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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Emmanuel Macron Wants to Share Power with the Yellow Vests

Peter Isackson

April 1, 2019

In a startling development that risks shaking up the political chessboard in France for years to come, Emmanuel Macron has invited the yellow vests to work with him on a power-sharing plan.

Exasperated by the repeated Saturday skirmishes with protesters that led him to mobilize the French army in an attempt to maintain order, French President Emmanuel Macron has had a change of heart. He has launched an open invitation to the yellow vest movement to designate a team of 20 leaders to work with him at the Elysee Palace on four successive Saturdays spanning April and May. His aim is to reach a mutually acceptable agreement on a legislative program, which the prime minister will then be asked to submit to the national assembly no later than September.

The immediate reaction in the media ranged from surprise to relief, but within hours many commenters expressed skepticism. Some, notably those who speak for the yellow vests, suspected Macron of demagoguery even while welcoming his offer. One of the potential yellow vest leaders, Jean Naymar of Montluçon, remarked, "How clever of Macron to hold the meetings on Saturday, simply to break the rhythm of weekly protests!"

Macron's proposition was clearly laid out. He expects the yellow vests to designate 20 representatives who will be invited to the Elysee Palace on April 13 for an inaugural tour, destined principally to underline the symbolic role of executive power-sharing he hopes to see implemented.

It includes the commitment to allocate a series of up to five offices in the presidential palace to be occupied permanently by a yellow vest team vetted by the national assembly. They will exercise no direct executive powers or responsibilities, but will be charged with coordinating with Macron's cabinet to agree an agenda for weekly meetings with the president himself, eventually accompanied by ministers according to the topics to be treated each week.

As per the proposed calendar, which the president insists must be respected, the yellow vests will be tasked with designating, before the end of May, the permanent team that will have access to the yellow vest offices in the presidential palace.

While Macron's announcement surprised the entire political class, many of the yellow vests who were interviewed by the media complained that the timing was unrealistic. Echoing Félix Granguelle, an activist in the Tarn, many have expressed their suspicion that if the yellow vests, who have no national organization, cannot find the physical means of getting together to agree on the delegation in the short time

allotted to them, Macron will use that excuse to cancel his proposal.

His aim may be to force the yellow vests to create a viable political party that will then fail, causing the movement to peter out. Since most yellow vest protesters consider the notion of a formal political party inimical to their cause, they see this as a ploy by President Macron to destroy the movement.

A respected editorialist at Le Monde pointed out that the evolution of the yellow vest movement has, over recent weeks, progressively veered away from the anti-immigrant right, Rassemblement National represented by Marine Le Pen, toward a more leftist agenda, which might eventually comfort the anti-elitist La France Insoumise party of Jean-Luc Melenchon.

Despite efforts by the parties to recuperate yellow vest anger, leaders of the movement adamantly refuse to adhere to any party. This has led to speculation that Macron's move may be an attempt to spread confusion with his opposition on both sides, but more particularly on the left, since he himself was a minister in François Hollande's government.

This strategy of disruption would thus be intended to as a coup de grâce for a left wing that is already in disarray. Behind this is the Elysée's desire to strengthen the perception of Macron as a stable centrist, representing both the bankers (the milieu he comes from) and the

voters of the left who will have no other viable choice to oppose Macron.

Announced on the last day of March, President Macron has indicated his intention to give a televised speech on Monday evening, April 1, to explain his offer and appeal to the entire population to participate in its success. Once the reaction from the various parties and the people emerges, the credibility of the plan will be reassessed on April 2.

Some are calling this "Emmanuel's wager" ("le pari d'Emmanuel") in a reference to the famous Pascal's wager, a bet on what to believe. Others say this is entirely appropriate for April 1.

**[This special bulletin of breaking news comes directly from France for April Fools' Day.]*

Peter Isackson is an author, media producer and chief visionary officer of Fair Observer Training Academy. Educated at UCLA and Oxford University, he settled in France and has worked in electronic publishing — pioneering new methods, tools and content for learning in a connected world. For more than 30 years, he has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, training of trainers and developing collaborative methods in the field of learning. He is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer and the creator of the regular feature, The Daily Devil's Dictionary.

What Does Turkey's Election Result Mean for Its Ruling Party?

Marc Martorell Junyent

April 2, 2019

While the AKP's electoral base has been loyal to the party this time, there is no certainty this will happen again in the future.

The results of the Turkish local elections appear to be quite clear as of now — at least when it comes to the actual numbers emerging from the polling stations. What is far more open to debate is the interpretation of what happened on March 31. We are used to seeing how, around the world, different political parties read the same electoral results in opposite ways. However, the outcome of the Turkish local elections offers a more interesting case than other contradicting statements. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has received “a strong warning,” some argue. And so it did. Others stress that the AKP has showed considerable strength. They are right too.

Although it will take time for the dust to settle after the close electoral races for Istanbul and Ankara, both cities will in all likelihood end up in the hands of the Republican People's Party (CHP). The center-left nationalist CHP, the main opposition party, has obtained two significant victories after unending defeats. Turkey's two most populous cities, which combine around a quarter of the country's population, appear to

have been lost by the conservative Islamist AKP; the party of Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had controlled both the economic and political capitals of the country since 2004.

What is more, Islamist mayors have been at the helm of Istanbul and Ankara for more than two decades. It was Erdoğan himself who won the Istanbul mayorship in 1994, which catapulted him to the very center of Turkish politics.

The AKP has announced that it will challenge the results of the elections in Istanbul and Ankara. Nevertheless, the possibility of the supreme electoral board overturning the CHP's wins appears to be very remote. This is especially true in the case of Ankara, where there was a 4% gap (around 150,000 votes) between AKP's candidate Mehmet Özhaseki and CHP's Mansur Yavaş. Most probably, the decisive challenge for the CHP will not arise from the AKP's petitions for a recount. It will come from the pressing need to deliver, and soon, on its electoral promises to the populations of Istanbul and Ankara. The ability to do so will be essential for the CHP to have a chance to unseat the AKP in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The major setback for the ruling AKP in these local elections is represented by the loss of the crown jewels of Istanbul and Ankara. The results in the city on the Bosphorus are particularly hurtful. The provisional results gave a 2% margin to the AKP's Binali Yıldırım, the

former speaker of the grand national assembly, over the CHP's Ekrem İmamoğlu after more than half the votes have been counted. The slower counting process in some Istanbul districts that constitute CHP's strongholds (such as Kadıköy and Beşiktaş) had much to do with this.

WAS IT THE ECONOMY?

Erdoğan came to power in 2002 after the AKP received 34% of the votes in the general election. Since then, a succession of local, parliamentary and presidential elections has taken place. On all of these occasions but one, the AKP has been above the 40% mark and below the 50%. The exception was the 2009 local elections, when Turkey was suffering the consequences of the global financial crisis. As a matter of fact, in 2009 the Turkish GDP fell from \$764.336 billion to \$644.640 billion. In that year's local elections, the AKP received 38% of the vote.

In the run-up to Sunday's election, a decade on, the economic situation was equally problematic. The country is struggling with recession, inflation and the depreciation of the national currency, the Turkish lira. This reality deeply affected the electoral campaign. The AKP and its ally in the last general and this local election, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), presented the March 31 polls as a "struggle for national survival."

What was at stake, the narrative went on, was the success of the fight against

domestic and international terrorism. Whereas this kind of discourse was partly motivated by the desire to shift the focus away from economic problems, achieving such a feat was simply impossible. The coalition between the CHP and the Good Party (İYİ Party), which reached an agreement to present only one candidate in many provinces, emphasized the responsibility of the government for the current economic crisis.

The government answered back by arguing that Turkish citizens have seen conditions improve greatly since the AKP arrived to power in 2002. Moreover, President Erdoğan has often signaled that Western countries, and more specifically the US, have been working to undermine the Turkish economy. It is difficult to believe in such an elaborated conspiracy scheme. A more likely explanation is that America's confrontational stance toward Turkey (especially the imposition of tariffs on Turkish exports) and financial speculation on foreign exchange markets have taken their toll on the Turkish economy.

The national economic structure has not proved to be resilient enough to pass such a difficult test, and the Turkish working class is suffering the consequences. This notwithstanding, this social group, which constitutes the backbone of the AKP's electoral base, has not deserted the party. In fact, it seems to have given a vote of confidence to the president — proof that they believe in the ruling party to get

Turkey out of economic difficulty. The overall vote for AKP candidates has moved from 42% in the 2018 parliamentary elections and the 2014 local elections to 44% this time around.

THE ROAD TO THE PALACE

The AKP's problem has been its inability to maximize the impact of its votes. This is the conclusion we can reach if we have a look at some of the results in Turkey's metropolitan municipalities, which represent the highest form of administrative organization in the 30 most populous of the country's 81 provinces. If we observe the results in some metropolitan municipalities where AKP victory was taken for granted due to its regional strength (places like Konya, Trabzon, Malatya or Erzurum), a certain picture emerges.

This time, the AKP has received a significantly larger share of the total vote than in 2014. In Konya, for instance, the increase represents a 6% of the vote. This growth in popular support can probably be explained by an important element: The MHP did not put forward candidates in the above-mentioned provinces after reaching an agreement with the ruling party. Thus, many MHP voters are likely to have moved to the AKP in these areas.

This helps understand why the AKP's overall vote has increased despite the fact that now it controls just 39 provinces, while it held 48 after the 2014 local elections. At the same time, the CHP has moved from ruling 14

provinces to 21. An important factor leading to this new reality is that the CHP won the eight close contests for a metropolitan municipality in which it was involved. If we define a close race as a struggle to control a municipality where the difference between the winner and the runner-up in 2014 was below a 10% margin, going into Sunday's vote 11 out of the 30 metropolitan municipalities presented such a case. In five of these, the CHP was able to defeat the incumbent.

If the presidential and parliamentary votes are not moved forward, there will be no more elections in Turkey until 2023. This means that drawing any definitive conclusion on how the local elections might translate into the coming polls would be premature. However, by now it seems that only a joint effort by the IYI Party and the CHP in the presidential election has a chance of defeating the AKP.

The road to the presidential palace in Ankara goes through a repetition of the winning formula in Istanbul and the capital. The CHP and the IYI Party should also take into account that had the HDP presented a candidate in Istanbul, Yıldırım would now be mayor. The pro-Kurdish and leftist HDP paved the way for İmamoğlu's win.

The health of the alliance between the AKP and the MHP also appears to be decisive for the near future. The implementation of tough and unpopular economic measures by the government seems to be around the corner. This can

test the strength of the AKP-MHP duo. The Economy Ministry used a considerable amount of central bank reserves to stop inflation before the election in March. This is not sustainable in the long run. While the AKP's electoral base has been loyal to the party this time, there is no certainty this will happen again in the future.

Marc Martorell is a graduate in international relations. His research is focused on the politics and history of the Middle East and North Africa, specifically Iran. He has studied and worked in Ankara, Istanbul and Tunis. He is the author of the blog *A Non-Orientalist Review*.

Election Losses Are Good News for Turkey's Ruling AKP

Nathaniel Handy
April 3, 2019

While the opposition hails the beginning of the end for Turkey's ruling party, local election setbacks might actually be a blessing in disguise.

Just when you thought the ship was steadying, last weekend brought another tumultuous moment in Turkish politics. Local and mayoral elections that once again pitted a government-led conservative alliance against a more secular opposition have produced ballot box drama.

The headline is that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) saw its candidate lose in all three of Turkey's largest cities: Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. It looks like a political earthquake, and that's certainly how the opposition is portraying it. But look a little closer, and it's not so straightforward.

TURKISH DEMOCRACY IS ALIVE

Firstly, it is worth emphasizing the fact that these election results have occurred at all. The Turkish opposition, and much foreign media, has long painted the AKP and President Erdogan as an authoritarian dictatorship destroying Turkish democracy. While the president's populist tendencies, his alliance with far-right nationalists and the suppression of opposing voices — namely those of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) — are undeniable, this election is proof that what is happening in Turkey cannot be painted as another Middle Eastern dictatorship.

Erdogan is an energetic campaigner. He works for his votes, and he continues to claim legitimacy from the ballot box. As Yasin Aktay, a columnist in the pro-government *Yeni Safak* newspaper, wrote in the prelude to the poll, "You know what kinds of elections are held [in most Arab countries] ... the number of votes they desire are ordered and dictators get over 90 percent." Not only have the Turkish local and mayoral elections not been rigged, but they have seen a reported turnout of some 85%.

That's very good by any democratic standard.

More importantly for the government, the election results are not as bad as they might appear from the headlines. First, take the big news: The AKP loses Turkey's three biggest cities. The AKP never has a hope in Izmir, Turkey's third city, since it is a west-coast bastion of opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) support. In that sense, it wasn't lost, since the party never held it in the first place.

In the case of the mayoral race for Istanbul and Ankara, the two biggest cities, these are genuine defeats. Istanbul is particularly painful psychologically, since the AKP has held the city since Erdogan's own election as mayor in 1994. The party fielded former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim as its candidate, and he lost by a wafer-thin margin. Plus, there is a dark old saying: He who controls Istanbul, controls Turkey.

Yet despite these foreboding signs, both Istanbul and Ankara were very tight races. Neither CHP candidate won by much, and there is still significant support for the AKP. What's more, nationwide the AKP has taken the largest share of the vote once again. All this means that while it was a sobering night for the ruling party, it was not a total disaster.

The other key element in these election results is the context. The AKP came into these elections after 16 years in

power. It is overseeing the first recession in a decade, a sliding lira and growing unemployment. It has been through a devastating regional conflict in Syria that has hugely affected Turkish internal politics.

Given the context, most observers would expect far worse for a ruling party. It could be argued that AKP support has held up remarkably well. However, that support has slipped in the all-important major urban and business areas, and that might not be a bad thing. Opposition has been building for a long time, and it has become increasingly vocal and extreme.

In a democracy, there is ultimately no better antidote to opposition anger and frustration than power. For the Turkish body politic as a whole, an opportunity for the opposition to exercise power in the major cities, and also confront the very real problems Turkey faces there, will only contribute to a nuancing of debate within Turkish politics.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PARTY

This moment of electoral turbulence is also, very possibly, an opportunity for the AKP to rejuvenate itself after so long in power.

Not only does the result demonstrate to the world that — despite frequent portrayals to the contrary — Turkey is no China, Saudi Arabia or Egypt. In Turkey, the opposition can win if it can persuade. It also gives the AKP room to maneuver and perhaps change course.

The economic and political direction has brought a contraction of growth, a sliding currency and polarization — all things the AKP originally swept to power by reversing. As a historically pro-business party, it could take this as an opportunity to reform in the name of listening to business. President Erdogan has already said, “If there are any shortcomings, it is our duty to correct them.”

Not only do I predict that the AKP will come back stronger in the next elections than would be the case had it simply rigged the result, but it will come back stronger than it would have had the party won all three of Turkey’s biggest cities comfortably. Easy wins breed complacency. There will be no complacency now.

Nathaniel Handy is a writer and academic with over ten years of experience in international print and broadcast media. He is the author of the chapter “Turkey’s Evolving Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq since the Arab Spring” in *Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring* (Isiksal & Goksel, Springer, 2018); the article “Turkey’s Shifting Relations with its Middle East Neighbors During the Davutoglu Era: History, Power and Policy” (*Bilgi Dergisi Journal*, 2011); and he presented a paper at the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) annual conference in 2014.

Candidates Bet on Welfare Populism in India’s Election

Ravi Tripathi
April 4, 2019

India’s opposition is attempting to thwart neoliberal Modinomics with its own version of economic populism.

The world’s largest democracy is days away from its national elections. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s re-election bid seems stronger than ever before.

The attacks of main opposition Indian National Congress party on issues like unemployment, communal polarization and favoritism in a multi-billion fighter jet deal have been largely blunted since February, when India launched an air strike against Pakistan-based terrorists.

While Modi’s popularity remains high after five years in office, India’s opposition continues to struggle. India’s young and tech-savvy voters have not yet forgotten the corruption of Congress-led governments that have mostly ruled the country since its independence in 1947. A majority Indian voters increasingly see Congress as weak on national security issues.

It was the promise of waiving the farm loans that helped Congress party clinch three key states from Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last December. Unsurprisingly, its leader Rahul Gandhi has now charged a direct attack by promising basic income security to the poorest.

Described as a “final assault on poverty,” he has promised up to 6,000 rupees (\$87) per month for every family earning less than 12,000 rupees a month. The scheme termed Nyay (Hindi word for justice) could benefit around 50 million households — or 20% of the total population — qualifying it as the world’s largest minimum income scheme. Such a scheme could also cost anything over \$50 billion for the world’s fastest-growing major economy running a fiscal deficit of 3.4% of national GDP. But can such a scheme work in India? Is Rahul Gandhi’s minimum income scheme fiscally possible?

BETTING ON THE POOR

In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the grandmother of Rahul Gandhi, won power with the slogan of “Garibi Hatao” — “Remove Poverty.” She won the election, but poverty and unemployment remained largely unchallenged. India opened its economy in the 1990s, and non-Congress governments began grasping power in states across India. They too failed to cut down on poverty despite launching an array of populist schemes. India’s largely agricultural economy remained far too dependent on monsoons and less exposed to the world markets.

India’s expanding middle class is mostly dominated by a lower middle class that struggles to make ends meet. Alongside the job crisis, poor wages are the biggest hurdle to India’s effort of raising its per capita income. Less than a fifth of

the population is covered by some form of social protection.

While there is no denying that extreme poverty has reduced, poverty remains a massive challenge in over-populated India. As per the 2018 global Multidimensional Poverty Index, the incidence of multidimensional poverty almost halved between 2005/6 and 2015/16. The world poverty clock made the claim that Nigeria has now replaced India as home to the largest number of poor. Yet India was ranked 103 out of 119 qualifying countries in the latest Global Hunger Index.

The rapidly growing income and wealth inequality between urban and rural India has made it worse. In 2005, the Congress party had launched a controversial scheme called MNREGA that guaranteed the right to work for rural unskilled labor. While the scheme created petty employment, Modi termed it a “monument to 60 years of failure” owing to its wastefulness and leakages. Daily wages in urban areas remain more than twice as high as wages in rural areas.

Narendra Modi’s government launched various pro-poor schemes in the last five years. It has expanded public investment in health care and increased the banking penetration rate among rural poor. The government recently introduced a 10% reservation for the Economically Weaker Sections, extended to all castes and religions. In its last budget before elections, Modi introduced a new scheme for small

farmers that shall provide 6,000 rupees per year as minimum income support.

For India's millionaire lawmakers, poor voters are key to winning elections. Almost all of them work in the agricultural and informal sector. Some 80% of India's poor live in rural areas. It is this section of the poor population concentrated in rural areas that is the target audience of Rahul Gandhi's minimum income scheme. The question of welfare access among rural poor gains further relevance since the poor in India vote in large numbers, dwarfing their urban counterparts. Welfare populism has become politically inevitable.

THE LONG ROAD TO WELFARE

As for the income guarantee scheme itself, the idea is not bad. India has thousands of overlapping government schemes for the millions of its poor. Many struggle to deliver on the ground. The lack of awareness and multiplicity of institutions delays the progress. An income guarantee scheme that puts the money right in the bank account is a doable idea.

In the last five years, the Modi government has prepared the ground to implement a minimum guarantee scheme. The government has focused on improving efficiency of the welfare scheme by implementing a universal biometric Aadhar card system and direct benefit transfers for government subsidies. Banking coverage now reaches 80% of the Indian population,

and 23% of these accounts receive direct benefit transfers.

As for the fiscal reality of the scheme, India currently spends more than 8% of its GDP just on government salaries. A major chunk is spent on palatial accommodation and wasteful expenditures of its senior bureaucracy. Rationalizing this and shutting down inefficient schemes could fund the income guarantee scheme. A reintroduction of inheritance tax (discontinued since 1986) and fostering tax compliance are other options in the toolkit.

There are some key problems to implementing such an initiative. Corruption among the state governments is a major challenge that makes any minimum guarantee scheme unsustainable in the long run. The success of nationwide schemes largely rests on the cooperation between union and state governments. Around 60% of India's poor live in seven states that lack the financial muscle to pull through such schemes. Another issue will be identifying the target households and ensuring the money goes to those who need it most. To what extent can a minimum income remain unconditional? The impact on the labor supply could also be disastrous for some states.

India's opposition is attempting to thwart neoliberal Modinomics with its own version of economic populism. It won't be easy for Rahul Gandhi — whose father, grandmother and great-grandfather all served as the country's

prime minister — to convince Indians on this populist ploy in the weeks before the voting begins. Until then, Modi's stellar record on clean governance wrapped around extreme nationalism might prove just enough to get him re-elected.

Ravi Tripathi is PhD candidate in economics at Sorbonne Paris Cité University and an Indian lawyer. He previously worked on issues of the labor market, international development and energy.

Congress Manifesto Raises Terrifying Questions about Jammu and Kashmir

Mayank Singh
April 15, 2019

As India goes to the polls, its opposition party is proposing a policy that threatens the unity of the country.

All political parties bring out manifestoes before elections. Think of them as love letters to the electorate that tell citizens about the person wooing them. In India's ongoing national election, the manifesto of the Indian National Congress tells us a lot about this party.

The proposed policy of the Congress manifesto on Jammu and Kashmir is oblivious to the harsh realities of the state. Section 37 on page 41 spells out the party's promises for the region: "an innovative federal solution."

Interestingly, the party does not tell us what this solution would be.

The mention of Jammu and Kashmir raises a key question: Why does a state find a special reference in the manifesto of the Indian opposition? No other state achieves this honor, including the turbulent northeastern ones. They are all conveniently bunched under section 38. The Congress party's manifesto proposes a solution to a complicated problem it created and, therefore, deserves detailed examination.

IS THE CONGRESS SOLUTION REAL?

The party's manifesto makes a sweetly reasonable declaration: "[D]ialogue is the only way to understand the aspirations of the people of the 3 regions of Jammu & Kashmir and find an honourable solution to their issues."

Such a declaration begs a simple question: Who does India have a dialogue with? Is the answer Pakistan? Is the answer China? Is the answer the US? Or is it Saudi Arabia?

The promise of dialogue forgets one simple fact. The state of Jammu and Kashmir comprises three administrative divisions: Hindu-dominated Jammu, Muslim-majority Kashmir and the Buddhist Ladakh. Only the Kashmir Valley is a theater of conflict. It comprises merely 10 out of 22 districts of Jammu and Kashmir. In fact, the violence in Kashmir is causing Jammu and Ladakh much distress. Political

power in Jammu and Kashmir is monopolized by politicians of the Kashmir Valley. And national politicians give scant attention to Jammu and Ladakh because they are peaceful.

When proposing dialogue, the Congress fails to spell out whom will it talk to. Will it include citizens of Jammu and Ladakh? How will the party select whom it will talk to? And, after ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits, growing radicalization in Kashmir Valley and the decimation of civil society, which Kashmiris will the Congress talk to?

REVIEWING THE TROOPS DEPLOYMENT

The Congress manifesto has promised “to review the deployment of armed forces, move more troops to the border to stop infiltration completely, reduce the presence of the Army and CAPFs [Indian paramilitary forces called Central Armed Police Forces] in the Kashmir Valley, and entrust more responsibility to the J&K police for maintaining law and order.”

First, the Congress is naive to believe that borders can be sanitized just by moving more troops to the border. Already, the Indian army has reduced infiltration through concerted use of improved technology and tactical troop deployment. Yet Pakistan remains committed to its long-term strategy of inflicting on India “death by a thousand cuts.” The Congress party is lying when it promises to stop infiltration

completely. That cannot and will not happen.

Second, to reduce military and paramilitary presence is likely to cause much strain on the local police. The local police answers to the state government, which currently stands dismissed. The state of Jammu and Kashmir is under president’s rule, the direct administration of New Delhi. Tomorrow, it will be under the elected chief minister because law and order is a state subject. They are not likely to have the funding or training to fight an increasingly bloody proxy war.

Recently, Operation All Out — launched by the Indian army in coordination with the CAPFs, intelligence agencies, Rashtriya Rifles and the police — has been a tremendous success. It turns out that anti-militancy operations in 2018 achieved the best results over the last 10 years. According to Lieutenant General Ranbir Singh, “250 terrorists were killed, nearly 54 arrested and four surrendered.” These results give hope for peace, but the Congress manifesto threatens that possibility.

Of course, eliminating known terrorists has been partially negated by new ones joining the ranks. Adil Ahmad Dar, a local youth, was responsible for the suicide attack at Pulwama in February, which triggered the latest bout of Indo-Pakistani tensions. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence has used propaganda and psychological operations to trigger “a discernible rise

in the levels of radicalisation and violent extremism.”

Such is the state of affairs that respected foreign policy analyst Brahma Chellaney concludes that “Pakistan’s terror-centred warfare has proved costlier for India than any past war on the country.” For Pakistan, this is payback for 1971 when India defeated its neighbor and helped Bangladesh declare independence from Pakistan. It turns out that support of terrorism also pays. No one, especially the US, wants Pakistan to implode and terrorists getting their hands on nukes. As Chellaney states, “sponsoring cross-border terrorism pays.”

The Congress manifesto fails to take into account the role of Pakistan. If India lowers its troop presence, proxies of Pakistan will increase. Terrorism will rise. More people will die. Sadly, the manifesto’s pious homilies fall flat in the face of harsh geopolitics, religious radicalization and grassroots realities.

PLAYING FAST AND LOOSE WITH THE LAW

The Congress manifesto states, “The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and the Disturbed Areas Act in J&K will be reviewed.” This act, popularly known as AFSPA, has become a beating stick for the security forces. People assume that AFSPA allows security forces to get away with murder. The reality is that AFSPA is simply an act that allows the army to arrest, open fire in self-defense

and carry out search operations without reference to the civil authorities.

However there are safeguards. The army has to hand over every person it arrests under AFSPA within 24 hours to the local police. There are other safeguards to check abuse. In general, AFSPA is a much-needed legislation that allows the army to function without its hands totally tied. In any case, the Indian army does not have the freedom of other militaries. The US, the UK and even Pakistan give their troops far greater legal protections when sending them into combat. Were it not for such protections, US Navy SEALs could not have killed Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

In addition to the AFSPA point in the manifesto, veteran Congress politician P. Chidambaram has talked of amending AFSPA by “balancing the rights of security forces, as well as human rights and remove immunity only in three cases, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, and torture.”

Prima facie, this seems entirely reasonable. Yet there is more to it than meets the eye. As a clever politician, Chidambaram is insinuating that the Indian army gets away with murder, rape and torture right now. The reality is that the army is not exempt from the Indian Penal Code and numerous other laws. India’s National Human Rights Commission is no pushover and it registered 82,006 cases in 2017. All security forces in the country fall under its purview.

The Congress manifesto doubles down on Article 370 and Article 35A, two rather controversial aspects of the status quo. The former gives special legal status to Jammu and Kashmir, while the latter gives the state legislature “a carte blanche to decide who ...are ‘permanent residents’ of the State and confer on them special rights and privileges in public sector jobs, acquisition of property in the State, scholarships and other public aid and welfare.” This has allowed the more populated Kashmir Valley to lord over Jammu and Ladakh. Politicians from the valley deny refugees from the partition of 1947 permanent status and create a monolithic culture that Shia Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics find deeply disturbing.

The manifesto also posits “a large-hearted approach that will eschew muscular militarism and legalistic formulations and look for an innovative federal solution.” One wonders what that federal solution might be. The manifesto also promises “talks without preconditions.” Does that mean talking to jihadist groups? Is ceding Jammu and Kashmir or the Kashmir Valley to Pakistan on the agenda? And is the Congress party willing to talk about azadi (independence) for Kashmir?

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Memes of Hate: Countering Cyber Islamophobia

Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero
April 17, 2019

Linking hate speech or extreme language with humor looks disturbing, since it is assumed that prejudice, intolerance and fanaticism are humorless per se.

Memes have a frequent presence in our daily lives. They flood our timelines on different social media platforms, usually to provide us with a smile. Originally, the term “meme” was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, to describe the flow and flux of culture. The meme was born as a cultural counterpoint to the gene, since, for Dawkins, biological evolution has been surpassed by cultural evolution as a key factor of human behavior.

In Dawkins’s words, concepts so culturally broad like art, technology, language, art and religion are “memeplexes,” built from sets of several micro-level memes. Memes are multimodal artifacts that combine image with text, usually have an uncertain and popular origin, no attributed authorship and are perfect examples of participatory media since readers are free to reproduce, appropriate and modify them.

From the point of view of discourse, memes are “constructions used to articulate argumentations” that have two main features. One is the presence of a cultural element (with a communicative

intention), and the other is the presence of humor, almost always a joke (or a remark intended to be funny). Memes may adopt different formats, from the very popular macros rage comics, remixed images or comics, among others.

Although, at least in origin, memes were associated with jokes, the truth is that humor is a very controversial concept. The possibility of linking hate speech or extreme language with humor looks disturbing, to say the least, since it is assumed that prejudice, intolerance and fanaticism are humorless per se.

However, Christie Davies, in his book *Ethnic Humour Around the World*, argued that those who tell ethnic jokes do not necessarily have to share the stereotypes the jokes express. Thus, Davies establishes a distinction between the mischievous tone of jokes and the seriousness of anti-Semitism. When jokers are challenged, they have the possibility to draw back using the defensive excuse "I was only joking," as Deborah Tannen pointed out.

What is clear about humor is that it is used to establish solidarity within social groups as well as to draw the boundaries between them. This is the reason why a kind of humor is enjoyed by the members of a given group and not by the ones out of it.

INTERNET COSMOS

The internet cosmos is full of hate or extreme speech. The World Wide Web

is actually a paradise for racists who can be brave behind the protection offered by the screens of their computers where they feel secure and minimize the risk of exposure. They can say what they really think without fear of losing face within the social groups they belong to, often using a fake identity to release their real self.

Social media applications such as Facebook or Twitter have become the agora for attacking, mocking, insulting, denigrating and humiliating members of the LGBTQ community, women, black people, native Americans and Jews, among many others. Muslims have been one of the most targeted groups, giving way to the so-called cyber Islamophobia, or irrational hostility toward Muslims and Islam expressed online.

Even though many of those attacks come in written form, there is a wide range of anti-Muslim memes. In a 2018 study I carried out on 150 anti-Muslim memes retrieved mainly from Twitter and Google images, the most numerous memes perpetuated the different stereotypes usually attributed to Muslims.

These include the oppression of women in Islam, the inherent violent nature of Muslim men, the aggressiveness of the religion itself, their taste for pedophilic or zoophilic practices, a potential to become terrorists, the lack of intelligence of the followers of Islam (mocking aspects such as the 72 virgins) and the threat posed by the

concept of multiculturalism perceived as a Trojan Horse in the Western world.

The type of memes in which a text is superimposed on an image is called macros. Usually, it is the written text that carries the anti-Muslim message. One example depicts the recurrent stereotype that Muslims are generally pedophiles who marry very young girls. In this kind of meme, the image is centered and framed by two sentences; the one on top gives a general statement, while the one at the bottom provides the “humoristic” twist: “My wife called me a paedophile. That’s a big word for a 9 year old [sic].”

Another example of gendered Islamophobia is a meme in which a woman wearing a burqa is visually compared with the garbage bags next to her. The question of the loss of individual identity of women in Islam is targeted in the meme through the dehumanization of the object via visual analogy.

Memes are extremely efficient means of spreading hate since images have a great impact on the viewer, and the ideological content is provided by the short message that accompanies them. Even more, the fact that memes are mainstream products of popular culture make their hate content pass unnoticed by some readers who will just focus on the “funny” side without adverting the hateful content.

Readers do not have to make a great effort to decodify the message, and the

very nature of memes makes them products to be shared, modified or easily altered because to their uncertain origin and lack of copyright restrictions. Thus, the speed of dissemination, impact and reach of memes are extremely high.

LAUGHING AT YOUR OWN CLICHÉS

However, in a very intelligent move, some Muslims resorted to the very tool of memes to counterattack the hate projected directed against them. In a counter-hate series of memes, Muslims dismantled the stereotypes attributed to them by reusing them with humor.

These memes show the popular “ordinary Muslim man” macro meme in which the main actor is a Muslim man wearing a taqiyah hat. The structure of the memes is always the same: The Muslim man occupies the center of the meme, which is framed by a sentence on top and another at the bottom that follow the bait-and-switch pattern. The first part of the sentence at the top always refers to any commonplace attributed to Muslims that acts as bait — “I want my wife to be fully covered” — and the bottom part switches the cognitive construction the reader has anticipated after reading the first part, smashing the stereotype — “by a comprehensive insurance policy.” Memes prove to be a very powerful reply to hate when the target group is the first one laughing at its own clichés.

Humor has proved to be a very powerful strategy to fight Islamophobia by

reversing the expected reaction and changing the dynamics of communication. It acts to give cohesion to the Muslim community without offending the attackers. Readers, however, must be aware of the hate speech present in many elements of popular culture in subtle ways that, precisely because of that, may not be immediately obvious, but definitely permeate our lives.

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What Does the Future Hold for the UAE?

Sulaiman Al-Fahim
April 17, 2019

The UAE combines international prominence with a conscious focus on what's best for its people and the world, says Sulaiman al-Fahim.

As a business leader and property developer in the United Arab Emirates, I have seen our geographically tiny nation develop a wide global influence. To manage this power responsibly and conscientiously takes both an understanding of the country's needs, along with those of the world at large.

Few know this fact more intimately than the nation's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, known as Sheikh Mohammed. For over a decade, his leadership has been marked by a strong consciousness about the UAE's unique place in the world, and its responsibility to set an example through a strong economy, partnerships, anti-terrorism and philanthropy.

As chairman of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council, the crown prince oversees all that happens within the borders of his continually growing nation.

LEADERSHIP IN PROSPERITY

The UAE, blessed with substantial fossil fuel reserves, is forever seeking to grow beyond this ephemeral source of capital and enhance its position in the international order. To that end, bold plans have been enacted, such as Vision 2021.

Launched in 2010, the aim of Vision 2021 is to cement the UAE as a leader in the Middle East and worldwide by developing a formidable knowledge economy, one not beholden to oil reserves but centering true, permanent leadership in education and finance. In Sheikh Mohammed's own words, the people of his country "are the real wealth, not the 3 million barrels of oil."

New York University Abu Dhabi, opened in 2010, represents perhaps the Emirates' most noteworthy step toward international educational preeminence. The keynote speech from Bill Clinton to

the inaugural graduating class set the tone for this new generation of leaders, uniquely prepared to help bring the vision of a better world into reality.

LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

One of the ways to ensure the economic viability of the United Arab Emirates is to forge and sustain strong relations with partner countries. The UAE's international stance is important not just in the Middle East, but in terms of the world at large. For the nation to reach the goals of Vision 2021 and beyond, its place in the international order must be unyieldingly firm.

The principles of diplomacy put in place by Sheikh Mohammed's predecessor, Sheikh Zayed, have held strong and been the foundation for the future. The UAE is to be a partner and friend to fellow global leaders, and the cooperation-based partnerships built and grown on his watch are the pathway to a more peaceful world, equipped to handle any problem laid before it.

Partnerships with nations like the US, the UK, France, China, South Korea and many more — not to mention its fellow Arab states — make the UAE ever-ready to engage in constructive international endeavors.

LEADERSHIP IN SAFETY

As a leading figure in the Middle East, Sheikh Mohammed has taken a powerful and principled stance against

forces seeking to do harm. While the UAE itself has extremely low rates of crime, the international order depends on leading figures to keep a watchful eye on malevolent forces that pass within their purview.

An unmistakable part of 20th-century leadership is ensuring the safety of citizens from the nefarious forces behind international terrorism, drug trafficking and other destructive actions. In this regard, the crown prince has proudly taken a leading stance, overseeing one of the Middle East's most formidable anti-terror frameworks.

Recognized by the UN as a leading force against terrorism, the UAE stands firm against those who wish to do harm to the peaceful citizens of the world.

Prevention being a vital form of anti-terror action, the 2012 establishment of the Hedayah center in Abu Dhabi stands as a monument to the UAE's commitment to ending large-scale violence by fostering a peaceful international order.

LEADERSHIP IN PHILANTHROPY

Charitable endeavors, especially for a nation as prosperous as the UAE, must always be a leading concern. To achieve the goal of uplifting those in need, Sheikh Mohammed has been a continual example of generosity and support. Whether fighting disease or threats to nature, his work has always been toward preserving and protecting the good in the world.

In partnership with the Gates Foundation, the crown prince has committed \$100 million to the delivery of lifesaving vaccines to impoverished children in the Middle East. His commitment to curing destructive disease goes even further, with a \$120 million contribution to the fight against debilitating polio infections. Every child deserves a life unencumbered by disease, and these efforts are helping the international community reach that goal.

Extending his mission to protect the vulnerable, Sheikh Mohammed established his Species Conservation Fund to sustain animal populations worldwide. The fund provides necessary support for conservation initiatives around the world, with an additional goal of increasing awareness of these crucial causes. A generosity of spirit distinguishes these goals, which fit well into the overall drive of the UAE: to leverage the good fortune into being a leading force in a more free and sustainable world.

A geographically small nation with grand importance on the world stage, the United Arab Emirates combines international prominence with a conscious focus on what's simultaneously best for its people and the world.

Sulaiman Al-Fahim is a global personality with strong regional ties. As one of the world's premier facilitators of international business, he is a property

developer, board director, business leader and philanthropist based in Dubai, UAE.

Indonesia Needs to Negotiate with China

Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat
April 18, 2019

The outcome of the election may be unclear, but the next president of Indonesia should take notes on how to do business with China.

On April 17, Indonesians went to the polls to vote for a new president. Although the official result will be announced in May, “quick counts” by polling companies — which have proved correct in the past — reveal that incumbent President Joko Widodo is set for re-election.

But Widodo — known as Jokowi — is not in the clear just yet. Former army General Prabowo Subianto, who was the main opposition candidate, has claimed there are widespread irregularities in the election. The real results will not be known for a few weeks, and some Indonesians may have to vote again due to fraud allegations.

Yet what is clear is that whoever wins will be faced with political and economic challenges that must be resolved to ensure that Indonesia is moving in the right direction. Of these challenges, one that needs scrutiny is China's growing influence, particularly the

implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN INDONESIA

Ever since Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the BRI in 2013, Indonesia has been one of the countries where the initiative is being actively realized. To date, the Indonesian government has accepted 28 projects worth \$91.1 billion under the guise of the Belt and Road Initiative.

These projects include the Sei Mangkei Industrial Zone; the strategic cooperation at Kualanamu International Airport for the second phase; the development of clean energy in the Kayan River, North Kalimantan (Kaltara); the construction of exclusive economic areas in Bitung, South Sulawesi; and Kura-Kura Island in Bali. The projects between China and Indonesia are carried out by private business entities, state-owned enterprises and universities. For example, the Kura-Kura Island project will be conducted between the Bandung Institute of Technology in Indonesia and Tsinghua University in Beijing.

The Belt and Road Initiative is expected to bring many benefits to Indonesia, but it has also brought worry to the average citizen. There are three reasons behind this.

First, at the end of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's term (2009-14) and the beginning of the Jokowi

administration, China offered the BRI projects to Indonesia. However, only \$3 billion has been executed from the \$50 billion that was prepared.

This means many of the projects have been delayed and their completion plan is not clear. The issue has been discussed by many observers, and some have argued that Indonesia is being destroyed by China. Yet Beijing needs Indonesia as a strategic satellite in Southeast Asia.

This is related to the existence of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which since March has changed its name to Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Similar to the TPP — minus the United States — the CPTPP aims to reduce China's appetite to become the axis of the world economy and politics.

Over Jokowi's last four years in office, the pace of BRI projects by China has been slow. Yet with a possible second term in the making for him, Beijing is likely to be more careful. It will not let money be disbursed if it concludes that a BRI project is at risk with a change of power in Jakarta. So, until the next government is announced, it is likely that many of these projects will continue to be delayed.

Second, another worry in Indonesia is related to foreign workers. In recent years, there has been growing paranoia against foreign workers, particularly those of Chinese origin. In fact, during the last presidential debate for the

election, Sandiaga Uno, a candidate for the vice presidency, raised the issue of foreign workers in Indonesia as potential threats to citizens.

It is important to note that bringing workers from China is common for Chinese overseas investments, especially in places like the Gulf and Africa. For Beijing, while there is an ongoing effort for skill transfer to locals, bringing its own laborers creates efficiency in the work, especially when it comes to language and working styles. This has led to worry in Indonesia that the entry of Chinese workers, with the implementation of the BRI, would threaten Indonesian jobs.

Third, the existence of the Belt and Road Initiative has also led to fear of a debt trap. This has been an issue in various countries where the initiative is being implemented, especially after the cases of Hambantota Harbor and Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, which are BRI projects in Sri Lanka.

The projects have made Sri Lanka fall into debt to China, with up to \$8 billion owed. That number is equivalent to 10% percent of total government debt. The problem is that Sri Lanka is facing difficulty repaying the loan because the return on investment of the newly-inaugurated projects is not as large as originally estimated.

Xiaomeng Lu, a global public policy consultant at Access Partnership, said China had political and military ambitions to fill the vacuum of influence

in the maritime regions. The situation has triggered allegations, including in Indonesia, that Beijing is trying to push strategically-located countries, including Djibouti and the Maldives, into debt traps that are then used to master the control of key infrastructure.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO RENEGOTIATE

It is important for the new government of Indonesia to learn from the experiences of countries in Asia, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Laos. These countries receive investment from China and end up in debt. In doing so, they must then be willing to give up some of their territorial assets due to defaulting on loans as a result of high interest rates.

A case in point comes from Malaysia, which has tried to renegotiate the BRI projects with China. After being faced with an option to either renegotiate or pay termination costs of about \$5.3 billion, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad decided to bring China back to the table. Under the new agreement, the project cost has been reduced. Malaysia will still need to take a loan from a Chinese state-owned bank to fund the initiative, but it will be less than under the original deal. This shows that negotiation is important with Beijing.

In regards to foreign workers, Indonesia could also learn from other countries in facing Chinese investments. Some states in the Arabian Peninsula, for

example, require foreign companies to partner with national firms to open businesses. Those companies are also required to hire locals for directive and managerial positions, as well as to train local workers to be employed.

The incoming administration would do well to remember that Indonesia has considerable bargaining power with China. While Indonesia may need Chinese investments to improve its economy, China needs Indonesia to reach its economic goals overseas. If we look at the official map of the BRI, the planned maritime route from China to Rotterdam would not be possible without the role of Jakarta. The next president — whoever that is — should take note.

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Men Claiming Objectification Is an Irony-Rich Cop-Out

Ellis Cashmore
April 26, 2019

Men talking about objectification is like prison wardens pointing out they eat the same food as the inmates, neglecting to add that they have home-cooked meals after work.

“There’s this idea that if a man enjoys a photograph of a nude woman or if he likes your short skirt, he’s taking something away from you,” actor and model Emily Ratajkowski was talking to Harper’s Bazaar. “When I post a selfie and someone comments, ‘Oh, sure, go ahead and reclaim your sexuality, I got my rocks off,’ that’s not my problem.”

“Whoah!” I can almost hear readers cry. Not her problem? Maybe not her particular problem, but how about other women? Especially those who don’t enjoy being preached at by models, porn stars and a miscellany of other women who are relaxed about men ogling at them — just as long as they get paid for it. Ratajkowski could be contributing to what others regard as a problem for every other woman.

What might have been, 10 years ago, an unfamiliar, perhaps even arcane term understood by only a few feminist scholars, is now part of our everyday vernacular: objectification. We use it all the time. It’s been given fresh impetus by the #MeToo movement that emerged in the aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein scandal.

When #MeToo identified objectification as one of the most bedeviling problems for women, it wasn't a new argument. It had been circulating for a while, but after the tide of disclosures that followed the Weinstein revelations, the credibility of the argument strengthened — though, of course, it is virtually impossible to verify.

A LITTLE MORE

There's a little more to the #MeToo-influenced model of objectification. A culture of sexual objectification is apparent everywhere we look. Women are presented in a way that deliberately reduces the importance or prominence of all features apart from their sexuality. The ubiquity of images of women presented in this way has contributed to sense of male sexual entitlement. Surrounded by representations of glamorous women, with no apparent capacity for anything other than sex, men feel permitted to do as they please and in a way in which their misdeeds are disregarded. Some women are consciously complicit in this, while others, particularly those in the entertainment industry, are reminded, often surreptitiously, that they should take special attention to their physical appearance.

"My question is why do young girls want to be portrayed in that way?" That wasn't my question, but Mel C's. The Spice Girl, known for wearing sports gear on stage, was wondering out loud why the girl band Little Mix dress sexily. "They are getting more provocative,"

she believes. In their supercilious, in-your-face exuberance and their eagerness to bring new dynamism to the analysis of sexual objectification, critics appear to have overlooked the degree to which some women are as indifferent as most men.

Ariana Grande is another artist who's been singled out by a more mature performer — in her case Bette Midler — though Midler is not the only person to have noticed Grande's erotic performances. "Expressing sexuality in art is not an invitation for disrespect," Grande has responded. "Just like wearing a short skirt is not asking for assault."

The argument runs along the lines that the inclination of some men to behave toward women as if they were objects rather than subjects with thoughts, feelings and agency, has been encouraged by the entertainment, fashion and music industries — all are as culpable as the sex industry. Some actors aren't impressed. "We're projecting a very unrealistic body image ... I find myself with actor friends — after we've done a kind of barely eating, working-out-twice-a-day, no-carbing thing for these scenes — looking at each other going: 'We're just feeding this same shit that we're against.'"

The words are those of Richard Madden, winner of best actor in the 2019 Golden Globes, for his role in the BBC series *Bodyguard*. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, the British actor complained how he's been offered many

jobs on the condition he loses weight and “get to the gym.” His point, though by no means an anti-feminist one, is that the objectification doesn’t affect only women, “it happens to men all the time as well.”

It probably does. Do they care? David Beckham didn’t seem bothered when he let his figure ornament countless advertisements in the 1990s. Underwear, whisky, marker pens, motor oil, you name it: Beckham’s image helped sell them all. Self-aware, slightly conceited and attentive to his appearance, the metrosexual personified by Beckham was straight and saw no need to dissemble his interest in grooming products or even his vanity. Other Adonis-like celebs walked into advertisements, seemingly unaware or unafraid of the dehumanizing dangers ahead.

The famous shot of Daniel Craig in sky blue swimming trunks in the 2006 film *Casino Royale* became one of the images of the noughties. George Clooney appeared in swimwear on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. He also advertised coffee, watches and scotch. Madden seems to be the first man to murmur a protest, leading us to the inescapable conclusion that men are active abettors in their own objectification. Perhaps they don’t mind being used. Should they? When Madden said, “It doesn’t just happen to women, it happens to men all the time as well,” he may have been right. But does it matter? Or does it matter less? Less, that is, than women’s degradation to mere objects. After all,

not much turns on it: There appear to be no far-reaching consequences that harm men.

BEFORE METROSEXUALITY

Men’s objectification is different. Even before metrosexuality, men, young and old, were staring at the mirror and, like Narcissus, falling in love with their own images. There’s nothing disempowering for men to gorge on supplements or steroids, and frequent gyms in their efforts to build a buff body. You only have to look at *Love Island* or *Geordie Shore* (the British version of *Jersey Shore*) to see strutting young men who appear to prioritize their physical appearance over everything. And, even allowing for Madden’s uncommon protest, men have cooperated fulsomely.

Practically every woman and man in the public eye dutifully describes him or herself as a feminist and can usually recite some feminist precepts, the obvious one being that women have — or should have — the independence to make their own decisions in much the same way that men have had. Presumably, if women or men choose to exhibit themselves in a way that accentuates their sexuality, that their business. And, if, as Ratajkowski maintains, those images (of women and men) are used in a way that gratifies consumers sexually, that’s not their business. Does this constitute wanting it both ways? It means you want to display yourself and abrogate responsibility for how the display is used.

We end up predictably with a divided womanhood, with some women insisting freedom of choice gives them prerogatives denied women for centuries, and others denouncing them for using those prerogatives carelessly. Men can argue all they like that they're not owners of their own destinies and are obliged to succumb to the imperatives of objectification just like women. But this is an irony-rich cop-out. It's like prison wardens pointing out they eat the same food as the inmates, neglecting to add that they have home-cooked meals after work. There are always delicious and nourishing alternatives for men.

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Burning Man and Auroville: Understanding the Human Condition

William Softky
April 28, 2019

Burning Man and Auroville offer a glimpse into the souls of the US and India respectively, and a better understanding of the human condition.

Since the fall from the real garden of Eden, what some scientists call Paleo

Paradise, humans have had trouble living together in peace. So, we dream of ideal societies and try to construct them on purpose. Such utopias take two forms, depending on how long they're expected to last.

At the temporary end are escapes like parties and festivals, and at the long-term end "intentional communities" like kibbutzim and communes. A well-known example of the first is the annual week-long psychedelic party in Nevada's bleak Black Rock desert, the sex-drugs-rock-n-roll-machinery-art festival known as Burning Man. The most successful long-term example is Auroville in South India, over 50 years old, inspired by a Gandhi-like guru named Sri Aurobindo, blessed unanimously by the United Nations and reforested from scratch on a barren patch of red dirt. I'm lucky to have visited both Burning Man and Auroville, and would like to share the flavor of each, along with what does and doesn't work, and why.

SIMILAR PLACES, DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

The failure modes of utopias, but especially their successes, matter a lot to humankind right now. Worldwide, depression and suicide are up. The more technology presses in, the more get-away-from-it-all escapes can help make sense of life. Burning Man aims at a peak resonance experience, a big bang; Auroville at continuous, ongoing resonance, a steady thrum. Both succeed, both are becoming corrupted by money, both have immediate

potential to transform the world, and both are sponsored, in part, by billionaires who want to make a difference. Utopia might seem silly to some, but getting it right is the best and maybe only chance we have left. It helps to study any utopias that almost work.

My own perspective matters here. I grew up in Silicon Valley, the land of cults and startups. Like other inhabitants of the valley, I made the pilgrimage to Burning Man, where I've "burned" seven times. This year, I made my way to India to visit family and to fulfil two more motivations: receive authentic advice on Ayurvedic medicine and visit Svaram in Auroville, the world center of vibrational healing. Visiting Svaram and meeting its founder, Aurelio, was important to me because the focus of my biophysics research is vibrational healing. I certainly didn't come to Auroville thinking of Burning Man.

But from the outset, the physical similarities between Burning Man and Auroville were immediately obvious. Both are laid out in circles with diameters of 3 kilometers, their perimeter guarded and fenced, their wide-open central circles filled with celebration, bonfires and worship focused on a massive, artistic structures built dead-center of both circles. Additionally, both are flat, hot and dry, unpaved, dusty, crisscrossed by bikes and noisy smoking vehicles. Outside the central common area, habitats are divided into quirky self-governing communes, called "theme camps" at

Burning Man and "settlements" in Auroville, each shaded and decorated by geometric fabric tarps, awnings and artworks — all visually countercultural. In both places, here and there viewing towers rise above the flats.

The people living in both Auroville and Burning Man are generous and kind, and prone to wearing practical, desert-wear like dust masks, headscarves and flowing cotton drapes. Many go by unusual single names, honorifics given specially for the place. Both locations offer far too many healthy daily activities for any one person to consume: yoga, dance, discussions, myriad hippie-style workshops such as dancing, breathing, massaging, meditating, "healing," chanting and relating.

Both places are hard to get into and, as a result, are filled with enthusiastic people who pay money and work hard to be there. They are both full of like-minded souls who want to be around each other. Burning Man and Auroville "work" as real-world utopias, but that's where the resemblance ends.

THE AMERICAN ESSENCE OF BURNING MAN

Burning Man is a giant party, as temporary and unsustainable as can be. It is a raucous art-and-noise festival on a desert lakebed, caked with antiseptic lye-laced dust, which is rinsed clean by rain each winter and blown into opaque yellow clouds each summer by hurricane-force winds and dust-storms every afternoon. Burning Man is named

after the huge ceremonial burning effigy of “the Man,” an abstract wooden human form 25-meters tall that visually anchors the center of Black Rock City, day and night.

Apart from the Man, the Burning Man festival also burns much of its garbage, such as paper plates and most large wooden structures, instead of taking them apart and dragging them home. Taking things back home is inconvenient and, besides, burning them is fun. And Burning Man burns literally tons of fossil fuel in vehicles to get to and from the desert, and generators to fuel sound, light, art and parties, day and night, all taking far more energy than simply staying home. At its peak, Burning Man is filled with 70,000 close-packed partygoers, making it a blasted, giant, over-lit refugee camp — Mad Max meets Las Vegas.

The difficulty of getting in and living there is part of the point. Commerce “on-playa” isn’t allowed. You have to bring everything yourself, food and water included, everything except portable latrines, the only thing provided. And you have to carry out all your trash, down to every scrap of lint. The injunction “leave no trace” is taken religiously. There are no garbage cans, on purpose, to enforce personal responsibility for trash. That eco-consciousness is ironic when set against the overall indulgence and wastefulness of the festival as a whole.

A group of would-be “burners” needs weeks or months of preparation to assemble and haul enough food, water, shade-structure, generators, fuel, decorations and, especially, party supplies to not only survive, but also thrive. Burners need provisions on a flat, harsh, hostile plain to survive and to make their camp attractive enough to pull in fellow souls. Entertaining others is the goal of almost everyone.

Apart from logistical barriers, the \$500 entry tickets keep out riff-raff. By rigorously checking tickets, the security station keeps out anyone without tickets. With its hours-long wait, invasive vehicle searches for stowaways, and ever-spinning radar and night-vision coverage of the surrounding open plain that is capable of spotting jackrabbits miles away, those without tickets have little chance of sneaking in. Getting into Burning Man is an all-or-nothing affair and the whole thing reeks of Checkpoint Charlie. Yet once inside you’re free to do practically anything, the ultimate dream of the American West, ironically made possible by enforcement emulated from the Eastern Block.

Go naked. Get drunk. Make noise. Do drugs. Burn your stuff. Create giant fireballs, with permission of course, so that people don’t get hurt. Drive or be driven in giant rolling structures —“art cars” whose purpose is to look nothing like vehicles — or even ride your bike. The roads, or rather the portions of hardened dust marked off with sticks and signs that pretend-play at roads, form a regular radial grid: concentric

circular ring-roads labeled A through K or so, and spokes named in 30-minute, clock-face increments. This leads to weird-sounding appointments, such as “I’ll see you at 4:30 and F at 6:00.” It also leads to cognitive dissonance if you return in subsequent years, because the streets remains the same while the locations of landmark camps shift.

The regular road infrastructure and the banks of portable toilets every few hundred meters is all that your \$500 ticket buys. That fierce, capital-intensive individualism, an American specialty, drives Burning Man. It is home-built entertainment to the extreme. Groups build and bring giant art, climbing structures, roller-discos and dance domes. Hundreds of homemade bars enthusiastically serve free drinks all day and night. During the day, one might roam by bike across the wide-open center, stumbling across unexpected weird constructions, or friends you didn’t expect to see. At night, the roads are choked with dust, kicked up by people wearing elaborate furry, fuzzy, blinky costumes and their decorated bikes. Burning Man is the ultimate privatized party with everyone dedicated to grabbing each other’s attention.

The density, flashiness and amplified sound ramp up all week to a pinnacle on Saturday night, when The Man burns in a frenzy of fire-dance, whooping and hollering. This is the week-long party at its craziest, even as Black Rock City starts disassembling itself for the long drive home. Burning Man is so temporary, it celebrates its own demise.

While many burners are spiritual people, only one place on the playa is built for spirituality: the Temple. This is an ornate walk-in sculpture, different each year, half a kilometer beyond the Man in the wide open desert. People move reverently in the Temple, pinning pictures of departed loved ones or scrawling messages to them on its walls, sighing and crying in escape from the overstimulation all around. When the Temple burns the Sunday after, roaring and crackling as its embers soar upwards, one hears no whoops and hollers, only hush.

THE INDIAN SPIRIT OF AUROVILLE

The Temple offers spiritual solace in Burning Man, but it is banished both physically and psychologically to the periphery. In Auroville, quiet spirituality radiates from its center and has kept it alive for 50 years.

Auroville is named after Sri Aurobindo, an Indian sage who celebrated human unity. He was a contemporary of Gandhi, a fellow revolutionary who was jailed by the British. A disciple of his, a Frenchwoman now revered the as the Mother, proposed a pan-human city in his name. Newly-independent India provided 20 square kilometers of hot eroded dirt, and the United Nations did the cheerleading. Several hundred altruistic volunteers began reforesting the place by hand, living on the shadeless, waterless plain not just for weeks as in Burning Man, but for years. Now the millions of trees they planted cool the place, and machines dispense

free drinking water. Cookware isn't burnable plastic and paper, but indestructible stainless steel.

Entry into Auroville is free to visitors, but not to their vehicles. Only local motorbikes and tuk-tuks, locally known as autos, ply Auroville's dusty roads, which are allegedly arrayed in regular spirals like a galaxy. In practice, these roads curve almost randomly, making the place difficult for newcomers to navigate, but also making it seem larger and more mysterious than it is. Few signs show where you are, and none show distances. With fewer straight sightlines than Burning Man, 20-fold fewer people and lots of trees, Auroville's residential portions are a mix of modest mansions. Modernist concrete structures and quaint creative communes lie semi-hidden in a scrubby forest as sprawling estates of faded luxury.

Auroville's reputation for environmental technology has grown alongside its forests. It now leads the way in permaculture, water management, solar energy and similar conservation techniques. The stream of tourists, housed and fed, provide steady revenue. Tourists also buy — and Auroville exports — fancy clothes, soaps, oils, incense, handicrafts and (my favorite) sonic instruments. The Aurovillian settlement called Svaram invents and deploys the most beautiful and beautiful-sounding chimes, bells, gongs and rattles used in the therapy called “sound healing.”

Svaram was why I came to Auroville: to understand its most potent products, techniques and philosophy. Long discussions with Svaram founder Aurelio confirmed my professional instincts about why sound healing works. In a simple neuromechanical view, the body is a big wad of jelly, whose jiggles the brain wants to control minutely. But tuning a jiggle-managing brain needs pure vibrations as reference signals, just like tuning a violin needs a pure pitch. Svaram makes pure sources of three-dimensional vibrations to stimulate the entire body, not just the ears: continuous thrums like singing bowls for pure centerless pitch, chimes and rattles for sudden spots in spacetime. When people relax into such a sonic soup, letting the sound wash over them, their nervous systems recalibrate. At least that's what biophysics predicts, and what people say.

Back to Auroville. More than half the people in Auroville at any given time are Europeans, mostly speaking French. After all, it was a French colony till 1954. During four days, my wife and I heard only one American voice besides our own. The rest of the people are Indians, mostly servants, and mostly living outside Auroville. Although there is a place called “African Pavilion,” I didn't see a single African. I did, however, meet a native Aurovillian, a man about my age, born in Auroville in 1968. Nothing else proves sustainability like happy second-generation natives.

South India is a conservative place. There is not only no nudity, but there are barely bared shoulders, leaving the clothing a mix of saris, buttoned shirts and flowing hippie cotton. Among the Europeans, thin, middle-aged women dominate, often in pairs, a natural demographic for the myriad yoga workshops, other spiritual activities and organic meals. The food is safe to eat, but, unlike on the Playa, the dust is not safe to breathe, since it contains pulverized fecal matter from cows and dogs. I almost died from pneumonia caused by dust like that before, so I know the dust-masks people wear are health precautions.

Auroville has no bars at all, little if any alcohol or drugs, not many lights and barely any music. The place is dead at night, except for quiet workshops here and there, and even those are difficult to find in the dark. Auroville is quiet on purpose, and it even has signs asking people to be silent or speak slowly.

Auroville does have one especially attractive kind of drug. But it can't be bought with money, only with the common human currencies of planning, time and effort. This "drug" involves not chemicals, but human proximity. I've tasted it three times. They call it "the divine"; I call it human resonance. A modest form can happen when a few dozen people in a quiet room, led by an expert choir-master, sing or hum a simple, meaningless tone in unison or harmony. In such acoustic synchrony, the vibrations of an individual's vocal chords synch with those of the chest,

spine and ears, and then with those of others nearby, and thereby with their bodies too. Without the distractions of words, a whole group of people can fall into sympathetic vibration, spontaneously and organically. It feels amazing.

SILENCE AND THE SENSES

Auroville's most potent form of resonance takes place in the central meditation (aka "concentration") space, and entry is by reservation only. That circular room, inside the enormous 24k gold-covered ball called the Matrimandir, is luminously white, open carpet encircled by tall marble walls and columns, centered on a huge glass sphere, skewered and illuminated by a vertical shaft of sunlight from above. It is a central, physical, geometrical image of divine perfection. Everyone sitting sees the same view and hears the same silence, cherishing the kind of togetherness that can only be spoiled by words. Fifteen minutes of that silence feels like eternity. No wonder people go back, and back again, to sip from the divine.

That silent experience involves the same neuromechanical mechanisms as Svaram's sound healing, except in this case the resonating sources are not gongs but fellow humans, engaging frequencies from infrasonic to ultrasonic. These are not too far off from the potent silences shared at the Temple at Burning Man, silences that also move people to tears. Harnessing those

silences will be the key to reinvigorating these utopias.

Auroville, of course, could reduce ambient engine noise toward electric levels and below, and could limit distracting mobile phones, the most anti-spiritual form of technology in existence, by far. At the other extreme, noisy Burning Man would be improved in proportion to how it protects and enlarges zones of dark and silence, twin foundations of any paleo sensory diet. At present, Burning Man's attention-grabbing economy and amplification-heavy technology drive native desert silence into hiding, leaving quiet human togetherness off the table. I fantasize about "Quiet Man," with the motto "Leave No Trace, Nor Sound Nor Light."

Burning Man and Auroville were both founded on principles and practices of human togetherness and autonomy. Both goals are being undermined, inexorably, by technologies that come between humans. In the case of Burning Man, these are technologies of blaring sound and hyper-flickering, hyper-colored LED displays. In Auroville's case, wireless interruptions and miscommunications are fracturing live human connection. The good news is that once leaders and sponsors in these places come to understand how humans really interact, they'll rewrite rules around solid neuromechanical principles, and make the utopian experience really sing.

In fact, all of India might follow the same track. Over three weeks, I focused my

neuromechanical lens on all kinds of experiences between Chennai and Puducherry. The Ayurvedic self-massage prescribed for me using slippery thick oils turned out to be an ultimately delicious and transformative experience, even without the sleep and diet tricks. The high-speed, high-stakes traffic dance of interweaving buses, cabs and motorbikes; the throngs of chattering schoolchildren; the high-fiving strangers; the sight of friends walking and laughing close by, hand on shoulder or arm in arm; and rich ladies lunching in a fancy fashion café are abiding vignettes in my memory.

Those high-bandwidth sensorimotor interactions are what the human species needs everywhere — not just in India. And they are what is missing from the Western world. If India could just ignore the receding mirage of software wealth and refocus on its ancient core of human vibration, it might yet set the example the world needs: more of Auroville.

William Softky is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.
