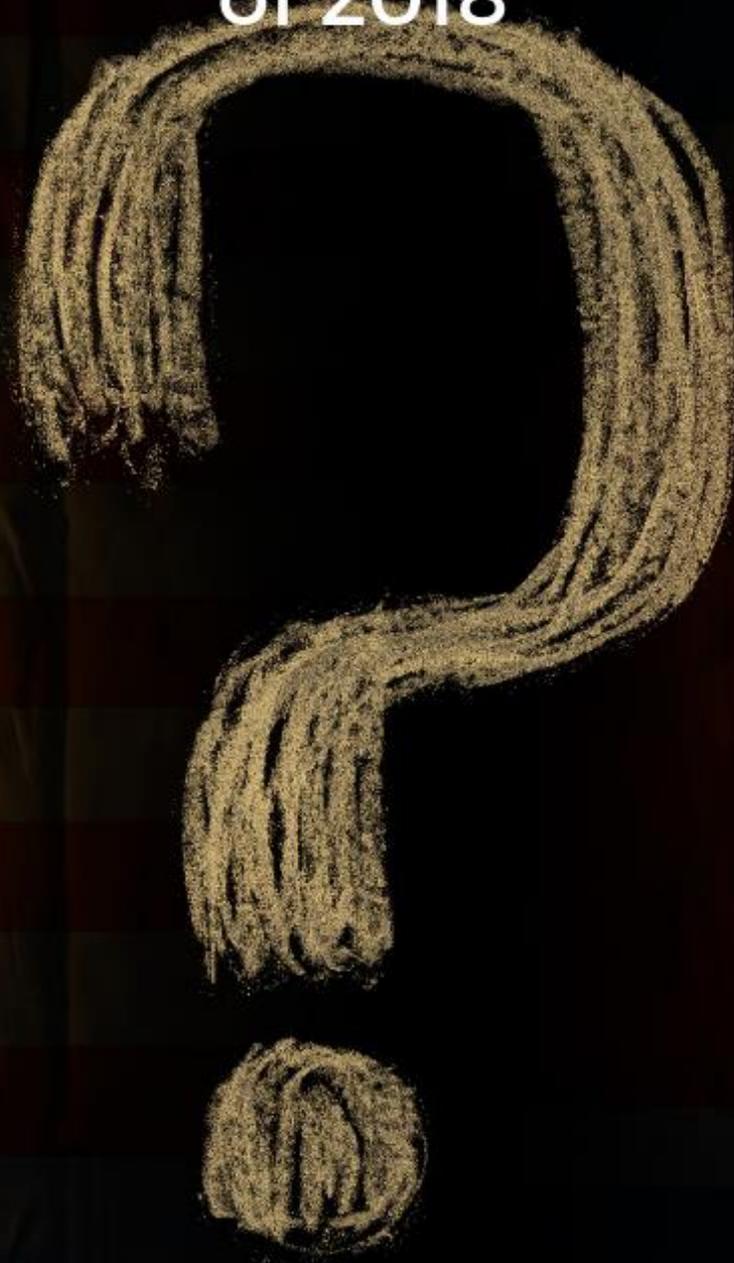


Make Sense

of 2018



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Fair Observer

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a US-based nonprofit media organization that aims to inform and educate global citizens of today and tomorrow. We publish a crowdsourced multimedia journal that provides a 360° view to help you make sense of the world. We also conduct educational and training programs for students, young professionals and business executives on subjects like journalism, geopolitics, the global economy, diversity and more.

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Nigeria's Refugees Face Epidemic of Rape and Abuse

Abiodun Owolegbon-Raji

January 8, 2018

Across Africa, armies and police forces regularly prey on civilians, with women and children enduring the worst abuse.

In December 2017, The New York Times exposed its readers to a horrific reality Nigerians have known about for years: the plight of female refugees and survivors from northeastern Nigeria who endure the deprivations of both Boko Haram and the security forces responsible for their safety.

Of course, The Times' was only the latest example of outside journalists and human rights groups uncovering the epidemic of rape and sexual abuse facing Nigeria's internally displaced women.

In October 2016, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the abuse (including rape and exploitation) inflicted on 43 women and girls living in seven internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State and the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Unfortunately, the story of 14-year-old Falmata shows how little has been done to protect IDPs since HRW raised the alarm. Having escaped the horrors of captivity and repeated rape at the hands

of Boko Haram, she faced the same kind of sexual violence after having mustered an escape from her captors, this time in the hands of the very soldiers supposed to protect her. Her account of the ordeal illustrates the impunity perpetrators enjoy: "The same day I was brought there, soldiers started coming to rape me. They did it one after another. I'm not even sure those two knew about each other."

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari ordered an investigation into the alleged rape of women and girls by security forces and officials in IDP camps in 2016.

Despite his own status as a former general, President Buhari has nothing to show beyond some scattered arrests and the (long overdue) deployment of female soldiers and police officers to the camps. Now, even those arrested in his probes have seemingly escaped prosecution or disciplinary action.

This lack of effective oversight over the campaign against Boko Haram has proved lethal. In 2015, Amnesty International publicly named nine senior military commanders responsible for the deaths of over 7,000 men and boys and more than 1,200 extrajudicial executions since 2011. In June 2017, a military panel dismissed all charges against them, citing insufficient evidence. An independent investigation into the allegations promised by Buhari two years ago has yet to commence.

It may be tempting to cite Buhari's ongoing health issues as an excuse for his failure to act more decisively. In context, however, the failure to punish sexual predators within the armed forces offers yet another example of his electoral promises of transparency and accountability turning out to be nothing more than obligatory lip service. Nigeria sorely needs concrete reforms to instill discipline and promote transparency in civilian relations with the armed forces. Thus far, Buhari has not delivered.

This may look like a primarily Nigerian problem, but the reality is far from it. In practically all conflict zones across the African region, armies and police forces regularly (if not systematically) prey on civilians. From false promises of marriage to outright rape, vulnerable children and women often face the worst abuse.

Beyond Nigeria, many prominent cases have come from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) recently, where embattled President Joseph Kabila is resorting to autocratic methods to extend his 17 years in power. Kabila's term officially ended in December 2016, but he has tactically employed a combination of political repression and duplicity to extend it.

These include forcing the judiciary to sentence Moise Katumbi, a former governor of the Katanga Province, who is widely tipped to succeed Kabila if and when elections are held, to 36 months in absentia for selling a property illegally. The charges against Katumbi are widely

considered to be politically motivated, forcing him to continue his fight for a democratic transition from Europe.

While Kabila's opponents have remained resolute in their opposition to his continued rule, the same cannot be said for the country's internal security. The political crisis has worsened ongoing conflicts in regions like Kasai, where 3 million people are at risk of starvation and 1.5 million have been forced from their homes.

The Kasai conflict has been marked by dozens of gruesome mass graves; according to the United Nations, Kabila's army is responsible for digging (and filling) most of them.

Unlike Buhari, Kabila does not bother paying lip service to transparency and the rule of law. Instead, his security forces have repeatedly attacked and killed opposition demonstrators since the start of the election crisis. It is disheartening to see supposedly democratic Nigeria perform no better than the DRC's corrupt and autocratic regime on security or accountability indexes.

Even the United Nations and Western governments like France cannot prevent sexual violence and fatal human rights abuses under their watch. UN peacekeepers from the Republic of Congo and the DRC have been accused of sexually exploiting women and girls in the Central African Republic (CAR). From 2013 to 2014, French soldiers

deployed to the CAR also allegedly raped and abused multiple children.

However, the tireless work of human rights organizations, who create the transparency that African governments and their international partners do not, is the one saving grace in the situation. Groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have done much of the heavy lifting to expose abuses and violations in Africa's conflict zones.

Thankfully, their efforts do not always fall on deaf ears. In the DRC, a landmark judgment issued in December 2017 has seen a sitting Congolese MP and 12 members of his militia convicted of rape and crimes against humanity.

Human rights defenders and journalists put their lives on the line to report on these issues. They need greater support, protection, and cooperation from the governments whose jobs they are doing.

Though it seems farcical to expect Kabila to commit to the principles of transparency and accountability, Buhari can and should be a more eager partner.

Abiodun Owolegbon-Raji is a writer and blogger on political and economic affairs with a background in political science. He is a graduate of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

DRC Violence: This Time It's Different

Hugo Norton

March 16, 2018

Should the DRC slip back into the kind of conflict that characterized the previous war, the intervening years of peace will become nothing more than a footnote in a bloody history.

For years now, we've been seeing headlines about violence and unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. But a surge in violence over the past several weeks suggests that this time things are different. New flare-ups of fighting across this conflict-riven state is having a profound impact on its people, with thousands of Congolese forced to flee their homes each day to seek asylum in neighboring states. It's estimated that 1.7 million people have been affected in the past 12 months alone, making the DRC one of the countries hardest-hit by conflict displacement in the world today.

Theories about the root causes of the conflict differ, but with much of the unrest due to the intransigence of DRC's controversial president, Joseph Kabila, little progress is likely. Will the UN's declaration that the situation is nearing "breaking point" help to change the narrative, or are we looking at the run-up to the next "African World War"?

With each passing week the DRC death toll rises. Recent reports claim that a total of 49 people were killed in Ituri province, during an outbreak of ethnic violence that was attributed to

continuing unrest between the region's Hema and Lendu communities. The clash happened north of the country's capital, in Bunia, and is the latest episode in a battle that has already claimed 100 lives and caused 200,000 to leave their homes.

Unrest isn't confined to Ituri territories, however. Armed groups, including the Hutu extremist group FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), is creating chaos between rival tribal communities in North Kivu's Rutshuru territory, as well as in the province of South Kivu, while conflict has also erupted in the country's central Kasai region following the assassination of an anti-Kabila tribal chieftain in September 2016. In Eastern DRC, where land and mineral resources have been sparking conflict for decades and millions have died since the late 1990s, dozens of militia groups are still in operation.

The impact of the grinding violence is being felt not only within the DRC, but also touches the countries it borders — including Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Angola — many of which are ill-equipped to cope with the mass influx of refugees. While thousands of those displaced head for remote regions of the DRC that are currently inaccessible to aid organizations, many thousands more are opting to cross Lake Albert to Uganda, where unsanitary living conditions await. The UN believes that as many as 10 million Congolese need humanitarian aid, half of whom are suffering as a result of displacement.

The unrest is being fueled in large part by the refusal of President Kabila to step down, despite having reached the end of his second — and ostensibly last — term in office in December 2016. Opposition parties gained the president's agreement to hold elections at the end of 2017, but campaigning has been put on hold again after the Congolese electoral commission, CENI, ruled that voting couldn't take place due to ongoing violence in the Kasai region.

To date, the DRC has never experienced a peaceful transition of power. The conflict that was initiated by the overthrow of long-standing leader Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997 led to a brutal six-year war — nicknamed Africa's World War — in which nine countries battled on Congolese soil, resulting in almost 6 million deaths and the displacement of millions more.

Presidential hopeful Moïse Katumbi is the favorite to succeed Kabila and may yet bring stability back to the country, although his electoral ambitions have been stymied by politically motivated legal charges against him. He left the Congo in May 2016, after state prosecutors accused him of hiring mercenaries, and has since been living in exile in Belgium. This week, however, he announced a new opposition coalition — Ensemble pour le changement, or Together for Change — and promised that he would return to the DRC by June to officially file his candidacy for presidential elections slated for December.

Failure to hold the long-delayed elections in December would only further plunge the DRC into the abyss, considering the deep fissures and political instability that are stoking the current conflict.

It is a situation that's not confined solely to the DRC. Long-term conflicts are also simmering in countries such as Somalia, Libya and Mali, while the four-year civil war in South Sudan is deepening. Rather than pitting country against country, battle lines in these disputes are increasingly drawn along caste, clan or ethnic boundaries, even dividing speakers of different dialects in some cases.

Should the DRC slip back into the kind of conflict that characterized the previous war, the intervening years of peace will become nothing more than a footnote in a bloody history. There may be little appetite for war among neighboring countries, but as rebel incursions are met with a ruthless government response, deaths are already mounting — if not from acts of violence, then from the spread of diseases such as cholera through increasingly vulnerable populations.

There is still hope that the elections planned for the end of the year may yet take place and that further bloodshed can be avoided. By acting in the interests of the nation, Kabila's government could prevent the DRC from sliding into a full-blown war that would decimate its population, draw its

neighbors into the maelstrom and set progress back by decades.

Hugo Norton is an Africa policy analyst and adviser at an economic consultancy firm in Brussels. He is also an aspiring freelance writer and passionate observer of the politics and lifestyle in Africa.

Drama in Dapchi: Another Nigerian Abduction Story

Oyepeju Abioye

April 2, 2018

The continued abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram across Nigeria raises questions about both the government's competence and its willingness to deal with the rebel group.

On February 19, nearly four years after the abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok, Borno State, which sparked global outrage, the rebel group struck again. This time, the target was the Government Girls Science Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State. The government took its time to issue a precise figure, which had the number of missing girls at 110. Of the 276 girls abducted in April 2014 in Chibok, 154 have either been released or escaped, but 112 are still missing.

Dapchi had all but come to a standstill this past month. Thankfully, most of the girls were returned by Boko Haram on March 21; five did not survive the

kidnapping, while Leah Sharibu, a 15-year-old girl who refused to convert to Islam, was still being held by the jihadist group.

The question on the lips of many Nigerians is whether the return of the girls had been staged. Fueling these suspicions are reports like the one by Sergeant David Bako, who claims that the government paid 80 million naira (\$222,400) to execute the capture and release of the girls in a bid to reinstate the faith of the people in its competence. Not surprisingly, the military has severed all ties with Bako, claiming he isn't registered with the Nigerian army.

All along, Nigeria's minister of information, Lai Mohammed, claimed little was known about the missing Dapchi girls. To him, this effrontery by Boko Haram was an attempt to embarrass President Muhammadu Buhari. As Nigerians question whether Boko Haram is a terrorist organization or a political tool, government authorities continue to give out aliquots of information about the group, creating confusion by changing facts and figures.

In May 2017, the governor of Ekiti State, Ayodele Fayose, accused the government of using the release of some of the Chibok girls to divert attention from Buhari's health crisis. Meanwhile, the population keeps grappling with truths and lies about the cycle of death and resurrection of Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau. These inconsistencies further fuel suspicions of a conspiracy theory

behind the abductions and Boko Haram's long-term strategy. The religious background of the group is strongly emphasized, but is it more than simply a terrorist organization?

One great worry is that Boko Haram militants keep targeting schools to get their hands on more girls, who are invariably raped and given as wives to the fighters. In the eventuality of their return, as was the case with the rescued Chibok girls, these girls would have been transformed from erstwhile innocent children to young mothers. Some might have even fallen in love with the fathers of their children. Others want nothing to do with their unwanted offspring. Upon their return, they face mistrust of their loved ones, who fear they might have been indoctrinated by the group and are now carriers of the Boko Haram legacy. Whatever the case, their lives will never be the same again.

The fact that these abductions happen in poor areas far away from the worries of the country's elites leaves those affected by Boko Haram's violence with no recourse to justice and further abuse.

Yet amnesty is being advocated for Boko Haram by some prominent Nigerians, including the governor of Kaduna State, Nasir el-Rufai, who declared that a carrot and stick approach must be used, as opposed to brute force. President Buhari, who declared amnesty for the insurgents to be out of the question during his presidential campaign, has promised to pardon repentant members of the group.

As of today, 30,000 have died as a result of Boko Haram violence since 2011, according to one estimate; the governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettina, put that figure at 100,000 in February 2017, with at least 2 million others displaced by the insurgency. By any standards, these statistics are grim enough to call for intensified efforts on the part of the country's government.

The subject of discourse also borders on how long Nigerians will keep living in fear of their children, especially girls, being abducted while they engage in something as simple as going to school. Western education is anathema to Boko Haram, whose name translates as "Western education is forbidden." But Nigeria is not an Islamic state, and the government is failing to protect its people from the infringements on freedom to life and to basic education that are being trampled upon by non-state actors.

This is not the Nigeria of our dreams, and if the country is to continue as a whole, Boko Haram has to be eradicated, once and for all.

Oyepaju Abioye is a doctor by day and a writer by night. She is an observer and a documenter of life as it occurs in her environment, believing that every medical case is a story and that there is a story in every moment of our lives. Her pen is her most prized possession. She runs a blog and is an avid contributor at African Freelancers.

Africa Opens Up Borders to Free Trade

Shigoli Shitero
April 11, 2018

The creation of a continental free trade area across the African continent poses unique conflict of interest challenges for the signatories.

In March, African leaders descended upon Kigali, Rwanda, the Land of a Thousand Hills' capital, to ink an agreement that is meant to smoothen the rough terrain of intra-African trade. Nearly 50 years after independence movements swept across Africa, the continent is still struggling to find its footing. The challenges are exacerbated by both the internal makeup of the countries and a shifting geopolitical environment. In 2014, African heads of state saw a rare invite to Washington by the Obama administration to discuss trade, investment and security. This was seen as a counterbalance to the growing Chinese influence on the continent; by 2014 China-Africa trade totaled \$200 billion, up from approximately \$100 billion during the 2008 financial crisis.

With the chaotic and confusing nature of the geopolitical challenges and the continued courting of African countries by both Beijing, through the new and ambition Belt and Road Initiative, and by the Washington security gospel, Africa finds itself in a position where it has to define its fortunes. By 2010, trade between African countries was only 11%, compared to 50% within Asia,

21% in Latin America and Caribbean, with Europe leading at 70% of internal trade. The picture is not of a continent that less than 130 years ago had no artificial boundaries and where its people traded and migrated freely.

The African Union has embarked on an initiative that is ambitious but also necessary. The Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), signed in Kigali last month by 44 of the 54 African countries, is the first step in the journey of a thousand miles.

As a matter of note, the two largest African economies, Nigeria and South Africa, did not participate in this historic event. This signals the internal challenges that, despite initiatives to deepen integration and remove trade barriers, have been the hallmark of the problems facing regional economic communities. First, on average, each African country belongs to at least two trading blocs, a phenomenon that has created confusion and challenges in implementing regional objectives. One example is Tanzania's membership in both the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC). When implementing external tariffs for the EAC, Tanzania can trade within the SADC, where it enjoys free trade status, leading to trade diversion from EAC countries.

Secondly, demographic composition and national stereotypes that lead to non-tariff barriers must be addressed with honesty. There has been ongoing trade wars between Kenya and

Tanzania despite the EAC integration process allowing free movement of goods and people across the border. South Africa has been on the news when xenophobic hostility toward fellow African immigrants erupted in riots. Despite the AfCFTA, the leadership must be exasperated by the challenges that it faces, meaning it needs to work toward smoothing the relations and avoiding internal conflicts for the greater good.

A classical pillar of trade theory is geographical proximity and comparative advantage. Africa's huge landmass is logistical nightmare. For the free trade agreement to be successful, the colonial angst of constructing transport infrastructure that is outward looking must be replaced by infrastructure that connects the interior populations rather than acts as a link to ports for external trade. Recently, there has been a transport infrastructure boom in East Africa that has been fueled by the need for accessibility to sea ports for extraction and export of oil and gas.

Construction of ports and high-speed railways has been inspired by the economy of extraction — the hallmark of colonialism. As a result, most of Africa's goods are raw materials. The comparative advantage question is one that is harder to answer given that similar goods are produced in many countries across the on the continent.

According to the World Bank, sub-Saharan Africa exports in 2016 consisted of approximately 34% of raw

materials. This ranges from natural resource to food commodities, which fuels the growing trade imbalance with the outside world.

For intra-Africa trade to grow, there must be a shift toward creating of indigenous industries that can provide a competitive edge in trade with the outside world. On the global scale, some African countries have commitments to other countries' trade objectives.

Case in point is China's Belt and Road Initiative. Since its inception five years ago, the ambitious Chinese foreign policy has recruited some African states like Kenya and Ethiopia, whose strategic geographical position is significant to Beijing's objectives. This will definitely be a challenge that these countries will have to deal with going forward, since the interests of the AfCFTA must supersede their national interests tied to the global trade initiatives. If not checked, the conflict of interest will be a hindrance in achieving the intra-trade objectives.

The African continent must be the author of its own fortune rather than misfortune. This is a painful medicine that it must take, but one that will set it on a path of prosperity both as a powerhouse and an integral part at the geopolitical negotiating table.

The signing the AfCFTA is a show of good faith, but the task lies in the implementation process. Member countries need to be ready to face the

challenges both internal and external to bring the agreement to life.

Shigoli Shitero is a Kenyan economist and internal controls professional at a financial institution. He holds a graduate degree in economics from the University of Nairobi. His research focuses on economics, corruption, trade, inequality, economic development and behavioral economics.

Cautious Optimism for Peace in the Horn of Africa

Hugo Norton

August 6, 2018

With Ethiopia and Eritrea pushing for peace, will Djibouti declare diplomatic war?

These are heady times in the Horn of Africa. A monumental rapprochement orchestrated over the past month by Ethiopia's new, reformist prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, has effectively ended the decades-long cold war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Addis Ababa and Asmara are pressing ahead to bridge divisions, open embassies, develop ports and resume flights between the two neighbors. Ethiopians and Eritreans are calling each other at random, giddy that the hatred and hostility that have been the legacy of the Eritrean War of Independence may finally be at an end.

The push for peace could also prove lucrative for both countries.

Reconciliation with Eritrea helps grant landlocked Ethiopia — a nation of 100 million people and Africa’s seventh largest economy — access to new ports on the Red Sea. Abiy is currently pursuing an aggressive reform agenda and opening up his country after a decades-long slide toward paranoid authoritarianism. On the other side of the disputed border, Eritreans hope the new accord will finally bring an end to their country’s extreme poverty and inhumane system of indefinite and compulsory “non-military service.”

Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea offers plenty of room for (cautious) optimism, but the events of the last month represent, at best, a start. Abiy is trying to navigate his role as what the Atlantic Council’s Bronwyn Bruton calls an “all-around compromise candidate.” He still needs to deal with both hardliners and high expectations at home. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki faces challenges as well. He may have accepted Abiy’s overtures, but he has given no indication he is ready to give up the power he has maintained through brutal repression for a quarter of a century. By accepting Abiy’s olive branch, the 71-year-old strongman may struggle to justify some of his harsher policies that hinge on war footing.

And then, of course, there is the question of how other powers in this volatile and strategic region will try to influence, exploit or otherwise undermine this drive toward reconciliation. The US evidently backs the Ethiopian premier’s agenda as it

hopes to draw the country away from China, which has invested much in the East African state, including \$13 billion in loans from 2006 to 2015. America’s most senior diplomat in Africa, Donald Yamamoto, is said to have hosted meetings behind the scenes and steered a diplomatic back channel alongside Eritrea’s allies in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

And then there is the one local player — Djibouti, which neighbors both Ethiopia and Eritrea — that stands to lose the most from the shifting state of affairs. Djibouti has exploited its prime territory between Ethiopia and the Red Sea to serve as Addis Ababa’s most important port. The lack of access to Eritrean ports has meant 90% of Ethiopia’s trade comes through the Port of Djibouti. This symbiotic relationship goes both ways, with 85% of cargo traffic at the port either originating in Ethiopia or making its way there. In May, Ethiopia agreed to take a stake in the port that has effectively been its sole point of access to maritime commerce.

Djibouti’s status as the gateway to Ethiopia has made it a magnet for Chinese investment as well, to such an extent that outside observers have repeatedly warned the tiny country’s debts to Beijing are unsustainable. Djibouti’s debt-to-GDP ratio already stands at 88%, and most of this debt is in Chinese hands. This “debt trap” is only growing deeper with the construction of a Chinese-backed, \$3.5-billion free trade zone in Djibouti.

China's outsized influence in Djibouti has already discomfited the other foreign powers who rely on port access and military real estate there, including America, whose only permanent military base in Africa is in Djibouti. Earlier this year, Djibouti shocked the international community by violating a 30-year concession granted to the UAE-based DP World and unilaterally seizing its Doraleh Container Terminal back from the company.

On August 2, the London Court of International Arbitration ruled decisively in the company's favor by insisting the contract between Djibouti and DP World was "valid and binding." Djibouti has spent much of this year heatedly, if unconvincingly, denying that its actions were carried out in favor of Chinese interests. Djibouti's autocratic leader, Ismail Omar Guelleh, has profited immensely from Ethiopian shipping and Chinese investment. His golden goose may have run out of eggs, however. Even before making up with Eritrea, Addis Ababa had begun working together with partners in the UAE to develop the Berbera Port in Somaliland as an alternative option. Now that Ethiopia is finding closer and more convenient ports in Eritrea, Djibouti's lucrative niche and a key source of annual revenue could be about to go up in smoke.

Will Djibouti scuttle the peace in response? Recent events indicate that Guelleh and his officials intend to try. The country has a longstanding diplomatic disagreement with Eritrea

over their own disputed border, and Djibouti reacted angrily to a Somali plea to lift UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea and facilitate Eritrea's re-entry into the international community.

The stakes of this diplomatic wrangling could extend far beyond the borders of Ethiopia's tiny and increasingly problematic neighbor. As the Atlantic Council's Kelsey Lilley explains: "At the least, this tectonic shift will reduce the revenues available to [Guelleh], in power since 1999, and undermine his ironclad grip on the country. At worst, Djibouti could prove a spoiler, which would threaten prospects for regional peace as well as longstanding US strategic interests in the Horn of Africa."

As with any major diplomatic shift, this new state of affairs will produce new winners and losers in one of the most strategic corners of Africa. For Abiy Ahmed, peace with Eritrea offers an opportunity to change the lives of well over a hundred million people in two countries for the better. For Guelleh, rapprochement between his two neighbors represents an existential threat. As Lilley makes clear, the rest of the region will need to watch carefully to determine what he is willing to do about it.

Hugo Norton is an Africa policy analyst and adviser at an economic consultancy firm in Brussels.

Should Rohingya Be Repatriated?

Swathi Gokulan

February 1, 2018

Citing concerns of safety and the possible risk of forced returns, Bangladesh says it needs more time to prepare for the monumental logistics of repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.

The number of Rohingya refugees pouring into Bangladesh from Myanmar has soared to over 800,000 as the two neighboring countries try to smooth a repatriation agreement that was set to take effect on January 23. The Bangladeshi government's decision to delay the plan to return many of the Rohingya to Myanmar comes as an interim sigh of relief amid heightened apprehension for the UN Refugee Agency, human rights groups, aid agencies and the Rohingya themselves.

Citing concerns of safety and the possible risk of forced returns, Bangladesh says it needs more time to prepare for the monumental logistics of repatriation. While the two nations bicker over when to start implementing the deal, there is no talk about revising its terms, which in itself would facilitate the premature repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. Based on a design that seemed guaranteed to fail, the agreement as it stands only serves to ease Bangladesh's burden and enable Myanmar to save face as international

actors cry foul over its practice of ethnic cleansing. Meanwhile, the Rohingya remain stateless and persecuted, while the international community has done little other than calling attention to their plight.

According to the bilateral agreement, Myanmar has agreed to accept up to 1,500 Rohingya each week in an attempt to bring back more than 650,000 people who fled to Bangladesh following a wave of violence in August 2016. The agreement does not include refugees who left Myanmar prior to 2016, thus turning away several previous waves of refugees. Despite Myanmar's stated willingness to start resettling the returning the Rohingya, the situation on the ground paints a different picture. The repatriation talks between the two countries came even as the Rohingya continued to stream into Bangladesh on a daily basis, although in fewer numbers than in the final months of 2016.

The recent resignation of a veteran US diplomat from the advisory panel on the Rohingya crisis following the arrests of two Reuters journalists covering the issue are among many events that point toward Myanmar's lack of cooperation in addressing the crisis. Further, the repatriation deal specifies that it would take two years to complete the "safe and voluntary" return of the Rohingya refugees to their homes and property, much of which have been destroyed in the ongoing violence. It remains unclear how the Myanmar government plans to provide the returnees with shelter, which

is likely to be in “temporary” camps that run the risk of becoming long-term, open-air detention camps.

The agreement requires the refugees to present some form of proof of identity and residence to return to Myanmar. But the questions of identity and citizenship are at the heart of the crisis. Rendered stateless by consecutive governments, the Rohingya have been denied basic rights for generations, and some of them have had their identity cards seized by Myanmar authorities. Many fled their homes without carrying any documents at all. The identity-verification process provided in the repatriation agreement reveals the skewed commitment of the government in Naypyidaw to take back refugees from Bangladesh. Having no guarantee of recognition of their rights upon return to Myanmar, the refugees will be subject to further discrimination.

This brings us to the concerned voices of the Rohingya themselves, who were not consulted at any point during the negotiations over the deal. One group of Rohingya leaders protested the repatriation plan and put forth several demands on the Myanmar government before any returns are made. These include granting of citizenship, recognition of the Rohingya ethnicity and the return of their land and property. Rohingya leaders have also demanded that the military be held accountable for the atrocities that led to the mass exodus. These demands have gone unaddressed by the Myanmar authorities as they try to push for the repatriation deal.

Faced with squalor in the gigantic camps in Bangladesh and probable persecution if they return to Myanmar, the future looks bleak. Given the overall reluctance of the Rohingya to return to Myanmar, any pressure from Bangladeshi authorities could make them complicit in the forced return of the refugees--- — a clear violation of the principle of non-refoulement under international law.

The UN Refugee Agency has not been part of the bilateral agreements either and has, along with other aid agencies, been denied full humanitarian access in Myanmar. The agency said in late January that “conditions in Rakhine state [where nearly all the Rohingya had lived] are not yet conducive to the safe and sustainable return of refugees.” Any mandate to facilitate the safe return of refugees from Bangladesh should be overseen by UNHCR and other international monitors.

Myanmar’s neighbors should assume responsibility for sharing in the protection of the Rohingya. Bangladesh is the only country in the region that has stepped up to the crisis. Of course it had no choice, once the refugees began arriving by the thousands. Now, finding itself stretched thin, it’s understandable that Bangladesh would see returning the refugees to Myanmar as an attractive option. However, you can’t share a refugee crisis with a country that persecutes the very population you are trying to repatriate. While the real solution to the crisis has to be a political one within Myanmar itself, nearby

countries like India, Malaysia and Thailand should work with Bangladesh to ease its burden and exert pressure on the Myanmar government. Until there's a joint concerted effort to do so, any effort to return refugees is far from being voluntary, safe and dignified.

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Shock, But Hold the Awe: Trump to Meet Kim

Gary Grappo
March 9, 2018

Can the world expect substantive achievements to come out of the meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, two of the most unpredictable leaders?

The world can be forgiven for having been whipsawed by Washington's announcement on March 8 that President Donald Trump will meet with

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The revelation came after briefings at the White House for the US administration by South Korean officials following South Korean President Moon Jae-in's dispatch of a delegation to Pyongyang for talks with their North Korean counterparts. Those meetings resulted in the invitation from Chairman Kim for the meeting between President Trump and him.

No sitting US president has ever met with a North Korean leader. (Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton did but only after leaving office.) The jolting realization that this may now take place — tentatively scheduled for May — with a sitting US president who has variously threatened, taunted and excoriated Kim has the foreign policy intelligentsia and US public both flummoxed and leery, and probably just a bit anxious.

Is Donald Trump — both famous and infamous for his much touted deal-making skills, but also notorious for ignorance of complex foreign policy issues and lack of interest in educating himself — really up to this? Let's remember, we are talking about two leaders who have both bragged about their nuclear weapons and threatened to use them.

Credit goes to South Korea's President Moon for recognizing and capitalizing on the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic games to encourage North-South dialog. Especially noteworthy is his recognition that any such proposed talks between Trump and Kim would be dead

on arrival in Washington without the North's agreement to discuss the "d" word: denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

HOPING THE PAST ISN'T PRELUDE

Let's return to reality. In the past, negotiations have been a tried and true tactic of the North Koreans to extract what they need from the US and the West, only to restart nuclear and missile testing when they got what they wanted. Invariably, their nuclear strategy proceeded almost unabated.

The US and its various negotiating partners, including South Korea, China and Japan, have all had the carpet pulled out from under them every time they've attempted to negotiate with Pyongyang, including the most recent and short lived in early 2012. North Korea had pledged not to launch satellites in exchange for US and other Western aid. The agreement was abrogated when the North launched a satellite a few short months later to celebrate the centennial birthdate of the country's founder, Kim Il-Sung. And so it has gone, dating back at least to 1993. Ditto on agreements with South Korea, the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Can we expect this time to be any different?

The North is negotiating from a much different vantage point this time. It has nuclear weapons. It also possesses the means to deliver them, most certainly to South Korea and Japan and possibly even the US West Coast. The dynamics

are changed, and not to the advantage of the US or its South Korean ally. Moreover, the North's young and ruthless leader — he ordered the assassination of his half-brother and execution of family members perceived as disloyal or threatening — has threatened to use them, including against the US. Possessing these weapons with the means to deliver them empowers Kim as never before, giving him leverage his grandfather and father could only have dreamed of. What does he want?

WHAT KIM JONG-UN WANTS

The consensus appears to be that Kim wants the US out of the Korean Peninsula — i.e., to sever what has been one of Washington's most important alliances with South Korea. Undoubtedly, there are other interests — official recognition, economic ties with the US and other major economic powers — besides China, which have taken a hit as of late due to increased sanctions, and the opportunity to appear one-on-one on the world stage with the leader of the world's superpower. There he'll be able to say to the American president, "I've got what you've got, now let's talk!"

This is not a position that a US president has faced since the arms negotiations of the 1970s with the Soviet Union, which roughly qualified as an "equal." Nuclear weapons have handed the leader of an impoverished, isolated police state the dream of every dictator: gravitas,

respectability and the attention of the U.S. and its president.

Heretofore, Kim has made clear he will not give up his new-found leverage... ever. This may be mere posturing, but one must still ask: Is he really willing to rid his nation of its nuclear weapons, missiles and supporting infrastructure? And the answer is, only if he gets what he wants... maybe.

MEETING OF UNKNOWN MINDS

Further obfuscating an accurate reading of this announced gathering is the personalities of the two principals. In past summits between an American president and his counterpart from any nation, senior State Department and National Security Council officials and experts conducted extensive pre-meeting negotiations so that the main event would be almost a mere formality — i.e., the handshakes, signings, banquets, toasts and photo ops. Pre-meetings are intended to sort out major issues, identify obstacles, reach preliminary understandings and ensure the ultimate encounter between principals is a satisfactory one. But that hasn't happened this time, presumably at all.

Instead, these talks will be in the hands of two erratic and unpredictable leaders who are not likely to fully and accurately understand the other or the issues and implications. Nor will the issues have been tackled in advance by senior experts. That's a risk.

For his part, Donald Trump places far too much stock in his innate abilities, soi-disant high-functioning gut instincts and business acumen, qualities that have earned him the Oval Office and the unflagging support of a core following within the Republican Party. He places little trust in the expertise and counsel of experts around him. That's a further complicating risk. Luckily for Americans and South Koreans, the more sober-minded South Korean President Moon won't be far away, one presumes, and should help keep the American tethered. Or at least, Americans and South Koreans can hope.

Kim, on the other hand, will face an American president he knows only from media reports and biased and censored information from his eager-to-please intelligence service, loath to tell him anything he may not wish to hear, lest they suffer the fate of other disloyal minions. It's impossible to know his mindset in the run-up to this meeting.

All this suggests that despite whatever happy talk emerges from this summit of shock, concrete results may be lacking and, in any event, suspect. It will depend on one ineluctable fact: What is on the mind of Kim Jong-un? For that, the world must place its trust and hopes in an untested, inexperienced president, whose own mind remains a mystery.

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China Is Rising... and Everyone Should Take Note

Uri Marantz

May 11, 2018

China is a force to be reckoned with. Not only should the US take notice, but the rest of the developed world should do too.

A recent issue of Foreign Affairs, "Letting Go: Trump, America, and the World," questions the extent to which the United States under President Donald Trump has abandoned its de facto post-World War II leadership of the liberal international order. The magazine further prefaces its front-page cover with the lead, "How Washington Got China Wrong," suggesting that the US is either unable or unwilling to recognize the emerging reality presented by China's rise to great power status.

The implication is that the ship of US grand strategy needs an immediate overhaul if it is to successfully navigate the increasingly turbulent waters of a

multi-polarizing world. It is not just the US, but the societies of the so-called developed world that need to reassess their modus operandi if they are to keep up with China's competing models of governance, business and society.

Since I spent most of March 2018 in the Chinese port city of Guangzhou, a major industrial hub and rapidly emerging metropolis, my arguments and supporting evidence are naturally informed by my recent experiences and first-hand observations. Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong Province, which neighbors the South China Sea, Hong Kong and Macao on China's southern coastline. Growing up in Canada, I also noticed some pointed contrasts between North American and East Asian cultures and practices. In arguing for greater Western awareness of the Chinese model of development, I outline some of these differences for the reader's general interest.

GOVERNANCE

China is governed by a principled but pragmatic Communist Party. There seems to be a peculiar social contract in place in China: The government continues to deliver robust economic growth year after year in exchange for zero dissent or public discussion of politics, religion and other topics of a taboo nature. As recently as 2013, Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner pointed out in their Foreign Affairs article on "The China Reckoning" that internal Communist Party memos "warned against 'Western constitutional

democracy' and other 'universal values' as stalking-horses meant to weaken, destabilize, and even break up China." This reluctance to embrace Western-style practices and a conviction in the superiority of the Chinese system was on striking display as China was changing one of its core tenets of Communist leadership, the regular hand-over of power that has taken place since Mao Zedong's time nearly half a century ago.

President Xi Jinping has enacted a series of reforms enshrining his position for life, essentially eliminating presidential term limits. Of course, the local media portrayed this stunning development as "democratic" since it was supposedly in the people's best interest to avoid "venal cliques" and "factional infighting." It is argued that these forces would threaten the existential survival of the Communist Party and, in turn, the People's Republic of China itself. Thus, the Chinese political system was superior to the West's version of competitive electoral politics since it eliminated partisanship and unpredictability, domestic and foreign. Perhaps the Chinese government has a point: With millions of Chinese residents migrating from the countryside to the city-centers every year, for decades now, the government faces an uphill battle keeping the economy running smoothly.

BUSINESS

China's growth since the late 1970s has been rapid, sustained and unparalleled

in the modern world. According to the World Bank, "GDP growth has averaged nearly 10 percent a year—the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history—and has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty." US-China trade in goods has increased by 30 times in 30 years (from \$8 billion in 1986 to \$578 billion in 2016, accounting for inflation). While there are many reasons for China's "economic miracle," my arguments here will rely more on my personal anecdotes than a laundry list of statistics.

The municipality of Guangzhou is much more modern and integrated than many Canadian cities I've visited: Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, even Montréal. The city parks, walking plazas and urban centers are well-kept, imposing and expansive. The Mall of the World, for example, is a series of interconnected stores and restaurants that connect to the subway and run through the central strip of downtown Guangzhou. Museums, libraries and artistic installations flank its southernmost tip astride a grand view of the city's major tourist attraction and one of the world's tallest observation lookouts, Canton Tower. During the day, these public works reach as far as the eye can see, but at night, they shine and shimmer with a dazzling array of lights and patterns, all choreographed to impress the myriad onlookers below.

Getting around the city is surprisingly easy and affordable. The subway system is quick and efficient, intersecting the city and penetrating

surrounding suburbs. Subway cars are jam-packed most hours of the day, making even the busiest rush hour in Toronto's underground feel like a leisurely stroll through the park. Millions of bicycles are stationed strategically around the city, owned and operated by government-sanctioned private enterprises like Ofo and Mobike. Scanning a barcode with a smartphone application unlocks it remotely for a limited time, after which riders can park them anywhere else in the city. With today's exchange rate, the cost of riding the subway or renting a bicycle is measured in cents, not dollars — an impressive discount from nearly \$4 a ride for public transit in major Canadian cities.

SOCIETY

Despite the limited exposure I had, I found that Chinese culture has blended the past and present, tradition and modernity, together into one seamless web. Guangzhou, the “City of Flowers,” decorated all its roads, bike paths and pedestrian walkways with floral arrangements of all kinds. The millennia-old heritage of Confucian civilization was evident in the sculptures on display at Sun Yat-Sen University. The extensive foliage of the Sun Yat-Sen Memorial paid homage to the nationalist norms and principles embodied in the postcolonial, early 20th-century Republic of China. Going for a jog one morning in Zhujiang Park, it was refreshing to see the emphasis people placed on physical fitness. People of all ages were walking, jogging and

stretching, popular with early morning joggers, tai chi practitioners, ancient sword dancers and octogenarians etching rows of Chinese character-based calligraphy in the ground.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, Chinese society seems exceedingly modest and traditional. Most personal interactions are pleasant and respectful, even with my limited grasp of the language. Still, all the shopping malls stock the latest fashions, and the trendiest brands are on display. The One-Child Policy, in effect for decades but repealed a few years ago, means that most adults are without siblings and most families still have only one child. The growing middle and upper classes may be able to afford more than one at this point. For instance, my Airbnb host — as a property owner, presumably already in the upper strata of society — was raising a pair of beautiful twin boys, an alteration to conventional family planning that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

As a cautionary note, state-owned media still run the day. The government tells the people what to believe about their country and the outside world. Flying into Beijing, Hainan Airlines provided me with a copy of the China Daily and the Global Times, both of which propagate the official bottom line. The Sino-centric worldview and uncritical coverage of Chinese affairs were expected. What was not expected were the progressive, almost liberal-minded stories discussed as current affairs: a #MeToo-style sex scandal in

South Korea with the potential to bring down a presidential contender; the plight of LGBT youth in China's major cities and within their own families; and the growing social media activism of feminists, represented most recently by the use of "rice" and "bunny" emojis to spell the phonetic mi-tu in order to get around government-monitoring censors.

Of course, security cameras everywhere and a tightly controlled online ecosystem render any public protest difficult and dangerous. Virtual private networks, or VPNs, are necessary to access BBC World News, Facebook, Google and many other websites deemed unsavory by the Chinese authorities. In the end, the government has an Orwellian ability to clamp down on dissent and enforce its own version of events on society if it deems it necessary.

WATCH CLOSELY

China's rising status, resources and capabilities in the world are a force to be reckoned with that all "developed" countries must consider. Here I have merely relayed some of the more impressive and intimidating characteristics of the Chinese development model that I deemed noteworthy. Without an awareness and recognition of China's growth and development, it is my contention that the West will be powerless to adapt and compete in the future.

For all the downsides that authoritarianism entails, the social

mobility and economic development that I witnessed in Guangzhou impressed me to no end. No doubt, China faces serious socioeconomic and environmental challenges going forward. Poverty and inequality are still rife, even in the most developed cities, and more than 1 million people are dying every year because of airborne pollution.

All the same, a rising China is of global concern and interest. As the ongoing trade tariff dispute with the US demonstrates, China's growing economic clout means that all countries need to take note of its foreign policy ambitions. Nowhere is this more pressing an issue than on the African continent, where some have already suggested geopolitical competition is underway. It was recently revealed that China's freely-built African Union headquarters were bugged, recording all incoming and outgoing messages since first being constructed. Furthermore, China has been buying up vast tracts of farmland in Africa, developing urban infrastructure, disbursing competitive loans, and even establishing its first military base in Djibouti as of 2017.

The future is uncertain for the West and China, but it is worth watching closely.

Uri Marantz holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Michigan and a Master of Arts in Political Science from the University of Windsor. In the past he has undertaken research projects for the Hudson Institute and the Foreign Policy Research Institute in the

United States of America. He contributes regularly to journals and magazines and has published pieces on Canadian foreign policy and the new politics of the Middle East.

Mindful Approaches to Watching Crazy Rich Asians

Annette Wu

September 19, 2018

One must understand how different it feels to watch this film in the cultural context of Singapore, where issues of socio-economic and racial inequality are finally gaining traction in wider public consciousness.

I've spent the last two weeks trying to locate myself in a cross-boundary conversation about Jon M. Chu's summer blockbuster, *Crazy Rich Asians*, based on Kevin Kwan's eponymous 2013 best-seller. Much of the North American perspective on mass media points to the film as a landmark movement toward greater Asian-American representation in Hollywood. However, in Singapore, where both the book and the film are based, commentators are calling out the irony of this statement.

Much of the film's focus is on the hyper rich, entitled East Asian characters played primarily by East Asian and Eurasian actors, whereas darker skinned Asian characters appear as scary guards, drivers, domestic workers and service staff. This Sinofication points to issues where a Chinese-

Singaporean majority is overrepresented, and Anglophone Chinese-Singaporeans have disproportionate access to resources in a Southeast Asian country where Singaporean-Malays, South Asians, Eurasians and other racial minorities face systemic underrepresentation in multiple aspects of daily life.

One must understand how different it feels to watch this film in the cultural context of Singapore, where issues of socio-economic and racial inequality are finally gaining traction in wider public consciousness. Though *Crazy Rich Asians* has emerged as a conversational phenomenon, it was preceded by another, earlier this year: Dr. Teo You Yenn's *This is What Inequality Looks Like*. Teo's book is an ethnography of socio-economic inequality in Singapore, based on three years of fieldwork with families living in rental flats and on household monthly incomes of SG\$1,500 (\$1,100) or less.

The book brought the conversation on inequality from academia into the mainstream, where the author got people to critically reconsider narrow, yet prolific narratives of a cosmopolitan, contemporary and prosperous Singapore with stories that unpack the everyday injustices faced by her interlocutors.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE HIGH LIFE

Though Kwan likens his book to "an ethnography of a culture and a species of people" living highly exclusive lives,

the film adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* doesn't aim to fit its characters' experiences into larger structures of society, leaving the wider historical and social context of power and privilege unexamined. In the same way that the film may have been found empowering to underrepresented Asian-American populations in the US, it could have really stepped up in trying to do the same in the Southeast Asian country the story is actually based in.

Furthermore, when the focus is all on the film's racial representation within a US-centric context, issues of underrepresentation, privilege and inequality in Singapore are conveniently disregarded. Though both Kwan and Chu claim to present a satirical view of their characters' lives, the film indulges viewers in so much visual wealth, it becomes gratifying to the extent of placation. We start to lose some of that intended edge to ingrained aspirational capitalism that runs wild in both the US and in Singapore. The city of Singapore itself begins to reflect this as a glorified stage (queue tourism board product placement, camera lingering redundantly on the Merlion, and a garishly edited shot of the Marina Bay Sands) for wealthy, cosmopolitan Anglophone-Asians who live in the Asian values households of their tiger mothers.

Recall when Peik Lin tells Rachel that the Youngs were rich even when they left China to settle in Singapore — emphatically pointing North American audiences to a second map showing

that Singapore is not, in fact, in China — back when Singapore was nothing but “jungle and pig farmers” they eventually built up as one sprawling piece of real estate. Highlighting the centrality of Singaporean-Chinese wealth in the myth of Singapore's transformation from a sleepy fishing village to modern metropolis again obscures the nation's much more complex and pluralistic history and demography.

It's important to talk of this film with context in terms of for whom Kwan's book and Cho's film were created. Kevin Kwan wrote his book with the intention of introducing a North American audience to a contemporary view of “Asia,” one he felt many in the Western world did not know existed. Similarly, Jon M. Chu created *Crazy Rich Asians* within and for the North American context — more specifically, for the expansive viewer base of a powerful film industry that has systematically underrepresented racial minority voices in America. We could say that Chu's film is a direct response to an industry where the last film with an all-Asian cast was Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* 25 years ago, whilst making full use of Hollywood's classic romcom formula for global appeal.

HOLLYWOOD SYSTEM

Crazy Rich Asians comes to us in 2018 as something very different from what Kwan had envisioned in 2013, when he was offered a Hollywood film adaptation of the book, contingent on rewriting Rachel Chu (a Chinese-American

economics professor) as a white woman. He saw *Crazy Rich Asians* as an independent film outside of traditional Hollywood and its exclusive, often racist, systems of production. This industry legacy has helped to elevate white talent on screen and behind the camera, making little space for all those who are underrepresented, even when representing characters of Asian descent.

This was finally escalated in wider public consciousness with #OscarsSoWhite calling out the fact that there wasn't a single person of color nominated in any of the lead or supporting actor categories during the 2015 awards ceremony. The very members of the Academy of Picture Arts and Sciences — those made responsible for nominating films for the esteemed reward — were themselves demographically slanted. A majority were old, white men who unsurprisingly voted for the films and stories they decided were most worth recognition.

In this time, it's important to note how vocal Constance Wu (*Crazy Rich Asians*' own Rachel Chu) has been in her activism for Asian-American representation, and the way she grew to understand this need only after witnessing audience reactions to her show, *Fresh Off the Boat* — the first Asian-American television show led by an Asian American family in over 20 years. Her involvement in discourse of representation influenced people like Chu to recognize his own responsibilities as a successful director

of multiple Hollywood sequels such as *Now You See Me 2*.

But film in Hollywood remains skewed toward being made by, and made to represent, white men. In 2017, the Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative led by the University of Southern California found that out of almost 40,000 speaking or named characters who had an identifiable race/ethnicity, from the 900 top fiction films in the US box office from 2007 to 2016, only 29.2% were Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino or "other," even though these groups make up 38.7% of the population and 49% of the movie-going audience in the country.

The figure for women of color who are represented is even lower. We can enlist simple tests to reveal implicit and explicit biases about who is considered worth representing in the North American film industry, such as the Bechdel test (to pass, the film has to have at least two women in it, who talk to each other about something other than a man) or the DuVernay test devised by Mahnola Dargis, in which "African Americans and other minorities have fully realized lives rather than serve as scenery in white stories."

FRAMEWORKS OF MEANING

The effects of a voting demographic on a film awards ceremony and the differences in conversation about *Crazy Rich Asians* go to show that our encounters with film are always subjective. We experience films within

the frameworks of meaning we find ourselves embedded in, and we are limited by the contextual borders of our realities. A 93% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes depicts one reality of specifically Asian-American representation in a North American context, but denies the co-existent reality that recognizes the limits of this representation in a Singaporean context — much less the rest of the vast Asian continent.

What is so special about *Crazy Rich Asians*, however, is the global conversation that it has prompted, on topics informed by the current socio-political climate, but also of the way people watch film, how they see and what they demand of visual culture. Hollywood film is a powerful global export that has influenced viewing practices across the world, shaped cross-cultural discourses and manufactured viewer aspirations. We can't just talk about a film and its internal world of plot, character and twists. We must always be mindful of the way a film is created as a product and disseminated within in a larger industry with its own particular modes and relations of production.

With this, we must ultimately recognize ourselves as consumers of visual culture and, as consumers, consider whether or not we are elevating the kinds of representative stories we say we want to see. As platforms for watching films and exploring new works from emerging film industries have increased, viewers can choose to

support local and regional filmmakers who are in the best position and hold the highest stakes in telling nuanced and complex stories about our societies.

Crazy Rich Asians has generated so much buzz as a wildly fun and successful but underrepresentative film in Singapore. By contrast, Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* received comparatively little attention surrounding its sensitive and well-informed representation of Singaporean-Malay characters working in the Singapore prison and capital punishment system. Another is K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird*, which follows a Singaporean-Tamil man who is released from prison and must navigate reconnecting with his family, informal work and his friendship with a mainland Chinese woman who has overstayed her visit pass.

Whilst both these films have been very well received at international film festivals, neither got the media attention, multi-source funding or screening time afforded to a film that largely uses Singapore as a big prop. If we care about diverse and dignified representation of actors, characters, stories and histories in film, we really need to start showing up where it makes an impact.

Annette Wu graduated from Yale-NUS College in Singapore as a major in anthropology in 2017. She continues to work at the liberal arts college, creating experiential learning programs and advising students on international and

professional opportunities. She loves watching film, thinking about the concept of "culture" and deepening her awareness of gender studies.

Fear and Loathing in Xinjiang: Ethnic Cleansing in the 21st Century

Sean R. Roberts

December 17, 2018

What we are witnessing in Xinjiang is a new form of ethnic cleansing that draws from all of these mass atrocities of the past while benefiting from the technologies of control available in the 21st century.

Over the last two years, there has been a flurry of news coverage of the mass human rights abuses targeting Uighurs and other Turkic minorities in China's northwest Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Initially, reports documented the growing use of cutting-edge technology to monitor the inhabitants of the region, but such stories were quickly eclipsed by the evidence that the state had constructed scores of mass internment camps throughout the region, which held hundreds of thousands of Uighurs and members of other local ethnic groups arbitrarily and indefinitely.

While Chinese authorities initially denied the existence of these mass internment camps, they have since acknowledged their existence and characterize them as benign and voluntary "vocational

training" centers meant to combat Islamic extremism in the region.

Many scholars and journalists, who have been tracking information about these internment camps for over a year, have presented plenty of evidence that the camps are anything but voluntary. People are arbitrarily detained and placed in camps against their will, frequently without any notification being given to their families. When husbands and wives are both interned, their children are sent to special boarding schools, becoming essentially wards of the state. There is no standard time period for internment, and it appears that very few of those who have spent time in these camps have been released.

While the camps are allegedly meant to deter extremism in the region, the diverse reasons for being interned and the varied population in these facilities belie a much broader agenda. The list of criteria for internment is vast and includes both present and past behavior, alleged religiosity or nationalist tendencies, travel abroad, contacts with foreigners, family associations, the content of one's electronic devices, the use of a Virtual Proxy Network (VPN) to circumvent censorship while browsing the internet and any accusation that one has suspect loyalty to the People's Republic of China and the Communist Party. Those interned include farmers and urban workers, businessmen and businesswomen, intellectuals and cultural figures, and many members of

the Communist Party with long histories of loyal service to the state. In short, almost anybody can be interned for virtually any reason.

Survivors and former workers of the camps have also suggested that what transpires inside them is anything but benign, recounting terrifying experiences that include torture, the use of mind-altering drugs on detainees and persistent humiliation. Beyond the most egregious abuses that occur in the camps, the banal existence inside them is a source of incredible psychological stress. All spaces in the camps are under constant surveillance by closed-circuit TV cameras that are under the constant gaze of guards in a CCTV central control room. The living quarters inside the camps are reportedly overcrowded, and inmates are poorly fed and limited in their ability to interact.

THE INFORMANT

While the atrocities that these camps represent and the most egregious abuses inside them have been well documented, there has been less analysis of what this situation means for the Uighur people as a whole inside the XUAR, whether they are inside or outside the internment camps. The full scale of what is happening in this western region of China became clear to me when I recently met an Uighur who had only left the region at the end of this summer. This person's account of life in the region, both inside and outside the camps, suggested that the Uighur people and other local ethnic groups are

facing a systematic effort to change their identities and perhaps even their consciousness. To fully understand the impact of this effort on the indigenous population of this region, one must examine how life in the camps intersects with that outside of them. The person I met gave me insight into this dynamic.

In an effort to protect this person's identity, I will avoid revealing his/her gender, place of residency both inside and outside China, and profession. Instead, I will refer to this person as "informant," alternatively using the initial "A." I should note that the informant with whom I met had not been interned in a camp, but A did have a close acquaintance who taught in one camp and had recounted that experience to A in detail. Furthermore, the informant is not an activist or involved in any way with political groups either inside or outside of China. In fact, the informant had mentioned that the information being provided to me had only been shared with a few close friends for fear that it would have ramifications for A's family back in China.

That said, once the informant began talking, it was difficult to stop A. It was as if it was a cathartic moment that allowed A to let out feelings that had been bottled up for months in the terrifying context of what it must be like to live as a Uighur inside the XUAR today. Obviously, the informant's accounts provide a sample of one and should not be considered as demonstrative of the experience of all Uighurs in the region.

Furthermore, the quite detailed description of the camp where his/her acquaintance worked should not be considered to characterize the operations of each of the at least 59 internment camps in the region. Nonetheless, as a means of providing both more eyewitness accounts of the daily life in the camps and offering an understanding of the psychological impact of these camps on those Uighurs who are not detained in them, I felt obliged to bring this person's account to a broader audience. I believe this account should add to the mounting evidence of what the People's Republic of China is actually doing today in the Xinjiang and serve as a rebuttal to the benign explanations of the Chinese state when it denies violating Uighurs' human rights in the region.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REPROGRAMMING

When asked what word is presently used by Uighurs for the mass detention centers that are spread throughout the XUAR, my informant said "education centers" (terbiyilesh Merkezi), stressing that the word "vocational" is never used to describe them. If this term was favored by most Uighurs, the informant also noted that relatives tended to tell the children of those taken to the camps either that they had gone to "university" or to the "hospital."

The description of the camp where A's acquaintance taught painted a picture that was more like a highly fortified prison than a school or a hospital. Not

only are the detainees forced to remain on the grounds, which are protected by watchtowers and barbed wire fences, but each floor of the building is self-contained to prevent interaction between those interned in different parts of the camp. In doing so, the camp's administration also makes a conscious effort to ensure that relatives and acquaintances are on separate floors or in different buildings to further isolate individuals.

I explicitly did not ask my informant about reported physical torture in the camps because I was more concerned with the banal ways that these institutions have invaded the everyday life of all Uighurs in the region, both those inside and outside of the camps. While stories of physical torture and punishment illustrate more sensationally the camps' gross violation of human rights, it is the terrorizing aspects of these camps' impact on the banality of everyday life that tells us more about their broader impact on the Uighur people as a whole.

According to the teacher with whom my informant is acquainted, the daily routine of detainees is mostly composed of three main activities aside from meals. First, the detainees take part in organized physical exercise, then they are subjected to an extended class on the Chinese language that takes several hours, and finally they must endure several hours of intense propaganda instruction about Xi Jinping Thought, the duties of PRC citizens, the evils of extremism and religion more generally,

and the identification of extremists. As a regular part of these propaganda lessons, the inmates are asked to participate in sessions of self-criticism where they admit their past mistakes and pledge to change their ways.

The language classes are particularly surreal in that they involve many students whose primary language is already Chinese (Minkaohan) as well as those who have almost no knowledge of the language. Frequently the instructors do not even know the language as well as many of the students. In this context, the classes cannot be very effective in actually teaching the Chinese language. Rather, the description of these classes provided by my informant sounded as if their goal was to symbolically convey the intent of the entire experience in the camps by force-feeding them a Chinese identity while stripping them of their own.

The brutal setting of the classroom cannot be conducive to learning and appears more like an elaborate form of torture. The students are forced to sit perfectly still in an upright position with their hands either crossed or on their knees for hours on end. The intense pressure of sitting upright for hours on end without movement has given most detainees one of a variety of physical ailments such as hemorrhoids and muscle disorders. All classrooms are watched by employees of the camps on CCTV cameras, and these hidden monitors quickly berate students in the Chinese language from loudspeakers in the classroom if they are observed

moving, appearing to be falling asleep or fidgeting.

The teachers of these classes are also physically detached from the students and are behind a fence throughout the teaching period. If they enter the actual classroom, the same loudspeaker warns them to quickly get safely behind the fenced-in area. Thus, as has also been suggested by an ethnic Kazakh teacher in the camps who fled from the XUAR to Kazakhstan earlier this year, life as a teacher in these camps is quite traumatic itself, especially if the teacher is not ethnic Han, but from one of the local ethnic groups. For this reason, my informant noted that school directors have begun regularly using threats of being sent to the camps to teach as a means of motivating their teaching staff to be more obedient pedagogues in their present positions.

In their sleeping quarters, the detainees are placed deliberately with strangers and are prohibited from socializing or even speaking to each other. This is once again enforced by the omnipresent CCTV surveillance and loudspeakers, which will command detainees to refrain from communicating if discovered to be doing so, even with hand signals. In lieu of talking, the detainees must stay up in the evening and watch more propaganda via a television in their cell. A recent account of a former guard at a different camp notes that this constant observation by CCTV follows the inmates even into the bathrooms, which are also installed with cameras.

COMPLETE ISOLATION

The intensity of this experience suggests an environment far worse than most prisons in the world. The detainees are given almost no opportunity to communicate with each other, and with the exception of morning exercise sessions, they are forced to be completely still for the majority of the day. Furthermore, while there have been some accounts of detainees being given permission to meet with family members over the course of their incarceration, testimonies also suggest that this is tightly controlled. Family members who wish to meet with inmates must be approved by their local police station and, if approved, are given rare opportunities for face-to-face contact as well as the occasional ability to talk by phone, all of which is monitored closely by the camp.

This controlled atmosphere of surveillance and limited communication must create a feeling of complete isolation. Accompanied by a barrage of propaganda focused on building a “Chinese” identity for the detainees and breaking down their Uighur identity, this isolation must inflict untold psychological trauma. For this reason, and given the indefinite term of inmates’ detention, it is not surprising that my informant’s acquaintance told A that there were frequent suicide attempts in the camp. As a result, detainees are denied access to any objects that could be used to inflict self-harm and are forced to wear uniforms that are deemed “suicide safe.”

While it is virtually impossible to understand the full impact of this environment on any of those involved, whether it be the detainees, the teachers or those responsible for controlling the environment either via surveillance cameras and loudspeakers or through physical enforcement — it produces a distortion of reality in all cases. For the inmates, it must be incredibly disorienting and traumatic, creating an environment that may indeed facilitate a process of gradually cleansing them of their identity.

For many teachers, it likely creates a dilemma of conscience as they participate in parading brutal means of indoctrination and psychological torture as a form of pedagogy. And, among many security personnel, it may be creating a vicious and desensitized segment of the population for whom inflicting psychological torture and intimidation are becoming normalized as part of their banal work life.

WAITING FOR DETENTION

Although not comparable with the psychological damage done to the detainees inside the camps, these “education centers” are also inflicting psychological trauma on all Uighurs in the XUAR. My informant suggested that the presence of these detention centers constantly hangs over all Uighurs’ daily life in the region. In some ways, this has created a sense of a new normalcy that people must factor into virtually all of their daily choices of action, but it also instills in people a constant fear of

arbitrary detention as well as intense distrust of each other.

Some of the ways in which the camps have invaded the everyday life of Uighurs are as mundane as finding code words for telling others where their missing friends and relatives are when they have disappeared into an education center. Others are more overt, but equally mundane. As my informant explained to me, now, when one enters a store to buy clothes, the salesperson will ask without emotion if they are buying regular clothes or clothes for the camps. These examples suggest that people have to a certain extent internalized the existence of these camps as a normal part of life.

If the presence of the camps has become normalized, their incorporation into daily life also reinforces a constant fear among virtually all Uighurs that they, too, may be sent to live in them. In work places, employees are made aware of the many criteria that makes one either an “extremist,” or in state places of work (including schools and universities), a “two-faced official,” criteria against which they are constantly evaluated. While not stated explicitly, people know that these regular evaluations are intended to determine whether they will be sent to an education center.

For some Uighurs, this experience is even more immediate, as those who evaluate their loyalty are sent by the state to periodically live with them in their homes. While my informant did not

experience this extreme invasion of private space, A did mention that similar evaluations of the family were regularly done by a local state-run neighborhood committee (Makhalla Komiteti).

On one hand, this process of constant evaluation offers Uighurs a road map of the things to avoid being perceived as doing as a means of navigating the new normal of Xinjiang. On the other hand, they serve as a means to force Uighurs outside the camps to forsake the markers of their identity, including their language, history and religion. Additionally, these regular evaluations provide an avenue for others to attack those with whom they may have disagreements. Thus, my informant said that there are frequent instances of people using accusations of “extremist tendencies” or “two-facedness” against others as a means to remove competitors in the workplace or neighbors with whom one has a disagreement.

In this sense, the camps have cultivated an environment of distrust and viciousness that is quite similar to those in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and China’s Cultural Revolution during the 1960s, when colleagues and neighbors frequently turned each other in as “enemies of the people” or “counter-revolutionaries” to be sent to labor camps or killed on the basis of personal grievances.

The uncertainty and lack of trust in this situation makes one live in almost

constant fear that one could get the “knock on the door” from authorities. My informant said that it is widely believed that people are taken to the camps from their homes late in the evening, leading to many sleepless nights. A, for example, would stay up most nights waiting anxiously to find out if the authorities would be coming. The lack of trust cultivated by this situation has led people to take all steps possible to avoid talking about the camps and the fear they evoke. If one is to discuss this with anybody, it must be a very trusted person and in complete privacy where nobody else can hear. Thus, one cannot compare notes about the fear each is encountering, and all of these feelings must be bottled up and self-absorbed.

This internalization of fear among Uighurs in the XUAR must be creating a contradictory environment. On the one hand, people have incentives to appear unquestioning of what is happening and to embrace it as normal. On the other hand, the consciousness that at any moment one might be arbitrarily detained indefinitely in a camp must make life anything but normal. They cannot demonstrate any attachments to the social life they once lived — the bonds of family, friends, neighbors and ethnic identity must all be forsaken. This, in effect, is breaking down the social fabric of Uighur society, which is at the center of their cultural identity.

ETHNIC CLEANSING?

It is clear that the People’s Republic of China is seeking to radically transform

the culture and identity of Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic groups in the region, but to what ends? In general, these efforts have focused on the elimination of Islam, the eradication of any political voice in society, the destruction of Uighur social capital, the repression of the Uighur language and the destruction of all substance in Uighur culture beyond song, dance and perhaps a version of “national dress” that is acceptable to the state.

While the state appears to be attempting to replace these aspects of Uighur identity with the hallmarks of Chinese identity, I would posit that the goal is not assimilation because the dominant Han culture will never fully accept Uighurs as equals; rather, it is to make this ethnic group into a cultural artifact, much like the state changed the living Uighur old city in Kashgar into a museum-styled caricature of its original form.

While this systematic campaign to change identity shares some commonalities with other state-led social engineering projects from the past, it also appears to be something completely new. While its aggressive attempt to alter identity is reminiscent of Pol Pot’s Year Zero campaign in Cambodia or Mao’s Cultural Revolution, both of these examples of mass social engineering targeted the entire citizenship of states and not merely select ethnic groups. In other ways, the mass internment of people on the basis of ethnicity and religion in Xinjiang evokes the history of Nazi Germany’s concentration camps, but the fact that

this has yet to result in the mass murder of Uighurs suggests it is too soon to call this genocide.

Finally, it is tempting to equate efforts to quarantine and control Uighurs in the XUAR with a process of “ethnic cleansing” like that which occurred during the Yugoslav civil war, but China’s efforts vis-à-vis Uighurs and other Muslim groups in this region have not yet sought to drive these populations from the region entirely as was the intent in former Yugoslavia.

In this context, what we are witnessing in the XUAR is a new form of ethnic cleansing that draws from all of these mass atrocities of the past while benefiting from the technologies of control available to states in the 21st century. It is a form of ethnic cleansing where the object of purging is not physical territory, but the human terrain of the ethnic group itself.

Whereas ethnic cleansing during the breakup of Yugoslavia sought to cleanse a territory of other ethnicities, in Xinjiang, the Chinese state appears to be trying to cleanse Uighurs of their “Uighurness.” A recent document on China’s state policy in the XUAR makes these intentions clear, noting that the goal with regards to the Uighurs is to “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins.”

The appearance of new technologies for ethnic cleansing should be of great concern to the international community,

which had worked throughout the second half of the last century to prevent such mass atrocities from repeating themselves. How it deals with what is happening in Xinjiang today may be a litmus test for the future, and its response will help set a precedent for how much state-led violence against citizens — particularly against minority populations — will be tolerated in the 21st century.

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Investing in Kazakhstan Is Still a Risky Business

Polina Popova

January 10, 2018

Extending economic opportunities to Kazakh companies could end up bankrolling the ruling class.

Kazakhstan and the European Union are celebrating a landmark partnership agreement that was sealed in December 2017, with an “overwhelming majority” of Parliament members voting to pursue the bloc’s first such deal with a Central Asian country.

Before popping open the locally-sourced champagne, however, the EU should take a moment and consider this not as an opportunity to lean back, but to push its easterly neighbor harder on human rights, the rule of law and improving the country’s stagnant business environment for the European companies that Kazakh leaders hope to lure to their market.

The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) is a charter described as “WTO plus” because it reiterates World Trade Organization provisions (in order to cement them) while taking on other barriers to trade. The EU’s partnership agreements come with a variety of labels; a similar deal with Armenia, for example, is called the Comprehensive & Enhanced Partnership Agreement

(CEPA). The choice of adjectives may vary, but all generally seek to upgrade trade ties while simultaneously enhancing political dialogue and holding the partner country accountable to international frameworks. The EPCA with Kazakhstan sticks to these priorities and attempts to respond to civil society concerns by placing strong emphasis on rights issues.

Unfortunately, translating those words into action might be more complicated than the EU thinks. Finnish MEP Liisa Jaakonsaari echoed concerns shared by NGOs and other lawmakers during the debate over final ratification of the EPCA. She declared that “economic interests cannot take precedence over human rights” at the tabling of the bill, but it remains unclear whether even those economic objectives will prove within reach. For one thing, implementing and enforcing the deal’s provisions means facing numerous challenges posed by corruption and the post-Soviet state’s overall business climate.

As is often the case in former communist countries, oligarchs closely aligned to the ageing President Nursultan Nazarbayev control much of Kazakhstan’s wealth. In such a murky environment, extending more economic opportunities to Kazakh companies could just end up bankrolling the ruling class, making investing in Kazakhstan a risky business. While the World Bank’s latest Doing Business index places Kazakhstan 36 in the world — a jump of 16 places compared to two years prior

— corruption remains rife. Transparency International rates the country in its lowest quartile, sandwiched between Iran and Russia.

Many of these issues stem from the way the economy is structured. The vast majority of the country's state-owned firms remain government-controlled, with no progress on promises to privatize behemoths such as the KazMunaiGaz oil and gas firm. Even when outside companies are allowed into the market, they face obstacles to putting down long-term roots in the market.

This holds doubly true for investors in the country's strategic electricity sector. Astana bluntly told AES Corp, a US company with 20 years of experience operating in Kazakhstan, that its concession of two hydropower plants the American firm had been operating and improving since the 1990s would be terminated. Adding insult to injury, the Kazakh government then decided to ignore the terms of its initial contract with AES, which provided for compensations in case of termination. Instead of the nearly \$90 million it is owed, Kazakh officials offered the American company \$1 and demanded an immediate transfer of ownership.

A similar fate befell the Dutch company Liman Caspian, which saw its licenses for oil and gas extraction annulled by Kazakhstan's courts and transferred to a Kazakh company controlled by obscure shareholders. Liman Caspian's ordeal helps demonstrate the difficulties faced

by outside companies in dealing with the Kazakh judiciary and in seeking redress for unfair treatment.

In its defense, the Kazakh government is cognizant of at least some of these problems. Astana has made an effort to privatize state-owned enterprises, attract investors and diversify the economy. Following the 2015 collapse of world oil prices, for instance, the Kazakh government announced a privatization drive that sought to reduce state ownership of the national economy from more than 40% to less than 15% — the standard used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Speaking at the Kazakhstan Global Investment Roundtable last month, Prime Minister Bakhytzhan Sagintayev promised the government would be prioritizing transparency, the rule of law and the protection of property in 2018. Those remarks came just days before the European Parliament voted for the EPCA.

The MEPs who overwhelmingly voted for the new partnership agreement need to make sure their deal with Astana turns these talking points into concrete policy results on the ground. A freer, more transparent economy based on good governance as opposed to venal interests will be important to addressing many of their other concerns regarding Kazakhstan. Europe's voice should be loud, but it does not need to be solitary. With President Nazarbayev visiting Washington this month, now would be a

good time for his American interlocutors to drive home the same message.

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India Enters the Era of Sanatan Socialism

Atul Singh & Manu Sharma
February 9, 2018

The Indian government's latest budget courts the poor with an indigenous brand of socialism that relies on financial transfers and private provision of services in an election year.

In an article for the BBC, Vivek Kaul has damned the most recent Indian budget as “full of vague promises” that “sells dreams for votes.” In contrast, Shyamal Mukherjee, the chairman of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) India, has hailed the government for approaching “development holistically.”

The budget deserves neither Kaul's condemnation nor Mukherjee's genuflection. Instead, a cold look at the budget's proclamations and numbers reveal that this is a budget of both promise and peril. If the government can follow through on its proposals, it will improve the lives of hundreds of millions. If it fails or falters in its implementation, a surge in inflation, unemployment and debt is inevitable.

STATE OF THE ECONOMY

To analyze the budget, we have to examine the state of the economy, and the government of India's Economic Survey 2017-18 is the best place to start. The Indian economy decelerated in the first half of the year before rebounding sharply in the second half. Apparently, the slowdown in the first six months was because of demonetization, teething difficulties in the new goods and services tax, rising real interest rates, companies struggling to meet interest payments, bad debts on the books of banks, and sharp falls in certain food prices that impacted agricultural incomes. From July 2017 onward, the global economic recovery boosted exports. Because of government reforms, India jumped 30 spots on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings from 130 to 100.

Yet, as Economic Survey 2017-18 acknowledged, anxieties remain. In its words, “fiscal deficits, the current account, and inflation were all higher than expected, albeit not threateningly

so, reflecting in part higher international oil prices—India’s historic macroeconomic vulnerability.” While pointing out that India had risen 30 spots in one of the World Bank’s rankings, the survey failed to note that, out of 190 countries, India still ranks 156 when it comes to starting a business, 164 in enforcing contracts and 181 when dealing with construction permits. The rankings reveal that India’s infamous red tape, notorious corruption and dysfunctional judiciary continue to hinder its economic potential.

Newspaper headlines tend to focus on growth alone. However, Indians must pay attention to three pertinent facts.

First, private investment in India has collapsed from a high of 27.2% of GDP in 2011 to about 21.9% of GDP in 2015. The Economic Survey 2017-18 observes that Indian corporates have modest investment plans despite the low levels of the cost of equity, thanks to booming stock markets.

Second, exports of goods and services fell from 25.4% of GDP in 2013 to 19.2% in 2016. Alarming, “the only two truly sustainable engines” of rapid economic growth are not quite firing on full throttle.

Third, unemployment and underemployment in India continues to remain a huge challenge. Year after year, even doctors of philosophy continue to apply for positions of peons. The lack of “good, high productivity jobs” threatens to make India’s much-

heralded demographic dividend a demographic disaster.

GROWING TAX BASE

Tellingly, the Economic Survey 2017-18 reveals an important fact. The number of unique indirect taxpayers in India has gone up by 50% since the government implemented the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Act in July 2017. The income tax net has widened too. Now, an additional 1.8 million are paying income tax, taking the figure of those who file returns to around 59 million payees. Income tax collections have risen from 2% of GDP to a historic high of 2.3%. This number is still miniscule in a country of over 1.3 billion people, but the government has made significant progress in its goal to formalize the Indian economy.

Even as the central government in New Delhi is casting a wider net, the 29 state governments do a terrible job in collecting taxes. The Economic Survey 2017-18 reveals that Indian states get less than 10% of their total revenue from direct taxes. The corresponding figures for their counterparts in Brazil and Germany are nearly 20% and over 40% respectively.

India’s tax figures reveal an important fact. The informal or “black” economy in India has been humongous for decades. Neither Jawaharlal Nehru’s socialism nor Narasimha Rao’s liberalization were able to shine the light on this black economy. Indians found innumerable ways to work around their government’s

interminable red tape, and avoiding tax was a national sport in a manner uncannily similar to Italy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has made progress on its long-term goal of the formalization of the Indian economy.

TACKLING TWIN BALANCE SHEET PROBLEM

In March 2017, The Economist analyzed India's Twin Balance Sheet (TBS) problem. During former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's second term when Raghuram Rajan was the governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), companies invested on over optimistic assumptions and banks lent without due diligence. As a result, many companies are near-bankrupt and are struggling to repay their debt. This puts the balance sheets of both companies and banks in "parlous states" because non-performing assets throttle investment. Since most banks are owned by the government, the risk of an acute crisis is low. Having said that, bad debts are causing a "chronic malaise" in the economy.

Rajan is the man responsible for this malaise. Interestingly, Business Insider prides itself on calling Rajan the "James Bond of Dalal Street." This New York-based publication was not alone in letting Rajan off the hook for India's TBS problem. Like Alan Greenspan, Rajan and his predecessors presided over an "irrational exuberance" that led to banks lending merrily to the likes of Vijay Mallya, who alone racked up over \$1 billion. Mallya, the "King of Good

Times," has since fled to the United Kingdom and been charged with money-laundering. Rajan might have been Bond for the stock market, but this US-based son of an intelligence official left a trail of carcasses in India's banking sector.

Such is the scale of the TBS problem that India's non-performing assets ratio is among the highest in the world. Only Greece, Italy, Portugal and Ireland have worse ratios. In December 2017, RBI published the Financial Stability Report (FSR), a biannual publication. As per the FSR, non-performing assets in the banking sector may rise from 10.2% of the total loans in September 2017 to 10.8% in March 2018 and further to 11.1% by September 2018.

To be fair to the Modi government, it is finally addressing TBS through, what the Economic Survey 2017-18 called, the four Rs strategy involving "recognition, resolution, recapitalization and reforms." It has also brought in a new Indian Bankruptcy Code (IBC) to provide a resolution framework for companies to clean up their balance sheets and reduce their debts. Furthermore, the government has announced a large recapitalization package of about 1.2% of India's GDP to strengthen the balance sheets of public sector banks.

BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley trumpeted Modi's vision of "minimum government and maximum governance" in paragraph seven of his budget speech.

In the next paragraph, he talked about improving “ease of living” not just “ease of doing business,” especially for the poor and middle classes. He declared that good governance involves minimum interference by the government in the life of common people of the country. If we are to derive the philosophical underpinnings of the budget, they lie in paragraph eight of the finance minister’s speech. The government aims to ameliorate the lives of the people but intervene minimally in the process.

To improve this ease of living, the budget raised the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for a large number of crops by one and a half times. The government’s goal is to raise incomes for farmers. However, the budget does not contain an analysis of how the rise in MSP might impact inflation, cropping patterns or the budget deficit. It does focus on strengthening rural markets, though, and sets an ambitious target of upgrading 22,000 of them. The budget also announced 500,000 Wi-Fi hotspots that hold the promise of connecting millions of villagers to high-speed internet. It focuses on rural infrastructure, announcing 1.7 million kilometers of new roads, 5.1 million new homes, 19 million new toilets and 17.5 million new household electricity connections for India’s villages.

More importantly, the budget announced two major initiatives as part of the Ayushman Bharat program that, in the words of Jaitley, aims to make “path breaking interventions to address health holistically, in primary, secondary and

tertiary care system covering both prevention and health promotion.” First, 150,000 health and wellness centers are to “provide comprehensive health care, including for non-communicable diseases and maternal and child health services.” They are also supposed to dispense “free essential drugs and diagnostic services.” Second, “a flagship National Health Protection Scheme” is to cover over 100 million poor and vulnerable families, providing coverage of up to \$7,800 per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization. This is four times the country’s real per capita income. With an estimated 500 million beneficiaries, this scheme “will be the world’s largest government funded health care program.”

The budget recognized that “Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) are a major engine of growth and employment in the country.” Jaitley observed that demonetization and GST were causing the formalization of MSMEs. He announced more than \$590 million for MSMEs as “credit support, capital and interest subsidy and innovations.” The slashing of corporate income tax is more significant measure for MSMEs. Companies with a turnover of up to approximately \$39 million will pay tax at 25%. This will benefit 667,000 companies that employ 110 million Indians and comprise 37% of India’s GDP. Thus, 96% of the total number of companies filing tax returns will benefit from this measure. The assumption behind this move is that it will strengthen

the MSMEs sector and boost employment.

On the taxation front, the budget introduced the long-term capital gains tax on return on investment from equity. As per the finance minister, buoyant stock markets have largely benefited corporates and limited liability partnerships. Besides, as the Economic Survey 2017-18 observed, this stock market surge has coincided with deceleration in economic growth. India's corporate earnings to GDP ratio has fallen to just 3.5%, while the corresponding figure in the United States has remained a healthy 9%. As per Jaitley, this has created "a bias against manufacturing" and some say even capital investment. This measure is intended to even the playing field apart from getting some coins for India's coffers.

Finally, the budget increases the existing health and education cess by 1%. This will net the government a little over \$1.7 billion and go to the Consolidated Fund of India but, unlike the GST, not be shared with the states.

READING THE CHARTS: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Prima facie, the health insurance scheme is a bold move that could ameliorate the lives of hundreds of millions. Recently, the World Health Organization and the World Bank published Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2017 Global Monitoring Report, as per which India did not fare

too well. About 16% of Indian households spend over 10% of their income on health care in case of crises. Nearly 4% spend as high as 25% when emergency strikes, in contrast to South Africa and Russia where merely 0.1% and 0.6% households spend a similar amount. As per two different poverty lines, 4.2% or 4.6% of households end up impoverished because of excessive spending on health care. The above percentages imply that of the 240 million households in India, 50 million are ruined by costs of health care. In theory, insurance could save these borderline cases — people who are often pushed over the edge by simple diseases such as malaria and diarrhea.

Health insurance could also create a parallel health care system that provides for the poor. India's public health delivery system is on the verge of collapse. Government hospitals lack doctors, nurses, equipment and medicines. Employees fail to show up, wards are dirty and patients die waiting. Furthermore, of a total of 628,708 government beds, only 196,182 are in rural areas. India does not have enough doctors and most do not go to rural areas. This leaves villagers highly vulnerable because simple conditions can deteriorate rapidly into life threatening ones.

The budget's health insurance scheme could bring about dramatic change if executed well. However, after the shambolic implementation of demonetization and the multiple gaffes over GST, the government's ability to

execute is in question. Health care and public health professionals point out that the budget has given up on the provision of health care by the government. Since this model has failed for decades, it is opting for the insurance-based solution. However, this runs risks of inflation as the American experience demonstrates. In the US, an insurance-driven system now consumes over 17% of an over \$18 trillion GDP and achieves rather poor outcomes.

Furthermore, the budget's health insurance scheme took everyone by surprise. It was reminiscent of the government's earlier announcement to impose demonetization. While it may be a product of original thinking by government, the fact that the scheme was utterly unflagged is reflective of a secretive nature of functioning. It appears that a close coterie comes up with ideas but does not bother to run it by subject matter experts or those responsible for implementing this project.

There is another minor matter. In India, private health care providers are arguably at least as rapacious as in the US. They notoriously provide shoddy treatment at high prices. Worryingly, they provide "kickbacks for referrals, irrational drug prescribing and unnecessary interventions," profiting from the sick in a most unseemly fashion. Such is the state of affairs that an estimated 40% of private care is provided by unqualified providers. Even reputed corporate hospitals are guilty of running rackets. If implemented poorly,

private hospitals would profit far more from the budget's insurance scheme than poor villagers. Besides, the budget does not reveal how much this scheme will cost, where the money would come from and who would administer this scheme.

Similarly, neither MSP nor rural markets might end up benefiting farmers much. State governments are in-charge of agriculture, and their ability to implement policies or schemes are suspect. Besides, the budget is unclear as to the cost of increased MSP or its impact on inflation, deficit and the environment. If farmers are assured of MSP on rice, what stops them from growing this water guzzling crop in semi-arid areas such as Haryana and Punjab?

Despite potential pitfalls, the focus on issues such as health and rural infrastructure is indicative of a socialist bent of mind. At a time when US President Donald Trump is cutting taxes, the supposedly market-friendly Narendra Modi is courting the poor and the marginalized. He is cutting expenditure in defense and education while continuing subsidies and dispensing goodies. Unlike the Fabian Socialism of Nehru, this is Sanatan Socialism of Modi. Just like Sanatan Dharma, this is an ingenious and indigenous form of socialism. A party long identified with the priestly and trading classes is now focusing on India's impoverished millions. However, instead of entrusting India's bumbling bureaucrats with the commanding heights of the economy, Modi's

government is relying on formalization and financialization to deliver benefits to the people.

In the pursuit of formalization, the government is bringing an increasing number of individuals and companies into the tax ambit. To achieve its goal of financialization, over 310 million new bank accounts have opened under the prime minister's Jan Dhan Yojana. These accounts are linked to their unique identification numbers known as Aadhaar and to their mobile numbers. This linking of accounts, Aadhaar and mobile numbers allows the government to deliver financial subsidies directly to citizens, eliminating intermediaries, inefficiencies and leakages. Of course, financialization carries risks too. If Indian banks go the Americano way and invest in toxic assets, they might drag down depositors in the same way.

Finally, the political ramifications of this budget are the elephant in the room. This year, 10 different states will face elections. Many expect an early national general election by the end of the year. Some anticipate direct cash transfers to new bank accounts as a last-ditch effort to win votes.

India is now fairly and squarely in the midst of election season and all political parties are striving to win over voters. Yet even as the government has showered rural and marginalized voters with goodies, it has left the urban middle classes high and dry. These classes are traditional supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party and are seething with rage.

It is too early to tell if they will vote for the opposition, but they no longer love Modi as they did in 2014. If Sanatan Socialism does not seduce India's poor and needy, the next elections might prove just a tad tricky for the man with the self-proclaimed 56-inch chest.

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The Way Forward After Communal Violence in Sri Lanka

Amjad Saleem
March 6, 2018

Sri Lanka needs a platform for genuine and objective discussion in the hope of moving forward and achieving reconciliation.

In Sri Lanka, the start of February was about celebration for the past 70 years of independence, but its end was about reflective contemplation over an uncertain future. Following a wave of anti-Muslim violence in the central district of Kandy, a nationwide state of emergency was declared on March 6 — and lifted on March 18 — the first time in seven years in a country with a history of civil war.

Amidst a curfew enforced in the central province, mobs comprising disaffected youth from the majority Sinhala community — often led by Buddhist monks and individuals linked to ultra-nationalist Sinhalese groups — attacked and destroyed premises belonging to the minority Muslim community. Businesses, homes and mosques were torched and looted.

The attacks were in apparent retaliation for the death of a Sinhalese driver after an altercation with drunken Muslim

youth. Yet this was not a simple rise in anger symbolizing grassroots tensions between two communities. It was organized mob violence with a plan and strategy to target Sri Lankan Muslims, united on social media and fed with local intelligence about where they lived.

To some extent, the violence was not entirely unexpected. For many of us who have been working on post-conflict reconciliation in Sri Lanka and kept an eye on community relations, for a number of years there has been a feeling that although relative “calm” had descended on the island at the end of the decades-long civil war in 2009, this was just surface-led. It was inevitable that some sort of communal violence would return. After all, the conflict indicators showed that Sri Lanka faced trouble every 10 years after independence.

BEHIND THE VIOLENCE IN KANDY

For those of us who were tracking the rise of extreme nationalism and ethnic and religious hatred — being pushed by a small minority speaking on behalf of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community — the latest round of violence is a worrying sign of a link and trend of globalizing hatred and fragility.

Over the last 100 years, there have been at least six incidents of large-scale violence between the Sinhalese and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Today, the time between recent incidents has dropped (the previous flare ups happened within the last four years), and the rhetoric

around sectarian violence has mirrored what is coming out of Myanmar with hardline Buddhists and the minority Rohingya.

It is in this light that Sri Lanka is seen through a singular lens of good vs evil, us vs them. This perpetuates deeply delusive and divisive assumptions of exclusive identities by these sectarian actors, who want people to ignore all affiliation and loyalties in support of one “religious” identity.

The violence of February comes on the back of what has been a relentless and sustained campaign of anti-Muslim rhetoric. This has involved public meetings, the distribution of pamphlets and the publishing of articles in mainstream Sinhala and English papers, which have borrowed rhetoric used globally to demonize and stereotype Muslims. In the face of “fake news,” the propagation of myths is wide and wild. For instance, the week preceding the flare up of violence in Kandy, a tense situation erupted in the east where Sinhalese had accused Muslims of serving them food with infertile pills. Such was the seriousness of the claim that the United Nations Population Fund, the World Health Organization, and the Government Medical Officers Association had to issue statements to refute this.

It would be naive to blame the violence just on faith. There are other factors that combine to make this flare up and its causes deep and problematic. The majority misperception is that Sri

Lankan Muslims are successful businessmen and, therefore, economic interests mean there is an attempt to squeeze Muslims out of the market. From the halal boycott — a move by a hardline Sinhalese Buddhist group — to the extensive damage and looting that has been inflicted on businesses, it is clear that there was an economic dimension to the violence aimed at hitting the Muslim community.

There is also an attempt to decrease the visibility of Muslims. For hardline Sinhalese, Muslims are seen as a threat to Sinhala identity and ultimately Sri Lanka, which manifests itself in the rhetoric around dress codes — in particular what is deemed as Arab clothes such as the thawb for men or the abaya and niqab for women — and the attacks on mosques.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

What is ultimately surprising is not that these actions took place, but the silent complicity of the Sinhala majority. For a lot of us in Sri Lanka who grew up with people from other communities, what has been disconcerting (although there are exceptions to this) has been the silence of condemnation for violent actions by mainstream Sinhalese. This is by no means a generalization as there have been strong statements, including by Buddhist monks, condemning the violence.

However, the disappointment was the reaction of the government, who seemed to have been caught by

surprise by the violence and struggled to contain it. Despite a curfew and social media censorship, in the initial phases of the violence the government appeared unable to mobilize law enforcement to act. Though a number of arrests were made and there have been strong statements issued, the Sri Lankan government struggled to ensure that the rule of law and justice had been followed. This perhaps remains the biggest disappointment for many who thought the government change in 2015 would bring about a shift in the narrative of racist, ethno-nationalist politics.

So, what needs to be done?

Clearly there is a lot to be done politically. The present government entered office on the agenda of good governance and equality, and it was largely supported by minority voters, including the Muslim community. There needs to be trust built once again with the government and between the government and Sri Lankan Muslims. In addition, however, there needs to be work done at the grassroots level. There is currently a lot to be done around improving social capital. Hence, a change of narrative and thinking has to be the order of the day on top of any structural alignments toward ensuring that such bouts of violence do not happen again. There also has to be a change of narrative about who Muslims are and where they belong in Sri Lanka.

DIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA

By hardline Sinhala Buddhists declaring Sri Lanka as a “Sinhala-only country,” those perpetrating this mindless rhetoric of Sinhala supremacism presuppose the acceptance of Sri Lanka as a land sacred to Buddhism and with Buddhists as its chosen people. According to this vision, minorities, including Sinhala Christians, are not co-owners or even guests (because guests have to be given certain privileges and rights). Rather, they are second-class serfs (untouchables) who should thank the benevolent majority for being given the chance to live there.

In so doing, this completely rewrites the rich history of a country whose mosaic is made up of different ethnicities, faiths and cultures. They have chosen to rewrite a history of the accumulation of unfinished business, the piling up of debts and the stacking up of fortunes and misfortunes. Whilst it is true that Sri Lanka is the only place in which there are Sinhalese and where the Sinhalese language is spoken, this does not equate to ownership of the island solely by one race or another, nor does it speak of the rich inter mingling of all races and faiths that influence much of Sri Lankan culture, food, art and music today. It also does a huge disservice to the Buddhist way of life, which is about peace, tranquility and tolerance of others. Declaring Sri Lanka as Buddhist does not preclude it from having minorities of other faiths and ethnicities coexisting with equal rights.

This change in narrative also has to start from the Muslim community itself.

For years, we have claimed that Muslims arrived in Sri Lanka around 1,000 years ago. This simplifies a complex history of Islam coming through trade — mostly by Arabs — and of a rich history of engagement with local people. Islam came to Sri Lanka via traders who interacted with local communities. Thus, there is a *mélange* of identities, ethnicities and cultures that make up the Muslim community, not the homogeneous identities that both the Muslim community and those outside of it choose to define.

RECONCILIATION

The recent events are also a wake-up call to those who have been engaging in reconciliation work in Sri Lanka. For too long, there was a binary notion from the international community about the decades-long civil war being between two parties: the Sinhalese and the Tamil. Yet the history of the conflict is much more than that. Though not direct parties to the war, Sri Lankan Muslims suffered during the conflict, and it is important to note that for full reconciliation to take place, it needs to be holistic and comprehensive. This means everyone should be considered from all parts of Sri Lanka. Reconciliation is not about north and south.

The violence in Kandy shows that a lot more needs to be done at the grassroots level. It is fine to talk about political solutions, but if people at the grassroots still do not trust or know each other, then political solutions will just be

a band-aid to a deep burn. The vitriolic rhetoric that has been spread is testimony to the fact that we need to start once again from scratch in developing a discussion that is not only top-down, but bottom-up too. There needs to be parallel efforts to build trust between people and communities through multi-faith interactions and crossing ethnic divides.

This is the role that civil society and, in particular, religious leaders should be playing in order to bring out about reconciliation. The aim should be to rebuild trust through reducing suspicion and infusing human values, with an understanding of the need to move away from apportioning blame for deceit and destruction. Trust can only be rebuilt when a space is created for effective dialogue and understanding. This space is one that starts at local levels with community organizations, leaders and intellectuals. It is not the sole responsibility of the political establishment, but of everyone interested in this endeavor.

Rebuilding trust is about honoring unity and celebrating diversity, working toward equity and justice, and ensuring the eradication of social prejudices in building a collective identity. We cannot abrogate our individual responsibilities in this task. The simple question to ask ourselves is: How much do we know of and understand our friends/colleagues who come from a different faith and ethnicity? By knowing, understanding and respecting each other's faith and community, we move from just tolerance

to acceptance. These are the first signs of a mature, diverse society and democracy. It is the first part in accepting the social contract of citizenship of a nation.

Solutions are needed for the restitution of a fractured polity, which involves a healthy acceptance of minorities. Hence, there must be legal and constitutional structures that not only guarantee equal rights for citizens and freedom of religion, but also legislates against incitement for racial and religious hatred and discrimination. No one argues about removing the privileged place of Buddhism in Sri Lanka or doing away with rights of the majority. But it is expected that the spirit of Buddhism has to ensure tolerance and respect for others, and with legal safeguards in place to enforce this.

Sri Lanka is at a crossroads of uncertainty, with bitter interethnic rivalries fanned by divisive politics. Constitutional amendments and projected development, however, are not enough to make hearts forgive and forget. Sri Lanka needs a platform for genuine and objective discussion in the hope of moving forward and achieving reconciliation. This has to start at the grassroots and involve all aspects of society. Reconciliation has to ultimately work through the hearts of individuals who harbor pain from the long years of their inability to meet basic human aspirations or from the loss of loved ones and properties as they became innocent victims of calculated and

indiscriminate violence between fighting forces.

We are nearly 35 years on from the horrible riots of July 1983 that sent the country down a treacherous path, because it is exactly the same scenario where anti-Tamil propaganda was pumped over in the years. We are also 103 years on from the first Sinhala-Muslim riots and violence that took place in exactly the same place: Kandy. Despite the multiple incidents of anti-Muslim violence that have occurred since 1915 without any such armed reaction from the community, lessons should be taken from history in terms of the ramifications of not addressing the causes of conflict.

If we want to aspire to tackle the root causes of the ethnic and racist rhetoric and violence, then the challenge is to actually learn from what has happened in order to have a county that respects its diversity and is united in its principles and values that are influenced by Buddhism. Otherwise, we condemn future generations to the vicious cycle of hatred, intolerance and violence that will destroy Sri Lanka, not unite it.

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Lesson from India to Make America Great Again

Ruyintan E. Mehta & Atul Singh

July 3, 2018

By granting asylum to Zoroastrians fleeing persecution a thousand years ago, a local Gujarati ruler inadvertently helped create modern India and benefited the entire world.

The conventional view of history is one of progress. This is not entirely true. Sometimes, societies regress, cultures decline and civilizations fall. This is not a view that Steven Pinker espouses but Francis Fukuyama, the man who declared the end of history, is coming around to. Fukuyama is worrying about President Donald Trump and American political decay. Trump’s zero-tolerance policy on migrants that caused the separation of children from their parents is certainly an example of this decay.

Trump won power in part thanks to his tough stance on immigration. He raised the specter of drug-dealers, criminals and rapists crossing the American border with Mexico. He promised to build the wall, make Mexico pay for it and stop the deluge of migrants flooding into the US.

In office, Trump has certainly delivered on his promise. Illegal migrants entering the United States are rounded up, locked up in detention centers and then shipped back across the border. Until recently, Trump did not mind separating families and locking children in cages. As per US immigration officials, 2,342 children were separated from 2,206 parents between May 5 and June 9. After much brouhaha and raucous international condemnation, Trump signed an executive order that allowed for immigrant families to be detained together while their legal cases are considered.

Before his U-turn, Trump claimed that an executive order would not solve the problem. He argued that the only solution possible was the passing of comprehensive immigration reform by Congress. In keeping with his past behavior, the abrasive American president has reversed his stand in the blink of an eye. The US has now become Trumpistan, a land that is not only cruel and intolerant, but also dishonest and hypocritical in almost all its claims and actions.

IMMIGRANTS FROM IRAN

CREATORS OF MODERN INDIA

The US could do well to learn from a lesson from the past. This is not a story of Huguenots fleeing France to Prussia, England and Switzerland. It is not a story of Jews fleeing Spain. It is a story of Zoroastrians fleeing Persia or modern-day Iran because of fierce Islamic persecution in the eighth century.

These followers of Zoroaster were members of the world's first monotheistic faith that began 1,200 to 1,500 years before Christ. Many tenets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have their roots in Zoroastrianism. In the eighth century, members of this rich ancient tradition fled for their lives to India. Landing in Gujarat, they sought permission from Jadi Rana, the local ruler, to settle in his lands. As per Qeşsa-ye Sanjān (The Story of Sanjān), the ruler was apprehensive about giving refuge to people who appeared warrior-like, dressed differently and spoke in strange tongues.

As per oral tradition, Jadi Rana presented a full cup of milk to the refugees to indicate that his lands were already full. These refugees put sugar in the cup to convince the king that they would be "like sugar in a full cup of milk, adding sweetness but not causing it to overflow." This purportedly convinced Jadi Rana to grant asylum to the beleaguered men, women and children thronging his shores. This was the sensible and humane thing to do. These newcomers came to be known as the Parsis, in cognizance of their Persian roots.

Fast forward to 2018 and you cannot imagine modern India without the Parsis. The second president of the Indian National Congress was Dadabhai Naoroji, an educator, intellectual and statesman. This Parsi did the early work on the drain of wealth from colonial India to imperial Britain. After independence in 1947, Homi Jehangir Bhabha, another Parsi, created India's now much-vaunted nuclear program. In 1971, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, arguably the most famous of Parsis, liberated Bangladesh from Islamabad's oppressive rule.

Thanks to his brilliance, 92,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered, ensuring Bangladeshis could finally live without the fear of being raped, plundered and slaughtered with wanton abandon. Soli Sorabjee, a legendary lawyer, jurist and yet another Parsi, has been a torch bearer for freedom of expression and protection of human rights for decades. In the world of music, Zubin Mehta, the elegant conductor, and Freddie Mercury, the flamboyant rock star, fly the Parsi flag high.

Tata, India's preeminent business house, was founded and has been run by Parsis for more than a century and half. Not only has it run numerous successful businesses, this multinational has helped build towering national institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science, the Tata Memorial Hospital and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Other Parsis have run

successful businesses too and set standards for philanthropy in the country.

For centuries, the Parsis have been totally integrated in Indian society. There have been no reports of strife, tension or riots between Parsis and other communities in oral or written history. With a literacy rate of 99%, they remain the most highly educated community in the land, exceeding the achievements of Brahmins, India's priestly caste, and Sayyids, purportedly direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad.

It is important to note that the Parsi population has never exceeded 100,000 at any point in history. Low birth rates and migration to Western countries has resulted in the population declining to a mere 61,000 today even as India's population continues to rise. By any standards, the Parsi contribution to India has been staggering and is totally out of proportion to the minuscule size of their community.

LESSON FOR AMERICA

The Parsi story underscores an important point. Penniless refugees and desperate migrants have often been a country's greatest assets. In the American context, this holds even more true. Immigrants made America great and it is they who will make America great again.

It not without reason that the sonnet on the Statue of Liberty declares, "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled

masses yearning to breathe free / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." Over 1,000 years ago, the wretched refuse from Iranian shores drifted into the sandy land of Mahatma Gandhi. At that time, if Jadi Rana had acted like Donald Trump, the Parsis would have been cast back into the sea and not only India but also the rest of the world would have been poorer today as a result.

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Modi and Erdogan Have More in Common than You Think

Kumar Ashish
September 23, 2018

With strongman politics on the rise around the world, democracies like India should be worried.

Political “strongmen” are leaders who rule by force and with a sense of entitlement under the garb of democracy. The facade of democratic structures and institutions used by them distinguishes these leaders from monarchs or dictators.

The world is witnessing a right-wing resurgence, with strongmen at the forefront in every corner of this fractured, post-globalization world. At the end of 2015, columnist Gideon Rachman wrote in a commentary for *The Economist* that, “Across the world—from Russia to China and from India to Egypt—macho leadership is back in fashion.”

Politicians like Narendra Modi, Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdogan are products of these times. They are well capable of capitalizing on the sentiments of anxiety and longing for reclaiming a past civilization.

These leaders appear to be driving a ruthless development agenda and have adopted oppressive stands against minorities. In Turkey, President Erdogan has sprung from political Islam — a form

of politics that was pushed back under earlier secular regimes. He has been riding on the “ideal” of changing the secular character of the country. Erdogan has slowly achieved his goal by reviving the glorious past of the Ottoman Empire. In India, the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, motivated by the agenda of “Hindutva” — the notion that India is the homeland of Hindus alone. Prime Minister Modi’s campaigns evoke the glorious past of a Hindu India.

It is easy to notice the similarities between the political journeys of these strongmen — especially Erdogan and Modi — and what is happening to their countries. Both Erdogan and Modi are right-wing politicians who employ nationalist rhetoric. They use religion to cling onto power and push back the secular fabric of Turkish and Indian politics.

In order to unite his primary constituency, Erdogan has been persecuting the Kurds. Similarly, the Modi administration has imposed Hindu scripture study in schools, ignored attacks on Christians, and turned a blind eye toward repeated cases of targeted lynching of minorities. Demonization of the opposition, through media dominance, has been a hallmark of both governments. Erdogan and Modi come from modest economic and educational backgrounds. They have been successful in adopting a “strongman” image, which is extremely appealing to their respective constituencies. They brand the long-established political

workings of their countries as elitist (anti-national) and promote populist policies.

The strong resemblance of the two leaders has not gone unnoticed and, both in India and Turkey, the authoritarian tendencies of Erdogan and Modi have brought serious danger to democracy and human rights.

RELIGION FIRST

Turkey was founded in 1923 as a secular republic, with its founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, being granted a revered status as father of the Turks. Ataturk abolished the Islamic caliphate, and for nearly a hundred years that secular system of keeping religion separate from public life had held strong. How Erdogan has dumped Turkey's secular experiment and grabbed power should be a lesson for Indians, too. In Turkey, it is about the consolidation of power that will transform the once-fiercely secular republic into Erdogan's more religiously-minded model. Now, Turks are more likely to see large images of Erdogan's face in public than Ataturk's.

Contrary to the founding principles of the nation, Erdogan's popularity rides on a conservative Muslim base and is derived in part from his assertions that Turkey is a Muslim country. In India, the BJP has been strongly motivated by the notion that the country belongs to Hindus only. Since Modi became prime minister, minority groups have been regularly attacked and live in a very

hostile environment. Modi supporters have stepped up their campaign against inter-religious marriages and the consumption of beef. Mass conversions to Hinduism are being enforced by his party activists.

With absolute powers in his hands, Modi can do what Indira Gandhi did in 1975 with what is known as "The Emergency," or what Erdogan is doing today by placing Turkey under a state of emergency and giving the government every power to suppress dissent.

Religious revivalism is a strong adhesive that binds the core voter base of popular leaders. Use of religion as rhetoric was optimized by Trump in 2016 and exploited to the fullest by Erdogan. Similarly, strong motivation in the form of nationalist sentiments and religious revivalism are being successfully used by Modi, and it currently appears to be the most potent formula for victory in elections. Liberals and secularists term Modi as illiberal — a "fascist" who has stifled press freedom, free speech and is undermining democratic institutions. These were the very traits of Indira Gandhi, which the BJP today accuses the Indian National Congress party of for its historic misdeeds.

Both the Turkish and Indian cases show us what authoritarian populists can do in the long run. They become well capable of delegitimizing anybody who disagrees with them. They can denigrate the opposition, control the media and malign

the few who dissent by spreading lies about them.

With expanded presidential powers coming into force following an election in June, Erdogan could remain in office for another 10 years. He has perpetuated a virtual presidency for life, much like Russian President Vladimir Putin who has accorded such powers for himself. It shows that, even if around half of the country deeply hates them, populists like Erdogan can stay in power by mobilizing a fervent base of fake nationalism.

DISENFRANCHISING THE MINORITIES IN INDIA

The 2014 general elections in India saw a marked reduction in the share of influence of Muslim votes in national politics. It is no longer about economic deprivation. It is about political exclusion for the Muslim minority. For the first time in India, the governing party has no Muslim MP in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). In the present Lok Sabha, there are only 22 Muslims, accounting for 4.2% of the total number of MPs.

In Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims constitute nearly 20% of the total population, the BJP did not field a single Muslim candidate. This is a clear signal of political disenfranchisement for the Muslim minority in India. The government is trying to dismantle the consociational model of power sharing by replacing it with majoritarian tyranny.

Modi has adapted Erdogan's formula to reshape India. He has sought to marginalize Muslims and reinforce Hindu chauvinism. Minorities in general feel beleaguered, as Modi's nationalism not only excludes them, but portrays them as traitors. Institutions are subverted to serve the prime minister's narrow political agenda, and dissenters in the media and universities have faced intimidation.

The right wing in India engages in double-speak and clearly intends to rewrite the history of the country and its constitution. While the union minister, Ananth Kumar Hegde, who had remarked that the BJP came to power to change the constitution was made to apologize in parliament last December, he did state as much. Similarly, the right wing Ram Bahadur Rai, chairman of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, said the same thing to Outlook in 2016.

THE RISE OF CRONY CAPITALISM

The Modi government's reforms have put India on a rocky road to capitalism. In November 2016, the government announced that, effective immediately, all 500 and 1,000 rupee notes were no longer legal tender. The announcement sent India's cash-soaked economy that amounted to about 80% of all cash in circulation into a complete spin.

As if this wasn't enough, a few months later the government legislated to introduce a national goods and services tax (GST) to replace a series of excise,

sales and cross-state border taxes. Small and medium-scale industries, along with the informal sector, have been hit badly. They have either shut down or are on the verge of collapse. Big corporates, in turn, have not faced an impact at all as they neither deal in cash so much, nor do they get affected by something like GST.

The recent example of granting a nonexistent university the status of an “institution of eminence” has further established the government corporation nexus. These corporates are now controlling the state agenda and creating a perception of development through an effective perception management campaign. Wealth is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and this is having devastating consequences for hundreds of millions of the poorest people in India, not to mention the middle class.

Compared to Turkey, then, India has a better democratic framework, but it is under threat. Modi continues to win key state-level elections. His party is on the verge of gaining a majority in the upper house of parliament. The BJP already has one of its members elected as president, Ram Nath Kovind. A lack of effective opposition and a subservient national media are helping Modi on his way. The future of the India’s democracy is at high risk.

Of course, there are important differences between Turkey and India. For starters, Turkey’s population, at 81 million, is less than half that of just one

Indian state, Uttar Pradesh, which has a population of 210 million. India is only 80% Hindu and deeply split on caste and regional lines, whereas Turkey is 99.8% Muslim. Turkey is more or less a developed country, while India still has a long way to go to reach that point. Islam, on which Erdogan rides as proponents of Hindutva point out, is a global religion.

On the other hand, Hinduism is the dominant religion only in India and Nepal. An average Indian prides themselves on principles of tolerance, non-violence and coexistence, which are part of every Indian teaching. Unlike Turkey, India has been partitioned on the lines of religion and, as such, the majority of Indians understand the ills and trauma of religious divide.

Unlike Turkey, India’s democracy is deeply entrenched, making it less vulnerable to be ruled by a strongman. For most Indians, it is difficult to imagine the country following in Turkey’s footsteps to become a majoritarian illiberal democracy with an autocrat in charge. No political party in India has ever won more than half the seats in the general elections with a vote share of just 31%. Far from spelling the end of a fractured polity, the 2014 results show just how fragmented the votes were. It is precisely because of this that the BJP was able to win 282 seats with just 31% of the votes.

With such a huge majority, the BJP has been able to skillfully attempt to delegitimize all other parties. It does this

by accusing — via national and local media — the opposition of being “anti-national.”

2019 GENERAL ELECTION

India's till recently divided opposition has seized on a new way to counter Prime Minister Modi. They have done so by bringing national and regional rivals together to take on the ruling party. The reversal of the BJP's fortunes in the state of Karnataka — where it won the most seats but was ousted in May by a coalition of the Congress party and the regional Janata Dal (Secular), in spite of intense attempts by the BJP to form a government — marks one more election loss at the hands of a united opposition.

Despite a string of state poll victories, alliances have thwarted Modi in the 2015 Bihar state elections and in the recent Uttar Pradesh and Bihar by-elections.

The spate of losses in the Lok Sabha by-elections indicates that the BJP cannot take the opposition unity lightly in the run-up to the general elections in 2019. The margin of losses shows the opposition has managed to transfer its votes to joint candidature.

Moreover, recent events suggest that the BJP's electoral coalition is showing signs of strain. Existing BJP allies are voicing concerns about the party's methods, raising the possibility that its electoral coalition could fracture. These ruptures may potentially complicate the BJP's electoral arithmetic in 2019.

While many details of the 2019 race still remain unknown, its structural drivers are quickly coming into view. Rahul Gandhi and the once-dithering Congress appear more focused and consistent. The opposition, at least rhetorically, is embracing the need to forge a common anti-BJP front.

For the BJP, the 2019 election may just turn from a cakewalk to a contest. Though it is true that Modi and the BJP may have not yet achieved the degree of “state capture” that Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party have in Turkey, they are also 11 years behind.

If not countered effectively, Modi may very well have powers to do just about anything he wants. With no qualified opposition to effectually checkmate him, the prime minister may just be able to transgress all democratic and constitutional norms.

The path that both Erdogan and Modi are on is similar enough to invite comparison and provoke concern. Warning bells are ringing: With upcoming elections in India in spring 2019, will voters heed the alarm?

The **author** would like to remain anonymous and has used a pseudonym.

Italy's Migration Policy: A Dark Trade-Off on Human Rights

Sophia Akram

March 28, 2018

Italy's policies have failed migrants and refugees crossing from Libya, and things are about to get much worse.

Italy's migration policies have been formidable. Returning boats headed to its shores, compelling NGOs to cease sea rescue missions and paying Libya to stop migrants leaving have all helped to curb migration. But it does so by trading off people's dignity. With Italy's March elections having capitalized on anti-immigrant sentiment, the situation is not likely to improve.

Most of us are aware of the perils that face migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Between January 2012 and December 2017, UNHCR recorded 14,557 deaths from sea crossings between Libya and Italy. In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross said that deaths occurring en route from countries of origin are "critically underreported." Of those who survive the journey, many will have harrowing memories of sexual assault at the hands of armed gangs or of being flung into situations of slave labor or torture by soldiers.

Others are sold like chattel or detained in unthinkable conditions where they are

vulnerable to further mistreatment — malnutrition, rape, forced labor, disease and even death. The whole thing is a depressing catalogue of abuse and perfect guide to dehumanization. What's more, Libya is in the throes of armed conflict. The resulting lack of rule of law makes tackling the criminal networks responsible for smuggling and trafficking even more difficult.

Part of the reason migrants and refugees traveling through Libya receive such a menacing reception is that Libya is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol. It therefore does not recognize the right to asylum, allow UNHCR to operate in the country and its detention facilities do not comply with international standards. It should therefore not be considered a safe country to return people to.

Europe's policy has so far been focused on keeping migrants out of Europe. Boats are returned, and now the UN as well as the EU and the African Union are helping to return and repatriate migrants. This has been criticized for, firstly, the above-mentioned reason that Libya is not a safe country to return to. Secondly, some have stated that there has not been due consideration for people's individual circumstances. Irregular migration through Libya happens for a variety of reasons: war, persecution, crippling poverty, as well as other causes.

For many, returning home may not be safe and they must be resettled as quickly as possible.

Thousands have been repatriated since November 2017 and the International Organization for Migration says that those the numbers held in detention has decreased fivefold. If the numbers are accurate, this is in part a positive sign. However, estimates for the numbers of migrants in Libya are up to 1 million, meaning that much more work needs to be done.

On the whole, Europe's approach to Libya's crisis has been short-term and anti-immigrant. Return operations run the risk of trying to achieve targets without due consideration for what's best to the person being returned.

Instead of centering policies on keeping migrants out of Europe, European policy should focus on how to curb irregular and unsafe migration. Addressing root causes, using diplomatic ties to help broker peace, designing smart, sustainable programming in countries of origin that provide people with access to livelihoods are all available options. Instead of short-term policies that entrap people in horrific conditions, Italy and its European neighbors should compel Libya to sign and ratify the International Refugee Convention.

International partners do already contribute to achieving some of these interventions but their results have not been as visible as those achieved by Italy's Interior Marco Minniti under whom arrivals from Libya may have been reduced by up to 87%. This may have proven popular among Italian voters for whom immigration is a hot potato issue.

But tough immigration policies should not trade off human rights obligations either domestically or internationally.

The results of Italy's national elections have revealed no clear majority, but the fear is that control will go to the far right. If Italy's migration policies are falling short of the mark now, they are only likely to get worse.

Sophia Akram is a researcher. After completing an LLB in Law, she attained a master's in international politics and human rights at City University London, while providing research, program, policy and communication support in Whitehall departments and prominent nongovernmental organizations. She has a special interest in human rights and forced migration, particularly across Asia.

The Murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, Six Months On

Rebecca Vincent
April 16, 2018

Six months after Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination shook the world, attacks on journalists across the EU are becoming a new reality.

On a Monday afternoon last October, six months ago today, journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia finished what would be her last blog post, closing with the now well-known lines: "There are crooks

everywhere you look. The situation is desperate.” Around half an hour later, she was killed by a car bomb that detonated as she drove away from her home in Bidnija, Malta.

Caruana Galizia was a courageous investigative journalist known for her relentless and detailed exposure of corruption, including through her blogging and her reporting on the Panama Papers. Her murder shocked the world. The blatant assassination of a journalist in broad daylight in an EU state was simply unthinkable. But six months later, it is sadly becoming a new reality. Journalist Jan Kusiak and his partner Martina Kusnirova were murdered in Slovakia in February. Journalists in Bulgaria and Croatia have reported receiving death threats in recent months. It also emerged that nearly 200 journalists needed police protection in Italy in 2017.

Many of these attacks and threats have been against investigative journalists who report on corruption and organized crime, making it more important than ever to understand the conditions that allow for such attacks to happen, and how they might be prevented. But in the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, despite the arrests of three men suspected of carrying out the attack against her, the pursuit of justice has so far led to more questions than answers.

PROGRESS OF THE INVESTIGATION

As the UK bureau director for Reporters Without Borders (RSF), I travelled to

Malta in March in part to attempt to get some information about the progress of the investigation into Caruana Galizia’s murder. I requested a meeting with Police Commissioner Lawrence Cutajar to discuss the investigation. Despite multiple e-mails and calls, I received nothing but a perfunctory acknowledgement from a police constable.

My request piqued some interest in the local media. I was asked about it in several interviews. The Dutch ambassador to Malta, Joop Nijssen, even weighed in on Twitter: “Hope @rebecca_vincent gets requested meetings.” People started to comment on it everywhere I went, with many joking that I should have invited him for rabbit — a reference to footage Caruana Galizia had published showing Cutajar leaving a restaurant famous for its rabbit dishes and refusing to comment on a breaking scandal related to Pilatus Bank in April 2017. But there was still no response to my request, despite the fact that I made it clear that RSF’s interest was in the independence and effectiveness of the investigation.

However, there was plenty of other business to attend to, as a cluster of hearings in 26 separate libel lawsuits against Caruana Galizia was taking place during my trip, on March 1. In total, 34 civil libel cases continue against Caruana Galizia posthumously, as under Maltese law, it is the plaintiff’s decision whether to withdraw such cases in the event of the defendant’s death. At the time she was murdered,

Caruana Galizia had been facing a total of 42 civil defamation lawsuits, as well as five criminal defamation lawsuits; the criminal cases were de facto closed upon Caruana Galizia's death, per Maltese law.

The 34 cases that continue have been brought by powerful figures in Malta, among them Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, his Chief of Staff Keith Schembri, Minister for Tourism Konrad Mizzi and businessman Silvio Debono — the latter of whom has filed 19 separate suits against Caruana Galizia for a single blog post of 19 sentences. The lawyer acting for Debono in these cases, William Cuschieri, is also the defense lawyer for one of the three suspects currently arraigned in connection with Caruana Galizia's murder.

Despite the high number of proceedings scheduled on March 2, nothing substantive really happened. Some cases were postponed due to the lawyer's illness, some were postponed as the lawyer asked for more time, and the 19 cases filed by Debono were postponed as the lawyer failed to bring any witnesses to court. One of the witnesses, who represents a government entity, Projects Malta, was held in contempt of court for failing to appear.

Despite the frustrations of the courtroom experience that day, it gave me a glimpse of what Caruana Galizia was facing at the time of her murder: a constant barrage of vexatious lawsuits

that served as a sword of Damocles, an ever-present threat that had already resulted in her bank account being frozen the last eight months of her life, that could have seen her jailed at any moment, and that diverted significant time from her journalistic work. This was on top of the extensive harassment and threats she had been receiving for years.

SALT ON THE WOUNDS

Whilst in Malta, I also took part in a vigil on 2 March marking 10 years since the launch of Caruana Galizia's blog, Running Commentary. More than 200 supporters gathered at Parliament Square and progressed to the makeshift memorial to Caruana Galizia at the Great Siege Monument outside the law courts in central Valletta. I had taken part in other vigils in London since Caruana Galizia's murder, but there was something very different and incredibly moving in joining her supporters in Malta.

Despite having worked closely on Caruana Galizia's case for months, until I actually traveled to the country it was not clear to me just how embattled her supporters remain. These are not only her personal supporters, but Malta's pro-human rights, anti-corruption movement. Yet they are frequently attacked by supporters of the Labor government, through an elaborate and incessant range of pressures, from microaggressions to more blatant acts, such as smears in the media and the

repeated destruction of the memorial to Caruana Galizia.

After the March 2 vigil, the agitators were considerate enough to wait a full two days before destroying the memorial again in the dead of night — a spiteful act seemingly aimed at rubbing salt in the wounds of Caruana Galizia's loved ones and supporters.

Perhaps destroying this powerful visual time and again is also intended to remove it from the curious glances of the many tourists who walk past the central location — so many, in fact, that some tour guides have begun to include it in their stops.

Within the day, the memorial was back up, more prominent than before. As Caroline Muscat, co-founder and journalist of investigative outlet The Shift News, wrote, Caruana Galizia's supporters would be there bigger, bolder and stronger with each attempt to silence them: "It is going to take so much more than removing some flowers and candles to silence calls for justice following the assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia."

Just as the calls for justice continue in Malta, so do RSF's abroad. In London, we are gathering today for a vigil to honor Caruana Galizia's life and work and to call again for full justice for her murder, in parallel with similar actions taking part in cities across Europe and in the US. We are also holding an event at the House of Commons to mobilize members of Parliament in this case. It is

our hope that such actions will increase pressure on the Maltese authorities — who clearly care about their international image — to ensure full justice for this horrific attack.

Six months on, the challenge remains to sustain international attention to Caruana Galizia's case, and to build momentum for demands for full justice for all those involved in the planning and carrying out of her murder. The masterminds as well as the perpetrators must be identified and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Anything short would not only be an injustice for Caruana Galizia, but would also leave the door open for further attacks on journalists. A

clear and resolute message must be sent that violent attacks against journalists will not be tolerated, not in Malta, not in broader Europe, not anywhere, for an attack on a journalist anywhere is an attack on journalism and, in turn, an attack on democracy itself.

Rebecca Vincent is the UK bureau director for Reporters Without Borders, known internationally as Reporters sans frontières (RSF). She is a human rights campaigner, writer and former US diplomat. Vincent has worked with a wide range of international and Azerbaijani NGOs, and has published widely on human rights issues.

Will Trump and Macron's Special Relationship Survive?

Cécile Guerin

May 8, 2018

Emmanuel Macron has failed to change Donald Trump's mind on the question of the Iran nuclear deal.

The purpose of French President Emmanuel Macron's first state visit to the US last month was explicit: salvaging the Iran nuclear deal and convincing President Donald Trump not to reimpose sanctions. On January 12, the Trump administration extended sanction relief for Iran by four months. Pressure is now on for US Congress and Europe to address what the president has called "disastrous flaws" in the deal that was agreed in 2015.

In the run-up to Macron's visit, President Trump signaled his willingness to consider a revised nuclear deal. The American liberal press welcomed Macron's visit and his attempt to influence Trump's foreign policy. Days after the meeting, however, Macron and his team seem less sure than ever that the US will stick to the agreement.

Record-low approval ratings and a series of labor strikes have hit Macron's government. On the international stage, by contrast, Macron has achieved a series of diplomatic victories since taking office. His speech on climate change ("Make the planet great again") has established him as a central voice in

European liberalism. Under Macron, France has stepped up its commitment in the Sahel and taken the lead in creating the G5, a military force tasked with pushing back Islamist movements in the Sahara.

In his dealings with Trump, Macron has managed to be critical of the American administration without alienating his American counterpart. That Macron and Trump have a seemingly cordial relationship seems surprising given their political differences and Trump's admiration for autocratic leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Yet Macron is the first international leader to be hosted at the White House for an official state visit. Macron's encounters with Trump stand in sharp contrast with the American president's cold interactions with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and UK Prime Minister Theresa May.

Speaking on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show, Macron claimed he is always "extremely direct" with the American president. Despite their political differences, both Trump and Macron have built their political success by differentiating themselves from their predecessors.

Trump has put his efforts into undoing Barack Obama's foreign policy. Macron has condemned former President François Hollande's inaction in Syria during the 2013 chemical attacks and has been equally critical of Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the Libyan crisis during his presidency.

THE LIMITS OF THE “SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP”

Despite his activism on the international stage, Macron’s ability to sway Trump is open to question. Prior to his visit, Macron suggested he had convinced Trump to maintain American military presence in Syria — a claim denied by the White House. On the question of the Iran nuclear deal, Macron has also failed to change the president’s mind.

After hours of intensive talks with the French president, Trump described the nuclear agreement as “insane” and “ridiculous.” Recent days have seen a growing momentum against the agreement. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, accused Iran to be “brazenly lying” about its nuclear ambitions.

At the same time, Macron’s negotiation tactics with Trump are likely to put him at odds with his European counterparts. The members of the agreement have opposed a hypothetical “new nuclear deal” briefly taunted by Trump and have been adamant that it should be preserved as it is. Not only did Macron’s political gamble not yield results, it has also drawn criticisms that he is compromising too much with the American administration. After his three-day visit, Macron was forced to concede that Trump is likely to “get rid of the deal on his own, for domestic reasons.”

Iran is not the only illustration of the limits of Macron’s diplomacy. Macron’s involvement in the Libyan conflict has

shown the difficulty of balancing diverging interests in countries affected by political conflict and instability. Months after Macron hosted talks between the Western-backed Libyan leader Fayez al-Sarraj and General Khalifa Haftar, political progress in Libya has stalled with no end to political instability in sight.

A POLITICAL VICTORY?

Because Macron’s negotiation with Trump has failed to achieve its goals, the trip didn’t score any political victories. Nonetheless, Macron’s diplomatic venture confirmed his ambition to fill the leadership vacuum in Europe at a time when Angela Merkel’s coalition faces difficulties in Germany and the UK grapples with the ramifications of Brexit.

Macron’s government has placed effective communication at the heart of France’s international policy. Macron’s speech on climate change made him an international celebrity, while his reception for Donald Trump and his wife Melania on Bastille Day last year was greeted as a political success by the press.

During his recent visit, Macron gave a speech before Congress in English, reiterating his support for the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal. While less viral than his climate change speech, Macron’s address to Congress still fulfilled a similar purpose: strengthening his international aura.

Diplomacy is one of Macron's strengths. The French president may be facing strikes and discontent at home, but his hyperactivity abroad has earned him political points in France. While 6 out of 10 French voters disapprove of Macron's domestic record, 63% believe that his election has had a positive impact on France's image, according to a recent IFOP poll.

Following his election to the French presidency, Macron faced accusations of inexperience. Almost a year after taking office, he has managed to shake off his image as a newcomer on the international stage. Whether his activism will achieve substantial results and the "special relationship" with Trump will stand the test of time remains to be seen.

Cécile Guerin is a London-based freelance writer.

Brexit: The Countdown Has Begun

Orsolya Raczova
September 26, 2018

The window to agree on an exit deal between Britain and the EU is closing.

The United Kingdom is due to leave the European Union on March 29, 2019, but because of the necessary ratification procedures of an agreement, the plan was to reach a deal by the EU summit starting October 18. Although this

deadline has been extended to mid-November, there is still worry that no deal would be reached as the negotiating partners still have complex issues to agree on.

There are significant differences between potential Brexit scenarios: A "soft" Brexit would have a far less extensive economic impact than a "hard" Brexit. In the beginning of negotiations, the main question was whether the UK remains a member of the EU's single market or not. In this soft Brexit scenario, the economic side effects on both the UK and European Union would be minimized. By maintaining access to the single market, the UK would continue to be obliged by the "four freedoms" (free movement of goods, services, capital and persons within the EU), EU standards and the European Court of Justice. In exchange, Britain would be able to enjoy economic benefits of trade and close economic cooperation with the EU.

However, as a non-EU member, the political implications of the withdrawal would mean that the UK no longer has a say in the political machinery of the block, including formal representation with decision-making power in EU institutions. In practice, this means no voting rights or influence over EU laws the UK would still have to abide by. Therefore, such high political costs, together with the maintenance of the free flow of people, makes the soft option less attractive despite the potential economic benefits. Some optimists keep the option for a soft

Brexit open, but is it still a realistic scenario given the past two years of negotiations?

The supporters of a hard Brexit consider such costs from a soft Brexit too high, and they demand a clean break, including the withdrawal from the single market and the customs union. Therefore, a hard Brexit has not only been on the table as a viable option since the beginning of the referendum, but it was confirmed by leaders, including Prime Minister Theresa May herself, that the UK intends to leave the single market. If Britain withdraws from the single market, the economic costs are expected to be high, but could be somewhat softened by a potential transition period. Such a period would give additional time for the negotiating partners to not only reach agreement on key issues, but to work out deals on trade between the UK and members of the EU. There is disagreement on whether the transition period would help or not, given the rather slow pace of negotiations in the past years.

The European Union is the UK's largest and most important trading partner. In 2017, the EU accounted for 43% of UK exports, or £274 billion (\$360 billion) out of £616 billion (\$811 billion) total. Therefore, if no deal is reached on post-Brexit trade relations, the EU's economic losses would account for 0.7 % of its overall GDP, while costs for the UK would be significantly higher; over a 10-year period, 5% of the UK's GDP would be reduced. Therefore, without the single market membership and

under WTO rules, the export-import costs will significantly increase with additional layers of red tape, affecting not only manufacturers and traders, but the economy as a whole. Thus, there is a shock to prepare for if such a scenario becomes reality.

The economic impacts do not only affect the trading of physical products, but also services — a sector on which the UK relies highly. As the single market's largest provider of financial services, in 2014 alone the UK exported £20 billion worth of services to customers in the EU. Therefore, London, as the leading financial center of Europe, is at high risk. Without single market membership, financial services firms would lose their passporting rights. The passporting system enables such firms authorized in an EU or European Economic Area state to trade freely with each other. According to the Financial Conduct Authority, 5,500 UK companies rely on such rights, with a combined revenue of £9 billion. Thus, the loss would be significant.

What are financial services firms likely to do and how can they navigate such a high-risk situation? They can relocate or partially move branches, departments, services and even entire operations to the EU. The Financial Times estimates that about 4,600 banks would be relocated from London, while the accounting firm Ernst & Young estimates some 10,500 job relocations from the City of London on the first day of Brexit. Since the referendum, out of the 222 largest financial services firms

with significant operations in the UK, 24% have confirmed at least one relocation destination, and 34% are considering or have already confirmed relocations to Europe, according to the EY Brexit Tracker. Firms including JP Morgan and Bank of America are among the major financial services providers that have already confirmed relocations of hundreds, and in many cases thousands, of jobs to an EU country. Relocation plans target for example, Dublin, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin or Frankfurt.

While some are already preparing, others are still waiting to see what kind of deal will be reached. However, at this stage, the deadline is dangerously close. The fact is that the EU reacted negatively to British proposals at the recent EU meeting in Salzburg, labeling many as cherry-picking, while the UK has not provided a viable alternative acceptable to the EU yet. A no-deal scenario is becoming a real possibility with serious potential consequences.

Orsolya Raczova is a research fellow at GLOBSEC Policy Institute. She is currently focusing on EU-level political and policy developments, particularly in the area of security, migration and Brexit. She previously worked as a political risk analyst at Global Risk Insights, as a research fellow at a Hungarian NGO, as a program coordinator at the Berlin-based Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, and as a public relations assistant at Publicis Consultants Budapest. Moreover, she

was a trainee at the European Central Bank and the European Parliament. Raczova holds an MA in Non-Proliferation and International Security from King's College London, an MSc in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics, a BA in International Business Relations from Oxford Brookes University, and a BA in International Relations from the International Business School Budapest. She also attended the Harvard University Summer School and the Mid Sweden University as an exchange student.

The People of France Want to Be Heard

Sophie Hunter

December 14, 2018

By displaying a tin ear to the concerns of the gilets jaunes protests, President Emmanuel Macron remains fatefully out of touch.

A new revolution is on its way in the country that invented the guillotine. A new emperor, more at home at the gilded palaces of Rothschild and the winding corridors of power, is now asking his people to eat cake when they often can't afford a simple baguette. French President Emmanuel Macron is woefully out of touch and his people have taken again to the streets as a result.

Across France, a tired police force of 89,000 will be facing mobs on December 15, a fifth consecutive

weekend of protests. A top police chief has declared that this level of violence is unprecedented. On December 5, mobs burned down a famous law firm, two high schools and several cars in Paris. They looted shops in the historic Place Vendôme and Rue de Rivoli.

The “gilets jaunes,” as the protesters have come to be known because of their high-visibility yellow vests, were joined by high school students, road transport unionists and farmers. On December 3, 200 high schools shut down after students rallied to protest against the latest education reforms. Road transport unions, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the Workers’ Force (FO) union syndicates have called for a general strike. These mass protests are testing the mettle of a feckless government.

The gilets jaunes and other protesters have united out of disgust for Macron’s arrogance. Some hold the view that he suffers from pervers narcissique. In simple English, Macron could best be described as a smooth-talking narcissistic pervert.

When abroad, the French president conveys an image of a liberal and progressive leader who is holding back the mighty tide of populist nationalism, saving France and Europe from disaster in the process. At home, this image does not quite wash. For too many, he represents France’s out-of-touch, elite, business school-trained political upper class that can no longer hear or empathize with the people’s concerns.

Macron came to power in 2017 claiming to be an outsider. His La République En Marche! movement was supposed to liberate France from the shackles of party politics. Literally meaning “the republic on the move,” the party has now fizzled out to give way to a revolution on the march. The protests have led to a climate of fear in the country. Even though the government has caved in and withdrawn fuel tax hikes that sparked the protests, popular unrest continues. This plays into the hands of Marine Le Pen’s renamed far-right National Rally party, which now has a much better shot at the Élysée.

THE CLASH OF THE CLASSES

Once the gilets jaunes movement started, testimonies of thousands of people have been pouring out on social media. One of these has gone viral. Paul is a 40-year-old delivery driver who lives in the north of France. He earns the minimum salary of €1,184 (\$1,337) a month. He has three children and a wife, who doesn’t work. They live hand-to-mouth, with no money left after food, utility bills and rent. He is not poor enough to get full state benefits and not rich enough to lead anything but a hardscrabble life. The €600 per month that Paul gets in social benefits is barely enough for his family to get by.

Paul’s family may not be living in heartrending poverty seen in the developing world, but this sort of dilution of living standards goes against France’s ideals.

Macron's reforms seem to be hitting people like Paul the hardest. Some of the ills of the Anglo-Saxon system have infected France too. The recently disgraced Carlos Ghosn, the chief executive of the leading French car manufacturer Renault, was earning 1,200 times more than the lowest-paid worker at the company and remains in his job despite charges of financial misconduct. It comes as no surprise that gilets jaunes are looting, pillaging, plundering and burning shops selling luxury items and cars. Muriel Pénicaud, the minister of labor, has admitted that jobs simply do not pay enough for lower classes to make ends meet. She is planning to reverse this problem by decreasing the cost of social contributions and increasing the minimum wage.

France's convoluted laws and infamous red tape do not help. On December 5, bakers in Normandy went to court for selling bread seven days a week. French law imposes one day off per week for all businesses, facing a €3,000 penalty if they don't comply. The bakers argued that if they respected the law, they would have to fire two of their employees and close their shop. In light of such trying economic circumstances, restrictive laws have to go. They were once drafted with good intentions but now pave the way to a Kafkaesque hell.

Parisians from the posh 8th and 16th districts have called upon the army to protect their elegant Haussmann mansions. They accuse gilets jaunes of being a disorganized mob engaged in

social terrorism. So far, the government has been unable to protect the wealthy neighborhoods, sparking fear among France's elite.

At heart is a clash over a vision for France. The richer sections of society want to make France more like the US and the UK. For them, the Rothschild banker is the perfect president trimming down a bloated French state à la Margaret Thatcher.

For others, this is the wrong way forward. They want to reinstate higher taxes for the super wealthy, if not the wealthy. Marielle de Sarnez challenged Macron in parliament, declaring that it is time to rewrite the social and civic contract in favor of the struggling masses. It is important to remember that this discontent with the government is not new. Both Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande were failed one-term presidents who fell prey to popular disillusionment. Macron rose to power exploiting that sentiment.

Ironically, he was the one who extended working hours in 2015 as minister of the economy. Emmanuel Valls, then-prime minister, relied on Article 49.3 of the French Constitution to pass the law without a vote. Macron's new reforms aimed at attracting capital back to France to "unlock economic growth" are old wine in a new bottle that elites have been trying to sell for years. Those not so privileged are pushing back against this very phenomenon by the proverbial French method of taking to the barricades.

END OF PROJECT MACRON

Emmanuel Macron was always overrated by the media, particularly in Britain and America. He won 24% of the vote in the first round of elections in 2017, with Le Pen coming second with 21.3%. In the second round, the French rallied behind Macron as they did behind Jacques Chirac in 2002. On both occasions, they wanted to keep the far right from coming to power, but at the last election, Marine Le Pen did much better than her father, former National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. Her party gained 50% more votes than it did in 2002.

By displaying a tin ear to the concerns of the gilets jaunes, Macron may have signed his political death warrant. The president treated the movement as another strike, which are common in France, but failed to realize that this time the mood was more sombre. In contrast to Sarkozy, who faced 100 days of thugocracy in the outskirts of Paris in 2005, the gilets jaunes marched down the Champs Élysées and seized the Arc de Triomphe — the monument to modern France.

This is a national protest of les sans-culottes who are asking for dignity, equity and social recognition they have lost in a system dominated by the top 1%. The gilets jaunes are not typical French rioters. They are ordinary citizens pushed against a wall who have been crushed by every president since Chirac.

Macron has two ticking time bombs on his hands: social unrest because of growing inequality and economic transition due to environmental concerns. Nicolas Hulot, the former minister for ecology, tried unsuccessfully to address both these problems. He took the view that the government must reconcile “the end of the world with the end of the month.” That is what Macron promised to do, but so far Project Macron has failed completely and irrevocably.

To understand Project Macron, one has to study modern France. La grande nation prides itself as the home of liberty, equality and fraternity. Sadly, the reality differs from this ideal. In comparison to the United States, education is almost free.

However, as Atul Singh wrote in Fair Observer last year, the top “positions are monopolized almost entirely by énarques [graduates of the National School of Administration] and graduates of other grande écoles, the top French schools.” He points out how between 1987 and 1996, only 5.5% of énarques “hailed from working-class backgrounds” in contrast with graduates of Canada’s top schools where the number was 25-30%. As per Singh, “elite French schools perpetuate ‘a tiny caste-like aristocracy of wealth and brains’ that would make inbred Brahmins proud.” Success in France is only available to a few lucky ones who manage to get into the driving seat. Consequently, they make the system serve them, and not vice versa.

Today, France offers little social mobility. It suffers from archaic elitism that is not only unjust but also thwarts innovation. The French educational system does not teach or reward critical thinking. Instead, it teaches students to mold themselves into the system and become cogs in an economy of privilege. Outsiders have little room to breathe. As a result, the French are immigrating in large numbers even to former British colonies such as Singapore and Hong Kong.

France has a two-tier system of higher education. Public universities comprise the first, obliged to admit everyone with a high-school diploma but offering a low standard of education. The prestigious grandes écoles form the second tier. Created in the Napoleonic age, they were supposed to foster a meritocratic elite to run the French state. Out went l'ancien régime with its inherited privilege, in came the Napoleonic men of merit.

Over time, these elite schools have ossified and created an incestuous elite of their own. They judge merit through examinations that might be rigorous but reward conformity. More importantly, alumni of the grandes écoles have a stranglehold on French politics, business, finance and diplomacy. Those who attend elite schools are guaranteed top jobs for their lifetime. Over 80% of top executives in France's 40 biggest companies — including Emmanuel Macron — come from just three of these schools. That might explain his inability to relate to modern-day sans-culottes

who form the bedrock of the gilets jaunes movement.

SURVIVING IN THE DESERT

The gilets jaunes are protesting because they are fed up with the elite that Macron belongs to. They no longer want to be bossed about by the énarques and want ladders to the top echelons of French society. Macron does not understand their concerns. His knee-jerk response is to throw cash at the problem. Despite concessions to increase the minimum wage by €100, cancel taxes on extra working hours as well as the latest tax imposed on low-income pensioners, the gilets jaunes are hungry for more meaningful changes within governmental institutions and structures to allow their voices to be heard. Macron has failed to address the two main issues gilets jaunes care about: more social mobility and a sustainable minimum living wage.

There is an inherent link, historically, between anti-fiscal protests and the withdrawal of public services, according to the historian Mathilde Larrère. For people living in the countryside and the outskirts of large cities, it is a daily battle to find doctors, hospitals, centers for public services such as social security or taxes, nurseries and post offices. Without a doubt, the increase in the fuel tax hit a sensitive nerve.

According to a recent report, 11,300 municipalities lack doctors and other medical services. They have been labeled “medical deserts.” So under the

underlying anti-fiscal protests, the gilets jaunes express anger toward the disparity between what they pay in taxes and what they perceive in terms of public services — which is not much.

What is also at stake is people's participation in the making of political decisions. For the first time, protesters voice the thorny issue that challenges directly institutions. Condemning a political class that is not representatives of its people, gilets jaunes firmly demand the creation of a référendum d'initiative citoyenne — a referendum based on the people's initiatives. Already in place in certain European countries and very popular in Switzerland, this system allows parliament to review a project of law if a certain amount of signatures is reached. In addition, the gilets jaunes also demand the power to revoke a political representative or change the constitution based on a citizen-led referendum.

The debate between representative or direct democracy goes back to the 18th century. Montesquieu and Rousseau opposed each other on the issue. The gilets jaunes' frustration echoes what Rousseau wrote regarding the social contract, namely that citizens become the slaves of parliamentarians once elected.

The demands of today's protesters echo those made during the French Revolution and should be listened to, because they deal with the essence democracy and citizens' rights. When

the future of the gilets jaunes movement is uncertain after the terrorist attack in Strasbourg on December 11, one would hope that politicians have listened and will act accordingly. Otherwise people will flock back in the streets.

The rallying cry Tous à la Bastille! — everyone to the Bastille — that has swept social media evokes 1789, the year the royal prison fell to a revolutionary mob. The gilets jaunes are harking back to those days of resurrection. Hopefully, this time posh Parisians will not remain as out of touch as the French royalty of yore.

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LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN

Brazil's Drama of Unpredictability

Manuela Andreoni

January 22, 2018

A court decision this week may cost former President Lula da Silva his candidacy in Brazil's upcoming presidential election.

As Brazil braces for its most important election in decades, hopes of stabilization are dwindling. The country is slowly stepping out of an almost three year-long recession, but uncertainty over what will happen at the ballot boxes later on this year is pushing debate on how to resume growth into a distant future.

The main reason lies in the wide-ranging corruption investigation, which has sent over 100 officials to the political equivalent of a guillotine. The possibility of a conviction for corruption might bar even the leading presidential candidate, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the leader of the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), from running for office.

Lula was sentenced to more than nine years imprisonment for corruption and money laundering in July last year, and a federal court will hear his appeal on January 24, 2018. An unfavorable decision would stop his campaign short. The divide over his fate evidences how polarized Brazil has become.

The judiciary itself is playing a prominent role in this process of fragmentation. An analysis by Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), a project that evaluates the quality of democracy, market economy and governance in 129 developing and transition countries, points to the fact that the lead prosecutor, Federal Judge Sérgio Moro, was accused of unilaterally investigating members of the PT. Meanwhile, acting President Michel Temer already indicated that the battle against corruption is not a focus of his presidency.

For good reason, as the forthcoming 2018 BTI country report states, "Various corruption allegations have threatened to destabilize his government, implicating at least half a dozen members of his cabinet and even the president himself."

According to early opinion polls, over 30% of voters would vote for Lula, putting him around 20 percentage points ahead of the second most popular candidate in multiple scenarios. At the same time, 54% of the country would like to see him behind bars. "He is obviously the candidate with the best chances to face the elections, if it depends on the inclination of voters," says Fabio Wanderley Reis, a political scientist and emeritus professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. "The obstruction of his candidacy could have dramatic consequences."

The overwhelming impact of the corruption investigations, which started

with Operation Car Wash in 2014, came with drastic reforms in the Brazilian electoral system. Now it is illegal to receive donations from corporations, traditionally the main funders of presidential campaigns, and online campaigning through social media has been made legal, making way for new electoral strategies.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Professor Nara Pavão, a political scientist with the Federal University of Pernambuco, sees two contradicting options about what might happen after polling stations close this October.

The first one is that, in possession of information about corruption allegations against traditional politicians, Brazilians will choose newcomers. The scenario could favor candidate Jair Bolsonaro, a radical right-winger who supported Brazil's military dictatorship and its practices of torture. He ranks second in most early opinion polls.

The other scenario, Pavão says, is that, amid chaos and knowing that most of the politicians they have ever known are somehow involved in corruption scams, those issues will cease to be a deterring factor, and voters will go back to what they know.

This scenario favors candidates from the two big parties that have run the political establishment for the last 20 years, the PT and the Social Democratic Party (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, PSDB), which will run with

São Paulo State Governor Geraldo Alckmin. While Alckmin's popularity in the country is in the single digits, some analysts believe a familiar face might appeal to voters in a scenario of chaos, even though Alckmin is grappling with his own corruption scandal.

THE IMPACTS OF INSTABILITY

The unpredictability of politics fuels anxiety surrounding the country's future. "The expectation that things might settle down is precarious," says Wanderley Reis. "There are multiple possibilities that would mean even more intense drama." The reluctance of Brazil's congress to approve President Michel Temer's much promised pension reform is the latest example of the impact the instability has for policymaking.

Those were some of the conclusions the rating agency Standard & Poor's came to as it downgraded Brazil further into junk-status territory, from BB to BB-. "The uncertainties surrounding the election outcome, in our view, make it less likely that a new president with solid political capital could be able to quickly pass constitutional changes to meaningfully alleviate spending and revenue bottlenecks," its report said.

As Brazil pushes debate over reforms to give way to its contentious elections, challenges to lifting the country are mounting. With more than 30 political parties, the country needs to find a way to stop political fragmentation in order to construct more stable administrations. Coming out of a persistent recession

that depleted Brazil's ability to invest, the next administration will have to concentrate on recovering the state finances while making social programs more efficient. "The right mix of intervention and laissez faire will be of crucial importance," the 2018 BTI country report on Brazil concludes.

There is a possibility that the thirst for stability necessary for these reforms might overcome uncertainties. Some share hope for a more predictable country after the 2018 elections.

"Elections have this function of restoring the political pact in a country," Pavão says. But the reaction to Lula's fate could drag an already exhausted society to the peak of drama, demolishing the possibility that the elections could pave a way to solving the country's many conflicts.

Manuela Andreoni is a Brazilian journalist. She has worked for newspapers, magazines and television programs in Brazil and abroad, such as The Sunday Times, The Globe and Mail, O Globo, Agência Pública and BBC Panorama. She currently is a reporter at Columbia Journalism Investigations.

Nicolás Maduro: The New Tropical Czar Has No Clothes

Leonardo Vivas

May 25, 2018

Maduro may still be in office, but nothing in the Venezuelan landscape looks rosy for the government.

On May 20, Nicolás Maduro was re-elected president of Venezuela after an election almost everyone within and outside the country dubbed not free and fair. He presided over a process where most main political adversaries were jailed, exiled or disqualified, the government controlled every bit of news, and it organized a vast operation of vote-for-food with the use of a special ID card.

The obvious question following the election is how long he will remain in power as Venezuela suffers a deep economic crisis and the government experiments with a level of international pressure and isolation few countries have experienced in recent years.

Whenever a country enters a long phase of plights and political submission that look unsolvable and menace to become permanent, and when it all occurs under a strongman's fist, all gazes turn to the leader in power. This happened in the old days of the Soviet Union, in Cuba with Fidel Castro, in Augusto Pinochet's Chile, in Zimbabwe with Robert Mugabe (until it didn't), and

in many others. This is clearly the case of Venezuela.

Until recently, Maduro was the babbling, inexperienced and inadequate heir of Hugo Chávez, who built a powerhouse in Latin America, fueled by oil and championed by his populist nationalism and anti-US rhetoric. But after 2014, and more so in 2017, Maduro was able to outmaneuver both his foes in the democratic camp and his internal adversaries, even while the nation's economy was going down the drain.

Chávez presided over the longest high-oil-price boom (2004-2012) that Venezuela has experienced in its almost century-long history as an oil economy. This brought the country steady (though only mild) growth, a huge consumption boom, allowing the populist leader to address unsolved problems like primary health care and malnutrition that had accumulated over decades. It also led to numerous gargantuan projects in infrastructure, railways, oil and gas processing plants that never saw the day, and an orgy of nationalizations that ended up creating a deep black hole of corruption.

Chávez's proclivity to personalistic and authoritarian rule, though, did not resort to drastic repression in order to grant political stability. His rule fitted the trendy political science characterization of hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarianism where the judiciary is packed with followers, political adversaries disqualified and the press obstructed but not silenced.

AFTER CHÁVEZ

But as Chávez passed away in 2013, he left a troubling legacy to his hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro. The economy, entering the downward part of the oil price cycle, began a drastic crunch, accumulating external debt, growing fiscal deficits and higher inflation. What began as typical economic disequilibrium soon turned into outright crisis: a loss of a third of GDP in a few years, huge shortages of food and medicine, hyperinflation, and the inability to provide basic services like electricity and water supply. But different to earlier experiences of macroeconomic disturbances in the region, Venezuela's woes also originated in the extreme centralization of economic decisions (and property) in the hands of an inefficient state.

By reversing the mildly repressive tradition of his predecessor, who always sought political solutions and international support for his policies while dismantling a long-standing democracy, Maduro today incarnates the rebirth of the classic Latin American dictatorship of the 20th century built on the barrel of a gun. Political discontent in 2014 met a brutal response from the police, national guard and armed militias.

The result was dozens killed, hundreds wounded, thousands of protesters imprisoned without due process, and important leaders put behind bars. The prosecution and the judiciary have effectively become institutional

mechanisms at the service of curbing dissent.

Shortly after, however, in December 2015 the country woke up to a new situation: Maduro and his regime lost the national assembly (NA) in a blatant defeat, becoming a ruling minority in a country that increasingly despises them. As a result, the coalition in power — including the military, a majority of governors, the ruling party (with a consistent social base of government workers across the country) and the media (now either owned by the government or by friendly business people) — closed ranks in order to throw both the newly-elected NA and political adversaries off the rails.

The years 2016 and 2017 were decisive in more than one sense. In a sequence of decisions, the government invalidated a recall referendum that, in order to proceed, would have to take place before the end of the year; in early 2017, the supreme justice tribunal announced the annulling of the NA, and the executive approved (with no constitutional basis) the launching of a constituent assembly to remake the political system altogether.

As a result, the opposition staged massive protests in an effort to stop the measures. This included the volte-face of the Chávez-appointed attorney general, who condemned the supreme tribunal's decision as a constitutional coup, prompting divisions within the Chavista camp that had been boiling over the prior years.

All these factors led to the “spring of discontent,” with massive rallies across the country, a world campaign by the Venezuelan diaspora and increasing pressure from countries around the globe. This was to no avail: Maduro remained in power, staged several rounds of rigged elections (both national and local), and continued to rule over a country where economic collapse has deepened, a humanitarian crisis grows in intensity by the day, and close to 3 million Venezuelans have fled the country to every possible place in order to survive. Currently, countries as far as Peru and Chile — not to speak of neighboring Colombia and Brazil — today seek solutions for an out of control inflow of immigrants from troubled Venezuela.

MAFIA RULE

The tumultuous events of the past years reveal Maduro's adeptness to navigate troubled currents coming in all directions: the economy, international pressures, the opposition and, last but not least, dissent within his own ranks. Examination of his rule has become a job for tropical kremlinologists as the infighting within the inner circles of the government has become more obscure.

In early 2018, Maduro began an internal razzia against one of his major rivals, Rafael Ramírez, who had been Chávez's right-hand operator and an all-powerful head of Pdvsa, the state-controlled oil company. He had been appointed Venezuela's representative to the United Nations in 2013 in the

aftermath of a failed attempt at a moderate stabilization program he proposed that might have helped contain the imminent economic collapse. But from New York he continued to exercise a strong influence over the oil company. So, in order to reinforce his internal power, Maduro forced Ramirez's resignation, gave control of Pdvsa to the army, and launched an anti-corruption campaign against Ramirez's cronies. Given the extent of Venezuela's corruption, to which only Brazil compares, internecine struggles within the power clique don't revolve around political views like it used to be the case in Cuba or in defunct socialist states, but rather on corruption charges.

Clearly, corruption in Venezuela goes far beyond the typical institutional flaw that has become endemic in Latin America. A growing number of government officials have been accused and, in some cases, sanctioned for involvement in huge financial deals, taking advantage of exchange rate controls or for presumed involvement in drug trafficking. Even two nephews of Venezuela's first lady were condemned last year for drug trafficking in a New York court.

The extent of this enthrallment has become so pervasive that a growing number of international critics consider Venezuela today as a sort of mafia rule. Even Lech Walesa, a pioneer of anti-totalitarian struggles in Eastern Europe, has recently argued that "Venezuela has been kidnapped by a group of neo-

traffickers and terrorists" that "sooner rather than later shall be subject to intervention by coalition forces to preserve the region's peace."

What is clear from Maduro's recent re-election is that, as many strongmen before him, he has been grossly underestimated. With the opposition weakened, cornered and with no clear strategy after deciding to boycott the presidential election, and with Maduro in full control of Chavista forces, especially the military, the odds about staying in power have been reduced to what international pressure can be exercised against his regime. If Chávez, with a full wallet and a promising rhetoric, managed to capture the imagination (and support) of Latin America and other corners of the world, Maduro, who was his foreign affairs minister, has been experiencing setback after setback.

INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS

Not only has there been a pendulum change in the region, bringing fresh adversaries in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Panama and even in Ecuador, but the US and the European Union have heightened their pressure on the country to levels unknown in the region. If other countries have been mostly vocal against Venezuela, the US has put in effect individual sanctions against a long list of government officials, military officers, justices and others (the EU recently joined in with additional individual sanctions), as well as financial sanctions that make it harder for the government to handle financial

operations and, more recently, even purchases of ordinary requirements for the working of the oil industry. On top of that, the country is facing default on most of its own and Pdvsa's debt as well.

So the crunch is growing fast. Some officials within the Trump administration have recently spoke openly of other options, including the military, and there have been outcries by former Latin American presidents and others about the need for a humanitarian intervention to stop the situation from growing worse.

If international sanctions have proved effective in terms of bringing rogue nations to the negotiating table, so far this is not true for Venezuela. Recent experience shows that international pressure by itself does not bring about regime change, unless it is accompanied by military intervention. Given the Latin American tradition in that respect and — to say the least — the misgivings of the region vis-à-vis US involvement in the recent past, that option seems to be off the table.

It would seem that only an internal fracture of the ruling coalition may grant regime change, and at this point the odds for that to occur seem very low. At the same time, considering the very low turnout for the May 20 election — allegedly lower than what the electoral council has claimed — the need to rig the extent of the voting, and having to extract many of the votes for Maduro through economic blackmail (as Maduro himself put it, “This is giving and

giving”), nothing in the Venezuelan landscape looks rosy for the government. Because history tends to be cursory, an unexpected change of course is not to be entirely ruled out.

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Mexico Has Bigger Problems than Russian Interference

Jamie Shenk

June 30, 2018

Just like the US elections in 2016, fake news has become a fixture of Mexican social media during the electoral season.

In a video posted in January, Mexico's leading presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known by his initials, AMLO), stands on the edge of the port of Veracruz, looking out over the gray waters. “I'm waiting for the Russian submarine,” he tells the camera, “because it is bringing me gold from Moscow.” AMLO's video was filmed as a joke, poking fun at what he insists are preposterous allegations that

his campaign is supported by the Russian government. But in Washington, the fear of Russian interference in Mexico's presidential election is very real.

In December 2017, then-US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster insinuated that Russia had already begun efforts to influence the Mexican election. A month later, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson echoed McMaster's remarks, telling Mexico to "pay attention" to Russian meddling. Both Tillerson and McMaster are long gone, but the fear of Russian interference among Washington's policy circles remains. In late April 2018, a bipartisan group of House members filed a resolution calling on Russia to stay out of Latin America's elections.

Clamor in the United States over Russian interference has quietened in recent weeks, as the yawning chasm between AMLO and his next closest competitor in polling continues to grow. But when Mexicans take to the polls on July 1, they will not only choose their next president, but also governors, representatives and mayors in states across the country. While the possibility of Russian interference cannot be ruled out, three domestic factors — home-grown fake news, physical insecurity and declining trust in politics — will be bigger determinants of the election results and pose greater threats to Latin American democracy.

FAKE NEWS IN MEXICO

As with the 2016 US elections, fake news has become a fixture of Mexican social media during the electoral season. In addition to the dubious allegations of AMLO's ties to Moscow, voters in Mexico have been told wrongly that Pope Francis denounced the leading candidate, and that voters must re-register by the end of the week in order to be able to vote. Fake exit and opinion polls have even circulated around social media, allowing parties to distort reality and confuse voters.

While the narrative about fake news during the US elections revolved around Russia's role in disseminating false information, the power of fake news in Mexico is predominantly domestic and intimately connected to the Mexican government's history of collusion with the media, rather than driven by Moscow's efforts. For decades, national and local political parties have co-opted media outlets for the purposes of self-promotion. As a result, distrust of the traditional media runs deep in Mexican society.

Groups in Mexico have mounted valiant efforts to combat the spread of lies. But disinformation persists and, as Ioan Grillo noted in a recent op-ed, it exerts a pernicious effect on the civility of public discourse and fosters polarization. It may also confuse voters enough to discourage them from even participating in the election, undermining the mandate of whoever wins.

But fake news is not the only threat to the elections. Voters and candidates in

Mexico also face physical violence that could undermine the electoral process. Changing dynamics of organized crime and violence in Mexico have made the country an increasingly dangerous place to be interested in politics. Mexico reported its highest number of homicides in 2017, and local officials and candidates have borne the brunt of this violence. Mayors are at least 12 times more likely than the general population to be killed. Over 100 candidates and current or former politicians have been killed so far during Mexico's electoral season.

The violence also compounds the issue of fake news. Journalists are three times more likely to be killed than the general population, and many of the journalists that remain practice self-censorship under constant threat from drug trafficking groups or corrupt local governments. Without independent reporting, Mexicans may be exposed to an increasing proportion of disinformation generated within the country, supplemented by growing penetration of Russian media content aimed at Latin American audiences.

These two conditions — increasing insecurity and a polarized media landscape — have contributed to a worrying decline in support for democracy in Mexico. According to polling conducted in 2017 by AmericasBarometer, only around half of all Mexicans believe democracy is the best form of governance. This has a marked impact on how citizens view elections.

Experts warn that what Russia seeks in manipulating elections is to sow distrust rather than pick a particular candidate. However, only a small percentage of Mexicans — around 25% — trust their country's elections anyway. Meanwhile, nearly half of Mexicans would support a military coup under conditions of rampant corruption or high insecurity, characteristics that could describe Mexico's current environment.

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN MEXICO

These three domestic threats to Mexico's elections — disinformation, insecurity and distrust in democracy — run much deeper than this year's electoral cycle. As such, it would be shortsighted for concerned policymakers in the United States to focus on Russia's discrete threat this election. In order to support Mexico's democracy, the US would do better to focus on supporting whoever wins to work toward longer-term goals of transparent governance and security in an effort to regain Mexican's trust in democracy.

Admittedly, such a commitment from the Trump administration seems improbable. From insulting Mexicans while on the campaign trail to his imposing harsh tariffs on Mexican goods, President Donald Trump has alienated America's southern neighbor.

But Washington is more than the White House, and members of Congress, as some of the most vocal in denouncing the Russia threat in the Western

Hemisphere, could work around Trump to support Mexican democracy. Congress has already demonstrated its commitment to its southern neighbors in its most recent budget. The congressional appropriations bill passed in March increased foreign assistance to Mexico by \$14.1 million, 25% of which depends on State Department verification that the Mexican government is taking steps to address a number of human rights concerns.

Continuing to fund governance programs and demanding accountability from the Mexican government may, in fact, be the best answer to the Russian threat in the region. Russia specifically targets polarized and weak democracies where its efforts to sow contempt for liberal democratic values are most likely to take root. For the US, the best defense against Russia gaining a foothold in the Western Hemisphere is to help build solid institutions in Latin America, from the inside out.

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Meet Colombia's New President

Glenn Ojeda Vega & German Peinado Delgado

July 18, 2018

Iván Duque's foreign policy will center on reinforcing ties with Colombia's traditional allies and securing international support for the administration's agenda.

This has been a critical year for Colombian politics. In March, a new congress was elected and, three months later, Iván Duque won the presidency when he defeated the former mayor of Bogotá, Gustavo Petro. The new congress will be sworn in on July 20, and the new president is expected to do the same on August 7.

Nonetheless, the new head of state has already made some key ministerial and cabinet announcements. The first major appointment is that of Alberto Carrasquilla as minister of finance, position that he held previously between 2003 and 2007, during the presidency of Alvaro Uribe. Carrasquilla has also been named head of the transition team, which has been particularly well received by figures such as Juan Jose Echeverria, governor of Colombia's Central Bank; Santiago Castro Gomez, president of the Banker's Association; and Julian Dominguez, president of the

Chambers of Commerce Association. The fact that Carrasquilla is leading the handover from current President Juan Manuel Santos signals that the incoming administration wants to reassure markets and investors about Colombia's pro-growth and business friendly agenda.

Other important appointments thus far include that of the economist Andrés Valencia as minister of agriculture; lawyer Nancy Gutierrez as minister of the interior; economist José Manuel Restrepo as minister of commerce and industry; surgeon Juan Pablo Uribe as minister of health; geologist Ricardo Lozano as minister of environment; economist María Angulo as minister of education; and economist Jonathan Malagón as minister of housing. President-elect Duque's predilection for naming economists and lawyers to key posts in his administration should come as no surprise given his own background as a lawyer who spent years with the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington DC.

During the coming weeks, the rest of the new cabinet, as well as key ambassadors, are expected to be announced. Nevertheless, being an establishment figure, Duque is expected to continue naming individuals with experience working with the former Santos, Uribe and Pastrana governments.

On the legislative front, the Duque administration will count with a majority coalition in congress led by his party,

the Democratic Center (founded in 2013 by Alvaro Uribe). This governing coalition is made up of most of the traditional and center-right parties in the country. Furthermore, President-elect Duque has the political support of former Presidents Uribe, Andres Pastrana and Cesar Gaviria. However, the opposition also counts a significant and organized representation with key national figures, such as Gustavo Petro, Antanas Mockus, Jorge Robledo and Aída Avella.

During its first year, Duque's administration will have to tackle key domestic issues such as justice, tax and pension reforms as well as the implementation of the Havana peace agreement with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

In terms of foreign policy, President-elect Duque has had a very clear agenda. His first foreign trips were to the United States and Spain, where he met with leaders in both the business and public sectors.

During Duque's recent visit to Washington, he met with Vice-President Mike Pence; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo; Jim Carroll, head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy; National Security Adviser John Bolton; Gina Haspel, director of the CIA; and Senator Marco Rubio. Similarly, during a recent visit to Miami, he met with Florida's other senator, Bill Nelson, as well as the state governor, Rick Scott. The most pressing bilateral issues between the

two countries include combating illegal trafficking, eradicating illicit crops throughout Colombia, dealing with the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, advancing hemispheric security and fostering economic ties.

On the multilateral front, Duque met with the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, as well as the director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde.

During this time, Duque also announced his intention of withdrawing Colombia from the Union of South American Nations, given the organization's failure to condemn abuses of power in countries like Venezuela.

These gestures by the president-elect set a clear tone for a foreign policy that is committed to the democratic and liberal order advanced by the inter-American system promoted by the OAS. Simultaneously, Duque has also participated in multiple academic and business forums, meeting with personalities such as Barack Obama, writer Mario Vargas Llosa and businessman Florentino Pérez.

During his visit to Spain, Duque met with the King Felipe VI; former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar; the current prime minister, Pedro Sánchez; and Madrid's mayor, Manuela Carmena. These meetings afforded the incoming president the opportunity to convey his intent to reinforce commercial and diplomatic relations between both

countries. During these visits, Duque has been accompanied by lawyer Carlos Holmes Trujillo, who has been appointed foreign secretary. Holmes Trujillo has a respected political career, having served as a diplomat since the 1990s and standing as the vice-presidential candidate for the Democratic Center party in 2014.

It is clear that president-elect Duque's foreign policy will center on reinforcing ties with Colombia's traditional allies and securing international support for the administration's agenda.

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Is Jair Bolsonaro the Man for Brazil?

Kinga Brudzińska
October 26, 2018

Brazil heads to the polls on October 28, with Jair Bolsonaro widely tipped to become the country's next president.

There can be no doubt that Jair Bolsonaro entered Brazil's presidential campaign as a rank outsider. When it comes to populist anti-establishment politicians making their mark across Latin America, the far-right congressman and former army captain is certainly in good company.

Take, for example, the rise of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico's president-elect. Like Bolsonaro threatens to do in Brazil, López Obrador has broken the center-right's traditional dominance of Mexican politics.

But there the similarities end. In stark contrast to López Obrador's leftist message, Bolsonaro has consistently highlighted his authoritarian sympathies and illiberal social views over the course of the election campaign. Brazil's likely next president is a long-time defender of the country's former military dictatorship and a supporter of the armed forces, a point underlined by the selection of retired general Hamilton Mourão as his running mate.

Some of Bolsonaro's more controversial statements include his preference for a dead rather than a gay son, and his declaration that it would not be worth

raping Congresswoman Maria do Rosario because she was "very ugly."

Not that such choice words have affected his popularity among ordinary Brazilians. Indeed, support for Bolsonaro increased after he was stabbed at a political rally in September. During the first round of presidential elections on October 7, Bolsonaro won a spectacular 46% of the vote, with his closest rival, Workers' Party (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad, polling at 29%. Datafolha predicts that Bolsonaro will receive 52% on October 28 against his challenger's 41%.

TAPPING INTO POPULAR ANGER

So what explains the meteoric rise of someone like Bolsonaro in a country where memories of the last military dictatorship remain relatively fresh?

Many Brazilians are weary of the interchange between PT and Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) governments. Despite the remarkable achievements of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's PT — rapid economic growth and an expanding middle class — things were far from plain sailing for his predecessor Dilma Rousseff. Under her leadership, Brazil fell into a deep recession in 2014 due to economic mismanagement and a decline in global commodity prices. And while economic growth has since returned, conditions remain grim, with more than 12% of the population unemployed, and millions living back below the poverty line. Put simply, trust in the PT is at an all-time

low, with many Brazilians holding the party responsible for economic hardship and much more.

Jair Bolsonaro has effectively tapped into this anger and desire to disrupt the status quo, particularly when it comes to corruption and high levels of street violence. Brazil continues to struggle with the repercussions of 2014's "Lava Jato" — "Car Wash" — the country's biggest ever corruption scandal. The revelations contributed to the impeachment and eventual removal of Rousseff from office in August 2016, as well as the Lula's imprisonment earlier this year.

As things stand, Brazil remains the home to 17 of the world's most violent cities, with an annual homicide rate of 30 per 100,000 people. According to Latinobarometro, support for the police has declined by almost 20% over the past few years, from 53% in 2010 to 34% in 2017.

Neither do Brazilians have much faith in their democratic institutions. A 2017 poll suggests that only 13% of the population were satisfied with the state of democracy, way below the Latin American average of 30%. Further polling suggests that 97% of Brazilians think that the country is governed by an elite that only has its interests at heart.

The polls also make for grim reading for Brazil's incumbent president Michel Temer and his Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), with an approval rating of just 5%. His cause has hardly

been helped by his arrest and charging with obstruction of justice (a charge which he categorically denies) and a narrow brush with impeachment.

THE MAN

Finally, there is Jair Bolsonaro the man, a passionate and charismatic individual who stands apart from the relatively dour Haddad and Temer. Many Brazilians have also warmed to his backstory — a devout Catholic from a small town and working-class background.

Bolsonaro has proved particularly adept at using social media on the campaign trail, a significant development given his small budget and the absence of major party backers. His Facebook page currently has 7.8 million followers, five times as many as Fernando Haddad (1.5 million), and knocking President Temer's paltry 628,000 into the long grass.

Bolsonaro's popularity has also been boosted by his decision to choose the free-market economist Paulo Guedes as his potential finance minister. This is a remarkable development, given that he has advocated economic nationalism throughout his political career.

Thanks to this change of heart, Bolsonaro received more votes from investors and wealthy Brazilians than he perhaps expected in the first round of the presidential election. Many believe that he will curtail social spending and

implement much needed market-friendly reforms.

Jair Bolsonaro is adamant that he is the man to make Brazil great again. The task at hand should not be underestimated. Far-reaching reforms are required to boost the country's weak economic growth, including the consolidation of public finances and reform of the pension system. Brazil's next president also needs to restructure a business environment that hampers foreign investment. Without such measures the country will continue to teeter on the brink of one fiscal crisis after another. Fighting corruption and improving public security will also be at the top of the to-do list.

In the absence of party support, Bolsonaro will have to quickly learn the art of coalition building and managing the different factions that make up Latin America's most fragmented congress. This will be no mean feat, with the next parliament consisting of 30 parties in the lower house and 21 in the senate. Regardless of each candidate's ambitions, plans and expectations it will undoubtedly be difficult for the incoming president to make Brazil great again.

While it's true that Bolsonaro's right-wing politics could pose a danger to Brazilian democracy, it does not necessarily mean a collapse or a slide into tyranny.

First, it may be simply that Brazilians are hungry for a strong and charismatic leader — one that would resemble Lula.

Second, Brazilian politics are about coalition building, so Bolsonaro won't find it so easy to push his ideas through congress. Finally, Brazilians are known for impeaching their presidents when they cross a red line, so Bolsonaro will have to watch out as he navigates his political path.

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The Economy Flames Anger in Iran

Dina Yazdani

January 9, 2018

The protests in Iran will not bring about regime change, but they may force political elites to address economic corruption that has gone on far too long.

Iranians marked the end of 2017 by pouring into streets across the country to protest against the government of President Hassan Rouhani in what has become the largest nationwide demonstrations since 2009. After almost two weeks of unrest, over 1,000 of “seditionists,” as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei calls them, have been arrested and at least 21 killed. Even though it is unclear if there was a single event that triggered the widespread protests, the outbreak of dissent should come as no surprise. Iranian society was a pressure cooker ready to explode, for all the same reasons that inspired the Arab Spring protests that rocked the Middle East.

Lack of economic opportunities, growing inflation, corruption, a widening gap between the people and the elites seem have pushed Iranians over the edge. They are bolder, more fearless and have shown tremendous resilience in the face of a growing crackdown by authorities. The 2009 Green Movement

protests erupted in response to the fraudulent elections that pitted reformist Iranians against the hardline government were largely confined to the capital Tehran and made up of the middle class. This latest round of demonstrations is different: Protests erupted among low-income Iranians in the religious centers of the country like Mashad and Qom that align more closely with conservative hardliners than leftist reformists.

RED LINES

While the Green Movement (named after the color of Mir-Hussein Mousavi’s presidential campaign) was largely composed of pro-democracy activists, both moderates and conservatives are taking part in today’s protests. Economic grievances have provided Iranians with a common message to unite under. Both conservatives and reformists are channeling their economic frustrations toward the government and the establishment as a whole, seen in slogans like “Death to Rouhani!” and “Death to Khamenei!” Many consider criticizing the supreme leader as a red line that few in 2009 have dared to cross.

Iranians understand that declining living standards are not the fault of the president alone. While some of the country’s economic woes can be attributed to Rouhani’s policies, many have been institutionalized within the system of government and long precede his presidency. This past summer during a radio interview, the son of a reformist

leader Mohammad Reza Aref credited his business success to “good genes” from his parents, sparking public outcry and reopening a debate on nepotism in Iran. Iranians took to Twitter to mock the children of elites, or aghazadeh — Persian for “noble-born.” One tweet particularly captured the sentiment of Iranians well: “What is aghazadeh? A person who’s had nothing to do with success in his life and was only at the right place, at the right time.”

Nepotism propels economic corruption in Iran and has long been a source of grievance toward the government, not to mention a hindrance to economic growth. Both hardliners and reformists alike benefit from the entrenched culture of nepotism as demonstrated by a report from IranWire, which revealed the high positions held by relatives of some of Iran’s most affluent elites.

Nepotism is only one contributing factor to what is rampant economic corruption in Iran. News reports expose that while millions of employees of the Central Insurance Company earned only a few hundred dollars a month, at least eight of its managers received yearly bonuses over \$50,000; others received interest-free loans from state-owned banks, many of which have not been paid back since the days of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency. With 80% of the economy owned by the state, the most stable jobs are the government ones. However they are difficult to come by and secure because of low turnover rates, with priority often given to those with connections to political elites or the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

One report claims that embezzlement and corruption cost Iran almost \$18 billion between 2011-2015, which spans the last two years of the Ahmadinejad administration and first two years of Rouhani’s. According to Transparency International, Iran’s average corruption ranking largely remained the same throughout Ahmadinejad’s and Rouhani’s respective terms, demonstrating how both hardliners and reformists have perpetuated the practice.

“MY LIFE FOR IRAN!”

Economic corruption, while widespread, is not the only challenge to Iran’s economy. The misappropriation of funds is another. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Khamenei’s predecessor Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, the new Islamic Republic has sought to expand its sphere of influence in the region and establish itself as a regional hegemon.

While at first Khomeini hoped to inspire resistance to Western influence, exporting the values of the revolution eventually narrowed down to the Muslim world. Iran has expanded its influence in the Middle East by helping fund Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the Shia-led government in Iraq and Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. While “exporting the revolution” has been a

powerful instrument to curry nationalism among Iranians, the latest demonstration has shown that Iranians are quickly losing their support for its expansionist foreign policy, especially as it comes at their expense. Iran's extensive proxy network comes at a heavy price, and Iranians are tired of footing the bill. Among the many slogans chanted throughout the nationwide protests include "No Gaza, no Lebanon, no Syria — my life for Iran!"

Tehran's funding of proxy groups abroad has also consolidated the status of the Revolutionary Guards, which is responsible for training these groups, as an economic powerhouse in Iran. The IRGC has taken advantage of its indispensable role in executing the country's foreign policy by expanding its control over the Iranian economy. It is not uncommon for those with ties with the IRGC to be awarded non-bid government contracts, and for competitors to be disqualified on arbitrary grounds.

The economic footprint of the IRGC has been a hurdle for privatization efforts, making it hard for entrepreneurs and ordinary businessmen to compete. By continuing to invest money in an ambitious foreign policy while neglecting the economic plight of their own people, the government is emboldening the IRGC and, consequently, undermining the economy.

WIDENING GAP

The ongoing protests emerged outside of the historically urban center of dissent in Iran that was home to the 2009 Green Movement, the 1999 student protests and even the 1979 revolution — Tehran. Instead, they have taken place throughout the country while the capital has remained uncharacteristically quiet.

President Rouhani's recent proposed budget for 1397 (Iran's new year that begins in March) ignores the needs of the millions of Iranians living outside of the capital by dramatically slashing cash subsidies and infrastructure projects. Despite promising to increase the budget for infrastructure projects by \$31 billion, if approved by parliament Rouhani's new budget will cut them by \$3.1 billion — a 16% decrease from the previous budget. Infrastructure projects have been a key source of jobs for many Iranians, especially those living in rural areas. Economics aside, infrastructure development is crucial outside of Tehran, including new paved roads and buildings capable of withstanding the country's frequent earthquakes. Rouhani's cuts to subsidies will affect an estimated 30 million Iranians, who rely on cash handouts to supplement their living costs. With the price of eggs increasing 40% over the past six months alone, it is difficult to imagine how they will manage without government assistance.

From 2007 to 2015, the average household budget has fallen 15%, meaning that Iranians have become 15% poorer. However, the average budget of an urban household in Tehran

has increased around that same time period. According to BBC Persian, the gap between Tehran and virtually everyone else in the country has nearly doubled over the past few years. Economic corruption and the misappropriation of funds have played a role in pooling a disproportionate chunk of government money into the capital, the home of economic and political elites, hardliner and reformist alike. Iran beyond Tehran has grown restless from this economic inequality, and Rouhani's recent budget announcement confirmed that it will only get worse.

THE NUCLEAR DEAL'S BROKEN PROMISE

Compounding the litany of economic grievances is the disappointment with the nuclear deal signed in 2015. After years of crippling sanctions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) offered hope that Iran could finally join the global economy, which would attract foreign investment, spur economic growth, lower inflation and, most importantly, create jobs. However, the nuclear deal has failed to live up to its promises as the US under President Donald Trump continues to renege on its commitment to sanctions relief. After threatening to rip up the deal during his presidential campaign, Trump has lobbied even more sanctions against Iran as president.

Trump's hostility toward Iran has made many foreign companies, not to mention American ones who fear decertification, reluctant to do business with Iran. Iran's

highly educated population, advanced technology and vast resources make it a highly desirable market. However, America's aggressive stance carries a risk for private companies. Those that have managed to navigate around the sanctions language in the US and elsewhere have resorted to signing memorandums of understanding instead of actual contracts, leaving the Iranian signatories vulnerable and uncertain.

Foreign direct investment stands at only \$3.5 billion since the signing of the nuclear deal, which is relatively minor compared to other countries. Iranians are becoming increasingly pessimistic that the nuclear deal will live up to its promises, and many believe that the US is preventing other countries from opening economic channels. Over 70% of Iranians voted for Rouhani in last year's presidential elections, largely as a mandate for the nuclear deal, in hope that it would eventually usher in economic growth. The countrywide demonstrations suggest that this hope is quickly dissipating.

In line with Iran's history of dissent, all protests eventually turn political. What began as a protest against rising inflation and declining employment has exploded into a nationwide demonstration of dissent against the government as a whole. What is unclear is what role reformists will play in the protests. Even though the economy affects rural, low-income Iranians more than middle-class Tehranis, unemployment is high throughout the country, especially among young people

who make up at least half of the population. The pro-democracy activists who made up the Green Movement have the same grievances against the government and are also disappointed in Rouhani — not just for his annual budget proposal but for failing to live up to his political and economic promises he campaigned on.

Rouhani's control over the government is limited, however, and change can't come from his office alone. Chants on the streets are directed toward the government that includes Rouhani, the supreme leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Republic as a whole. While curbing Trump's threats of decertifying the nuclear deal and reversing new sanctions may be beyond Tehran's sphere of influence, it can start by not neglecting "the other Iran" and adopting reforms that promote economic equality. Addressing economic corruption is just a starting point and will without doubt bring more positive outcomes than a military crackdown that will only incite more Iranians to take to the streets.

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Can Europe Save the Iran Deal?

Dina Yazdani
May 24, 2018

Iran will rely on world powers to keep the nuclear deal alive, undermining Trump's attempt to weaken the country.

Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has wrapped up the first leg of his diplomatic tour to work with the signatories of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear deal), in a final stand for its preservation. Following Trump's decision to pull the US out of the agreement on May 8, Zarif met with his counterparts in Beijing and Moscow, soliciting their renewed commitment toward the international pact, as well as European leaders, who stand to lose billions if the agreement collapses.

Trump's decision has without a doubt dealt a blow to Iran. Nonetheless, Tehran is optimistic that the deal has not been completely derailed. "From this moment, the JCPOA is between Iran and five countries," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in a press statement just moments after Trump's announcement. "From this moment, the P5+1 has lost the 1."

Iran has abandoned hopes it once had under the Obama administration of gradually rekindling relations by pivoting away from the US toward other world powers, particularly Europe. Rouhani announced that Iran would continue to adhere to the deal as long as European powers took substantive measures to

preserve it and continue business with the Islamic Republic despite US sanctions. The UK, Germany and France have all announced that they will remain committed to the nuclear deal with or without the US. On May 15, European leaders held an emergency crisis meeting with Zarif and outlined steps to get the nuclear deal, in the words of EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, “out of intensive care as soon as possible.”

A BLOW TO REFORMISTS

President Trump had lambasted the deal for being “one-sided” and simply “horrible” and sought to penalize Iran from the benefits promised under it. While Iran adhered to the agreement by destroying its core reactor at Arak, ended uranium enrichment and ultimately abandoned its ambitions of becoming a nuclear power altogether, Trump sought to undermine the deal the moment he stepped into office. In addition to imposing new sanctions, the US president called for a Muslim ban that blocked Iranians from entering the United States; created an atmosphere of uncertainty for American companies that discouraged them from doing business with Iran; and appointed a war cabinet that includes Trump’s hardline national security adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who have both actively called for military confrontation against the Islamic Republic.

When JCPOA was signed in January 2016, Iranians were hopeful that the

nuclear deal would open both the country’s economy and society to the international community. The deal was thought to not only bring economic growth, but also strengthen reformist leaders like Rouhani who negotiated the agreement and have called for expanding political freedoms inside Iran. Hardliners in Iran, who are isolationists critical of the West and devoted to Islamic law, are capitalizing on Trump’s withdrawal and have criticized Rouhani for trusting Washington. Instead of buckling under pressure by admitting defeat, Rouhani is determined to resuscitate the deal by bolstering relations with the P5.

The nuclear deal has become a lifeline for the reform movement. For as long as it enables Iran to widen relations with other world powers and bring in foreign investment, reformists will continue to have leverage over the hardliners. Rouhani’s election in 2013 and the 2017 reelection, the latter of which was considered a successful referendum on the nuclear deal, emboldened ordinary Iranians to call for greater social reform. Rouhani has echoed Iranians’ calls publicly and even carried out measures to loosen restrictions on personal freedom, such as divesting of the moral police.

The deal provides President Rouhani with an opportunity to push for more reform and convince hardliners to work with the international community rather than against it. Rouhani is now depending on Europe, which understands how the reform

movement's fate is tied to that of the nuclear deal, to save the agreement.

European leaders are on the frontline fighting to save the JCPOA. In the weeks preceding the US withdrawal, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel vigorously lobbied Trump against it. Europe not only risks losing a lucrative trade partner, but also understands the ramifications it would have on political stability in the Middle East. Without the deal, Iran would restart its nuclear program, validating Saudi Arabia and Israel's calls for military containment. These three countries' proxy wars have already caused insurmountable damage to the region; a direct war could destroy it.

CAN EUROPE SAVE THE DEAL?

The nuclear deal is best positioned to contain Iran's ambitions. As long as there is an international pact with Iran, there is a channel for diplomacy. European powers understand that as long as this channel is open, they're more likely to be able to engage Iran on other topics, from its ballistic missile program to its involvement in Syria.

Europe's best shot at preserving the nuclear deal is through a carrot and stick approach toward the US. On the one hand, it can ignore America's extraterritorial sanctions by employing the 1996 Blocking Regulation that threatens to freeze US assets in Europe and in the process protects European companies from US legal rulings (such

as sanctions). On the other hand, European powers can address Trump's concerns over the nuclear deal through a separate, parallel agreement negotiated alongside the JCPOA that compels Iran to diminish its ballistic missile capabilities in exchange for sanctions relief.

If Europe hopes to save the nuclear deal, it will need to learn to stand up to Trump, who has repeatedly sacrificed global security in favor of an "America First" approach. The US cannot continue to dictate international relations and politics. Iran sees Trump's exit from the nuclear deal as an opportunity to work and bolster relations with other world powers and prove that international agreements can survive without the United States. When Trump announced US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, the international community came together to carry on with business as usual. Iran hopes that it will do the same when it comes to the nuclear deal.

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The Role of Fear in Turkey's Elections

Nathaniel Handy

June 23, 2018

Never mind who's afraid of President Erdogan — what about his supporters' fear of life without him?

When Turks go to the polls on June 24 — only a little over a year since the controversial referendum that paved the way for a new presidential system of government — the question of fear will be central to most narratives. The most dominant of these, certainly outside the country, is the one broadly attached to the opposition: the fear of another victory for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his consolidation of power.

This narrative is well worn in Western media. It has many advocates within Turkey and among Turks abroad, as well as much hard evidence to support it. There is also — particularly after the slim margin of victory in the 2017 referendum — the suspicion of potential electoral fraud. But against this backdrop is also another awkward, yet important, truth: President Erdogan still commands huge support.

Were Turkey a true dictatorship, as it is increasingly portrayed under Erdogan, he would have no electoral challengers, except perhaps for a few late entrants who suddenly and mysteriously realized a desire to run for president, despite being long-standing stalwart supporters of the incumbent. Instead, Turkey has a genuine field of candidates who are

most definitely independent of President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Turkey is still a functioning, if dysfunctional, democracy. President Erdogan and the AKP could lose. But they probably won't. This is due in large part — with all the intimidation, jailing of candidates and control of the national media excepted — to his enduring appeal for a large sector of Turkish society. While fear of Erdogan is well known and well documented, what about fear of life without Erdogan? What is it that AKP voters most fear?

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER: THE OPPOSITION FEAR

Fear of President Erdogan has become an almost all-pervasive narrative in opposition circles. Critics point to his majoritarian conception of democracy, his illiberal instincts, the muzzling of the media, jailing of journalists and opposition politicians, and the steady weakening of the rule of law as the judiciary and even financial institutions become more and more beholden to the president. What is less often cited is the increasing unease of many in his own party.

For many members of the ruling Justice and Development Party, the erosion of open borders, a soft power foreign policy and democratic foundations within the country are seen not as an erosion of traditional Turkish principles, but of principles championed by the AKP itself. Look to a major figure such as former

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and we see a man who led policies of “zero problems with neighbors” and “strategic depth” that have been abandoned.

In another clear sign of the division in the ruling party, rumors swirled briefly in May of former President Abdullah Gul — a founder of the AKP — running for president against Erdogan. In the event, he didn’t risk the challenge, yet there is a sense of potential momentum in this election. “It will be the most unpredictable election ever,” suggested a political observer in Istanbul who wished to remain anonymous. “Not even expert public opinion pollsters know what is going to happen.”

“I personally believe that the chances of a surprise victory for the opposition have significantly increased,” said the observer. He cited the victimization of the Kurdish and left-wing party, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), and the successful left-wing populist campaign of Muharrem Ince, candidate for the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP).

He also believed President Erdogan’s numerous public gaffes, such as acknowledging that the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) has been used to spy on the opposition campaign and threatening the death penalty for HDP candidate Selahattin Demirtas, had undermined the confidence of moderates.

ENDURING THREATS: FEAR OF LIFE WITHOUT ERDOGAN

Demirtas is the charismatic figurehead for the Kurdish political movement in Turkey, though he is viewed by many as a mouthpiece for the other jailed Kurdish leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The threat to execute a popular politician is no idle threat in a country that did just that following the coup of 1960. Adnan Menderes was the leader of the Democratic Party, which ruled for a decade in the 1950s following an early multi-party experiment in the Kemalist state.

Following the party’s fall in a military coup, the coup leaders chose to execute Menderes by hanging, an act that still casts a long shadow over Turkish politics. It is one small window into the minds of those who support President Erdogan and his ruling AKP.

Like Menderes and his party, Erdogan and the AKP came to political prominence through popular support at the ballot box, not through military tutelage. They too spoke for a largely disenfranchised provincial electorate of pious Turks who had never wholly embraced Kemalism.

Despite all the turmoil of the last few years, and all the illiberalism exhibited by President Erdogan, his supporters have the whole 20th century to reference in considering where their interests lie. It was a century dominated by the staunchly secularist Kemalist elite, supported by a military that was ready to defend the state created by founder Kemal Ataturk, even against the popular will of its citizens. Long years of

cultural and religious oppression are not easily forgotten.

JUST BECAUSE I'M PARANOID...

Erdogan is a personification of this history. He was himself jailed by the Kemalist establishment in 1998 for the crime of reading a poem by the Turkish nationalist Ziya Gokalp that spoke of how “the minarets shall be our bayonets” — a reference that whiffed of Islamism to the Turkish elite of the era. Perhaps even more acutely, the AKP constituency has the failed coup of 2016 to consider now. Though it has been surprisingly quickly forgotten in Western media against the prominent post-coup purge, what occurred on July 15, 2016, is now central to President Erdogan and to his support.

For all that he and his ruling circle can now appear paranoid, defensive and illiberal, it cannot be denied — beyond conspiracy theories of a false flag operation — that Erdogan's administration was the victim of a violent attempted coup. It claimed the lives of over 200 people, involved elements in the air force who bombed key government buildings, and even the hotel in Marmaris where the president was staying that night. Whatever we may think of the likes of US President Donald Trump or British Prime Minister Theresa May, neither has been subjected to such action from within their own state.

Consider for a moment what that means to a man in Erdogan's position. He is a

combative leader, determined to not only bring his constituency within the country representation, but real power and influence. Turkey is no stranger to the military coup, but for an attempt to have occurred in 2016 was, nevertheless, an audacious surprise in a country now wary of such practices. Moreover, in the shadow of Menderes, President Erdogan can have been pretty sure that night of what his fate might so easily have been.

In such a political climate, it is easy — perhaps not that surprising — that a leader would move toward illiberalism, toward a majoritarian vision that rested on the knowledge that unless you hold the power, those who do will not hesitate to oppress you. Unlike what might now be seen as the “AKP Spring” of the early 21st century, Erdogan's trajectory now borrows much from the lessons of the rule of Ataturk himself, who erred on the side of one man, one party rule — strength and stability for the good of the nation. There are many for whom that message still rings true.

Nathaniel Handy is a writer and academic with over 10 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 on Turkish relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

Jamal Khashoggi: The Martyr Who Made Backlash Possible

Peter Isackson

October 19, 2018

In his last ever article, Jamal Khashoggi lamented the lack of an “independent international forum” and “transnational media” in the Arab world.

In his final, posthumous column published by The Washington Post, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi complained about the public’s general acceptance of attacks by governments in the Arab world on freedom of the press. They are so frequent and widespread that the public has become inured and indifferent. “These actions no longer carry the consequence of a backlash from the international community,” he wrote. “Instead, these actions may trigger condemnation quickly followed by silence.”

When the press first began to speak of Khashoggi’s failure to appear after a visit to the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, many in the media expressed their alarm and ran stories about it for two or three days and then began to go quiet

when, following Saudi denials of any knowledge of Khashoggi’s fate, no further news was forthcoming. The pattern seemed confirmed. The world would move on to other dramas.

But the mystery deepened with the continued insistence of the Saudis that they knew nothing and had nothing to report, including the basic facts about how and when he left the consulate, as they claimed. Then, probably to the Saudis’ own surprise, the Turkish authorities revealed that they had evidence not only that the journalist had never left the consulate, but that he was most likely murdered inside the consulate.

Now the media had something to work with. Embarrassed by the revelation, the Saudis had a brief opportunity for damage control by admitting partial responsibility (i.e., the “botched interrogation” suggested some days later). All they needed to do would be to place the blame on a designated subordinate — the standard procedure of “plausible deniability.

But by then they may have realized that the degree of toxicity of the event was such that the only viable strategy would be to continue stonewalling, hoping that Khashoggi’s own insight was correct, that his murder would simply “trigger condemnation quickly followed by silence.”

THE UNRAVELING OF DONALD TRUMP’S MIDDLE EAST GAMBIT?

This is where US President Donald Trump may have been unwittingly responsible for the definitive undermining of the reputation of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), on whom Trump, or rather Jared Kushner, has based his grand vision of a new Middle East led by Israel and Saudi Arabia, with Iran neutralized after regime change or simply reduced to rubble.

By failing to join one of his most vocal supporters, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, in expressing his moral indignation and forcing the Saudis to admit some level of accountability — if only to stabilize the increasingly embarrassing situation caused by their blanket denial — Trump has revealed to the world how focused his own values are on money and power to the exclusion of justice and human rights. He has run the risk of potentially splitting the fragile unity he had created in the Republican Party around his bombastic personal power.

As we wait to see the chain reaction of future events once the already evident facts are brought out into the open, observers will focus on how three threads of the story will play out: the damage inside Saudi Arabia to Mohammed bin Salman's hold on power (after all he is "only" the crown prince); the damage done to Trump within in his party and to his party during the midterm elections in November; and the fate of the notorious peace plan for Palestine and Israel, engineered by Kushner

which, according to reports, included a major role for Saudi Arabia.

After first speculating that there may have been "rogue killers," which most observers believed was an allusion to the "botched interrogation" thesis, Trump has finally admitted that he "believes Jamal Khashoggi is dead." He also tellingly revealed his disappointment that the story has remained in the public spotlight longer than he and MBS hoped or expected: "This one has caught the imagination of the world, unfortunately." In an act of uncharacteristic patience, Trump now insists on waiting for the outcome of three investigations before making a "strong statement," possibly in the hope that in the meantime Kanye West and Kim Kardashian will have drawn "the imagination of the world" to a more exciting subject.

Trump's willingness to passively support as long as possible the Saudis' stonewalling illustrates Khashoggi's concern that the international community was no longer capable of providing the "backlash" he felt was necessary to drive a wedge in Saudi Arabia's despotic control of the press. As more and more economic partners, international firms and European ministers turn away from their commitment to the glitzy Future Investment Initiative in Saudi Arabia, something resembling a backlash finally seems to be taking place.

If the backlash continues to capture not just the imagination but also the moral

indignation of the world, Khashoggi's martyrdom may turn out to be a blow for freedom, opening a slight but possibly growing breach in the authoritarian control of the media that MBS has exercised. Could the journalist's murder be for Saudi Arabia what the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was for Tunisia's Arab Spring in 2010? That seems unlikely, given the nature and the sheer wealth of the interests in place, but symbols and acts of martyrdom have been known to change the course of history, particularly in the Middle East.

HOW FREE IS ANY PRESS?

Describing how the media is manipulated in the Arab world, Jamal Khashoggi tells us: "[T]hese governments, whose very existence relies on the control of information, have aggressively blocked the Internet. They have also arrested local reporters and pressured advertisers to harm the revenue of specific publications."

In the West it's different, but only by a degree. As this author recently pointed out, quoting Jacob Rees-Mogg, a member of the British Conservative Party: "Governments want to control information. To do this they have elaborate systems for promoting themselves." These include putting the media in a dependent and eventually compliant position.

The Washington Post is a prime example of this. The newspaper is known both for its heroic challenges to government (Watergate) and its

compliant bending to the wishes of partisan insiders and even to Saudi Arabian interests. This soft or indirect control of information takes different forms, one of which Khashoggi mentions in his posthumous article: through the pressure of advertisers, who combine with governments to present and enforce an official account of certain events and, more commonly, a normalized version of social values.

As the wealthiest man on earth, Amazon's Jeff Bezos could pay to have Khashoggi write for The Washington Post, just as he pays for a number of establishment writers who promote establishment values, while excluding a wide range of celebrated thinkers and writers known for critiquing those values. US commercial news media is locked into a binary logic that pits Democrats against Republicans, liberals against conservatives and occasionally subdivides the drama into opposing clans within each of the parties.

Consequently, they confine all discussion of politics, society and economics within the purview of two traditional partisan establishment points of view, creating and often fomenting false drama that excludes any point of view, however seriously reasoned, that fails to fall within the categories of debate defined by the bi-partisan establishment. The news as a source of public debate is organized in the manner of a sporting event, designed to foment fandom for one team or the other, confining the public's attention to recognized, official positions on the

issues that those two teams consider important and focusing the public's interest on the question of who will win and who will lose.

The website Media Bias/Fact Check offers this description of The Washington Post: "They often publish factual information that utilizes loaded words (wording that attempts to influence an audience by using appeal to emotion or stereotypes) to favor liberal causes." Of Fox News, it reports: "They may utilize strong loaded words (wording that attempts to influence an audience by using appeal to emotion or stereotypes), publish misleading reports and omit reporting of information that may damage conservative causes. Some sources in this category may be untrustworthy."

No writing is entirely trustworthy. All writing reflects someone's point of view and loaded words can be found in every discourse. But the damage of media bias comes more from the deliberate narrowing of perspective. It achieves a deeper effect through the consistent framing of issues in a way that invites the "loaded words" its public expects to hear, which provokes an emotional response.

FROM PROPAGANDA TO RESPECTABLE FAKE NEWS

Jamal Khashoggi left this world dreaming of "an independent international forum, isolated from the influence of nationalist governments spreading hate through propaganda." It

is a dream that people in the West should share and extend. Alas, it remains a dream because reality has not been kind to the idea of independence. Recent history makes it clear that despite the variety of platforms in the so-called "free world" (free of what?), true independence is rare. When it does exist, it tends to be aggressively marginalized by its more successful opposite — commercial journalism — which we would be wise to get in the habit of calling our "dependent media."

A single sentence in a recent article by Rick Newman of Yahoo Finance concerning the Khashoggi affair helps to clarify what we mean by Western media's dependence on established interests, both government and private. Attempting to explain "why Trump is going soft on Saudi Arabia" (the title of the article), Newman writes: "The Khashoggi mess, however, could disrupt Trump's Iran strategy just as he's about to tighten the screws on the hard-line Islamic nation."

In a context where the subject is both Saudi and Iran, an objective observer might legitimately pause and wonder which "hard-line Islamic nation" he is referring to: Iran or Saudi Arabia? Obviously it's Iran. Why should that be? Because everyone knows and accepts that Iran is the enemy of the US and Saudi Arabia is its ally. The public is taught to think in binary categories, where only opposites exist (as in a sporting contest).

But if you ask any thinking person which of the two nations cited they would describe as the most hardline or the most “Islamic,” after a bit of thought and research, the more obvious answer would be that it’s Saudi Arabia.

Not only do women have fewer rights than in Shia Iran, but Wahhabi Saudi Arabia has for decades exported violent Islamic extremism and terrorism on an unparalleled scale, spawning both al-Qaeda and, to a degree, the Islamic State. As military historian Major Danny Sjursen complains, the extremists who killed soldiers under his command in Afghanistan were “too often armed and funded by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” Is that how we choose our allies?

SEPARATING ALLIES AND ENEMIES

Westerners have been conditioned to think within the constraints of a culture and political ideology created and promoted by governments working — closely, intimately and, more often than not, outside of public view — with financial and industrial interests. As a group, they are more concerned about opportunities for business and power relationships than human rights or even the lives of their own soldiers. The technique for conditioning the public is, as mentioned above, fairly simple. Binary reasoning permits the presentation of any problem as a choice either between good and evil (by excluding all nuance) or between the lesser of two evils. This helps us divide the world into two camps: allies and enemies.

How do the public and the nation as a whole make that choice? That’s easy: “it’s the economy, stupid.” Do we really prefer Sunni Islam to Shia Islam? Few in the West have even a vague idea of the difference between those two versions of Islam and even fewer care. Do we compare their records on human rights or despotic rule?

No, all we need to know is that the nation we end up calling the enemy can truthfully be accused of practices that can be labeled despotic. The fact that the ally may be equally as despotic, or even more so, has no importance because we presume that their leaders trust and honor us, meaning that they will not direct their despotic tendencies to curtail our own sacred freedom. After all, anyone who does business with us must trust and honor us. What more do we need to know?

From the very time of its creation in 1932, Saudi Arabia accepted its role as a cog in the wheel of the complex arrangements established between powerful financial, political and industrial interests defined in the West. Iran, on the other hand, dared to revolt twice against the Western system. First when Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh attempted to nationalize Iran’s oil industry. The democratically elected leader was quickly overthrown in 1953 through the collaborative work of American and British intelligence agencies. What was Mosaddegh’s real crime? A wish for economic independence, which he felt Iran could achieve by nationalizing the oil industry.

The US and Britain made what they called the “progressive” move of replacing a democratically elected leader by a monarch, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a former playboy who easily slipped into the role of Western puppet and local tyrant.

THE MAKING OF AN ENEMY

When Imam Ruhollah Khomeini led the revolt that forced the shah into exile in 1979, the new Islamic regime had finally found a way to gain the independence that had been denied by the West in 1953, but this time with a vengeance and a deep resentment that required the combined force of religious conviction with the political sense of national identity to achieve its goal. This constituted a perfect recipe for a rigid, inflexible, theocratic, culturally authoritarian form of government, in contrast to the secularism of Mosaddegh. In some sense, Khomeini’s Iran duplicated the template of Saudi Arabia, with similarly massive oil reserves but without a royal family.

The democratic West reacted with its usual shock and incomprehension at seeing another group of people refuse the benefits of economic cooperation with the powers that, in the name of democracy and free markets, rule the world and control its resources. This confirmed in many people’s minds the perverse but facile Islamophobic belief that Muslim populations prefer theocracy to democracy, even though it was the US and the UK who had put a halt to the growth of secular democracy

in Iran — the same two nations that since the creation of the Saudi nation never ceased to endorse, or at least benignly tolerate, its despotic theocracy.

We must therefore ask ourselves: How does the establishment, including the media, maintain the public’s perception of Saudi Arabia as a trusted ally and Iran as an existentially defined enemy?

As everyone knows, Iran was designated as a core member of George W. Bush’s “axis of evil.” It was also the country John McCain wanted to bomb without asking questions and the nation John Bolton is now promising to give “hell to pay.” Donald Trump had no trouble canceling Barack Obama’s Iran deal, not because there was an objective reason to do so, but because he knew that the majority of Americans believed Iran is, by definition, “the enemy.”

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are theocracies, but Iran has a democratically elected government, whereas Saudi is the world’s last significant absolute monarchy. It doesn’t matter how hardline, how Islamic (or Islamist), how brutal, cruel, unjust and committed to violence one or the other may be. Saudi Arabia wears our uniform. It’s on our team. Iran isn’t. In the words of English poet John Keats, “that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” And for decades the public has asked no questions, not even after 9/11 when it became clear that both Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens.

REALIZING JAMAL KHASHOGGI'S DREAM

In his final article, Jamal Khashoggi lamented the lack of an “independent international forum” and “transnational media” in the Arab world. There is a great diversity of media platforms in the West, but most of them — and those that are the most watched and read — are neither independent nor truly international. Publishing and broadcasting the news that aligns with corporate interests and is careful not to disturb the ideological taste of its public is only a tiny step closer to independence than many government-funded and run media outlets.

That explains why celebrity news, entertainment and sports play such a prominent role in such media. They fill the time that might be more responsibly dedicated to raising issues of serious concern, issues that would invite people to think and eventually act democratically, but which might also risk disturbing the population's comfort level with an economy and political system managed, unbeknownst to them, by the corporate interests that program the news.

There are some exceptions. The BBC and Al Jazeera have established reputations for a high but far from perfect level of independence. Al Jazeera projects a more international vision of the world than BBC, which is still encumbered culturally by Britain's colonial heritage and its fundamentally English-speaking view of the world.

Khashoggi mentions with approval the fact that “Qatar's government continues to support international news coverage.” Had the article been published before his death, it would have been a sufficient pretext for the Saudis to assassinate him, since MBS made the decision in 2017 to brand Qatar — Riyadh's traditional Gulf partner and ally — a dangerous enemy, which he threatened to destroy and annex.

There are a number of online channels that have achieved independence but rarely correspond to Khashoggi's wish for “an independent international forum.” This media organization, Fair Observer, actually does fall into that category. By refusing institutional sponsorship and advertising, and steering clear of any ideological orientation, Fair Observer deserves to be cited as an example of true independence. It gives voice to the widest variety of serious and frequently conflicting points of view, always in the interest of creating perspective, the very thing most commercial media outlets endeavor to suppress.

As an independent publication, Fair Observer refuses to put itself in a position in which it would be beholden either to governments or private corporate interests. Alas, those two bastions of power remain the primary sources of the news people consume. As we have seen, governments and corporate interests understand that they wield the power not just to present the news stories that comfort the status quo but, more importantly, the power to shape public discourse and guide

people's "thinking," even on questions as basic as: who is our ally and who is our enemy?

Would Jamal Khashoggi have submitted articles to Fair Observer? Nothing would have stopped him, although without Jeff Bezos' cash to keep the pot boiling, in contrast to The Washington Post, he couldn't have made a living doing so. Are there other voices inside or outside Saudi Arabia that can deliver the kind of independent and knowledgeable insight Khashoggi offered us?

Perhaps few with the deep insider knowledge that Khashoggi had, but there are many valid perspectives that we need, more than ever, to learn about. Fair Observer welcomes them. And because it is a truly "international forum," it welcomes them from everywhere in the world.

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Heinemann and Macmillan. He has published books and articles in a variety of journals on culture, learning, language and politics. He is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer and the creator of the regular feature, The Daily Devil's Dictionary.

Is the Worst Over for Libya?

Sherif El-Ashmawy

November 2, 2018

There are signs that a worst-case scenario has been avoided in Libya.

The latest month-long round of inter-militia fighting south of Tripoli, which broke out on August 27 and left at least 115 people killed, had two remarkable effects. On the one hand, the level of violence, which the capital had not witnessed in four years, highlighted the persistent volatility of the security situation and, thereby, Libya's unpreparedness to hold parliamentary and presidential elections by December 10 — as set out by the May 29 Paris declaration to which representatives of Libya's main rival factions verbally agreed. On the other hand, the fighting provided an opening for the renegotiation of Tripoli's security arrangements.

Following several unsuccessful attempts to create stability in a country marred by violence and fragmentation since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya is entering a new transitional period. The characteristics of this period will become clearer over the coming year and will

have effects on the country's governance structures and security dynamics. Despite signs of persistent political fragmentation, entrenched disagreements between rivals and continued insecurity across the country, there have been positive developments over the past two years that can be built upon for a successful transition to peace.

GOVERNANCE-SECURITY NEXUS

While Libya's government structures are split between rival national-level sets of authorities, the most effective form of governance is often local. This is due to divisions along tribal, regional and ethnic lines as well as to the living memory of political rivalries and armed struggles since 2011. These factors, along with disagreements between international stakeholders on how to stabilize Libya, have undermined the UN-led efforts to reunify the country's fragmented state institutions and end the turmoil.

There has been no shortage of international initiatives to broker a political settlement in Libya and bring about stability over the past 18 months. These have engaged national-level stakeholders, who mostly had limited influence over their constituencies and constrained capacity to change realities on the ground. This has undermined the effectiveness of those initiatives.

Moreover, political and security stabilization tracks cannot be separated from each other. In the absence of

unified regular security forces and central authorities that Libyans across the country regard as legitimate, armed groups have significant influence over political institutions and figures, while political groups have their associated militias. Political fragmentation also provides an opening for a wide range of criminal and militant groups to flourish.

The international community's efforts to broker reconciliation efforts in recent months have focused on the need for Libya to move on toward adopting a constitution and holding parliamentary and presidential elections as a step toward reunifying the country.

The latest round of fighting in Tripoli further exposed the internationally recognized Government of National Accord's (GNA) weaknesses and the need to transition to a new form of governance. As elections are unlikely to be held by the end of the year, there are growing signs of a potential reshuffle of the GNA's Presidency Council over the coming months to allow a new body that better represents the Libyan stakeholders to oversee elections and efforts to reunify state institutions.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Three major positive trends developed over the past two years and can serve as a foundation for the country's stabilization.

First is the partial recovery of Libya's oil production. In September 2016, the eastern-based Libyan National Army

(LNA) took over the Sirte Basin's oil terminals, and production restarted in late 2016 at the southwestern Murzuq basin's oilfields following the resolution of communal disputes. These two developments paved the way for a steep increase in Libya's oil output, which reached 1.35 million barrels per day in October 2018 for the first time in five years.

This was only possible through a tacit agreement by which the LNA would guard the Sirte Basin's export terminals and oilfields, which account for 80% of Libya's oil reserves, while the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC) continues to manage the sector. Accordingly, oil revenues would also flow into the Tripoli-based central bank. Despite recurrent disruption to oil production and tensions between rival authorities over the management of revenues, Libyan factions realized the benefits of cooperation to keep oil revenues — Libya's principal source of income — flowing in.

Second, there are strong signs that designing a more efficient and sustainable security architecture is underway — though at a slow pace — and that Libya is highly unlikely to descend into another full-scale civil war comparable to that of 2014.

The latest clashes south of Tripoli prompted the GNA to implement new security arrangements that consist of the withdrawal of Tripoli's principal militias from protecting the capital's vital infrastructure facilities (such as Mitiga

airport, Tripoli's port and government buildings) and handing them over to a police force. If the new arrangements are efficiently implemented, they would reduce security risks in the capital and diminish the likelihood of inter-militia fighting.

On the national level, there are signs that major armed groups lack the intent and capability to engage in large-scale fighting against each other. These groups are also deterred by their foreign allies from escalating hostilities to a level that would trigger another civil war.

Finally, there is a growing international momentum to find a sustainable solution to Libya's turmoil. It is true that there are competing views between international stakeholders over how best to move forward. Different countries' drivers vary between stemming the flow of illegal migration toward Europe, preventing the creation of a safe haven for Islamic State militants in Libya, reducing instability in the Sahel region and securing business deals in the oil and gas, power and reconstruction sectors.

However, there are signs of efforts aimed at reconciling the positions of international stakeholders regarding Libya. For example, France in recent weeks has become less insistent on the need for Libya to hold elections by the end of 2018, which brings it closer to Italy's stance that advocates a more careful approach to Libya's transition.

Moreover, there is evidence that coordinated international action can

have positive effects on the ground and produce more stability. For example, significant international pressure — including from the US — on the commander of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar, compelled him hand back the administration of the Sirte Basin's oil ports to the internationally recognized NOC (after briefly transferring them in June 2018 to an unrecognized authority based in Benghazi), thereby resuming oil exports.

While Libya's coming transition is likely to witness persistent political tensions, fragmentation and violence, the scenario of a full-scale civil war has most likely been avoided, and the country is presented with an opportunity to progress, albeit slowly, toward a more stable order.

Sherif El-Ashmawy is a political and security risk analyst focusing on the Middle East and North Africa region. In his current role at Control Risks Group, a global specialist risk consultancy, he leads the company's analysis on Libya. El-Ashmawy advises multinational companies and organizations on the various political, security and operational risks that they face in Libya. He holds a master's degree in international relations from Sciences Po Paris and a bachelor's degree in political science and economics from Cairo University.

NORTH AMERICA

We Need a #MeToo Moment for School Shootings

Ellis Cashmore

February 16, 2018

Does the #MeToo movement offer a model for overcoming our compassion fatigue with mass shootings?

How long will it be before the next mass killing on American soil rips our hearts open and has us begging for a change in the US gun laws? Be warned: It will be soon.

Only last November, a gunman (the killers are almost always male) opened fire on a small church in Texas, killing 26 people and an unborn child. A month before this, Stephen Paddock sprayed gunfire on a crowd of 22,000 at a Las Vegas concert. Since the shooting at the Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999, in which 12 children and one teacher were killed, barely a season has passed without some sort of atrocity.

Mass killings are uniquely terrifying because they seem to happen spontaneously, and only later do we discover they have been planned. They also happen in the most unlikely places: not the mean streets of Chicago or South Central LA, but in schools or universities — places conventionally associated with innocence and enlightenment. Each killing meets with condemnation of the gun laws and an instant diagnosis of the killer as a psychopath. We react with shock,

though perhaps with less surprise than the time before. The killings disturb us, but perhaps with diminishing returns. In other words, we're becoming inured to mass killings.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

In the early 1990s, the term compassion fatigue captured the indifference to charitable appeals on behalf of suffering people, such as the homeless or populations afflicted by drought and starvation. The "fatigue" referred to our exhaustion: We didn't so much stop caring, just grew weary of the persistence and the frequency of the appeals. Every visit to a supermarket was accompanied by the jangle of money in charity boxes. A walk on the high street was impossible without at least one approach by a charity worker.

We marched past them, ignored the television appeals and guiltlessly threw away those envelopes bearing images of skeletal children. We didn't feel cruel, hateful or merciless — the repetitive invocation to contribute had simply worn us out. Our minds were transformed and provocations had little or no effect. I wonder if this is happening again. The killings should provoke us more than they do. Think about Parkland again.

The suspect, Nikolas Cruz, 19, had been expelled (what the British call "excluded") from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He returned to the school carrying a simple black duffel bag and the kind of backpack that practically

every teenager has; his was loaded with cartridges. He arrived in an Uber cab and pulled out a semiautomatic AR-15 rifle, which he had recently bought, completely legally. After he'd completed his killing spree, Cruz walked to a Walmart store and then to a Subway, where he bought a soft drink.

He also stopped at a McDonald's. The police eventually arrested him as he walked calmly down a street. The mundanity of this makes it arguably more chilling than any of the mass killings of recent years. Cruz was arrested as he walked down the street having finished his Subway drink. This should chill us to the bone every time we take our children to school and see dozens of other kids, many of them slurping from cans, with backpacks. It should prompt us into wondering if the world is as safe as we imagined. It should force us to think whether reasonless seemingly recreational abominations like this just normal parts of our everyday landscape.

The distance between Parkland and our homes appears untroublingly great. The truth is, it isn't. We don't know our neighbors very well, we have relationships that we count as friendships but are probably superficial associations, we hug, kiss and greet others as if long-lost relatives, even though we probably saw them yesterday. Much of our lives gives an impression of intimacy where there is really remoteness. Perhaps this is how

we satisfy ourselves that “it couldn’t happen here.” We live in a similar state of disunity to the United States; we just like to believe otherwise.

AN ANTIDOTE

Is there an antidote to the fatigue? Something to vitiate the existential anesthesia that leaves us insensitive to the pain that belongs to others, but should be shared? Does the #MeToo movement offer a model?

When sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein broke last year, few people outside Hollywood, or without a working knowledge of the film industry, would have known about Weinstein. But it became the biggest news story of 2017, and its aftermath turned it into arguably the most comprehensively covered event since September 11, 2001.

The #MeToo movement played no small part in preventing the Weinstein case becoming just another addition to the litany of episodes involving powerful men who use their positions to procure sexual favors from women. #MeToo used social media to promote awareness that not only had this kind of arrangement been commonplace for decades, but it was actually going on today. In a self-fulfilling way, it encouraged women, who might otherwise have remained silent, to reveal themselves and speak openly about their experiences. In the process, their abusers were named and, sometimes, humiliated.

#MeToo became a conduit for the pent-up anger of the ages, a way of shocking people, especially women, into realization, a method of conferring strength on groups that might otherwise consider themselves weak and helpless. The movement stayed sensitive and perceptive, not by imposing agendas or programs, but by simply offering a platform. Values, views, perspectives and just plain, simple thoughts swept around the world virally. #MeToo was adversarial, but not forceful: Ordinary human beings with smartphones, tablets and computers at their fingertips did all the bidding. It deliberately perplexed and provoked. That’s exactly what we need at the moment.

When psychologists, neuroscientists and health professionals bamboozle us with endless studies about the addictive properties of screens and the dire consequences of staring at them, and about how our preoccupation with digital devices will bring about the ruination of community life, we should respond, Me too! They may not have heard of it, of course; they usually have little interest in cultural context. But it has been a glory.

If ever we needed an equivalent to jolt us out of our tiredness with killing, it is now.

Ellis Cashmore is the author of "Elizabeth Taylor," "Beyond Black" and "Celebrity Culture." He is honorary professor of sociology at Aston University and has previously worked at

the universities of Hong Kong and Tampa.

To End Gun Violence, We Need Concrete Reform

Kyrah Simon

March 15, 2018

Kyrah Simon, a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and a survivor of the February 14 shooting, weighs in on the debate around gun reform.

As a survivor of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, gun violence has become personal to me. It was an issue that upset me before, but was too distant from my life to really matter. Now it has taken the life of my friend of over 10 years, Helena Ramsay, and 16 other innocent people. For myself, the only way to move forward is to establish concrete gun reform.

Following the shooting, my community and I personally have struggled to maintain normalcy. My high school has been transformed into a cemetery. The city of Parkland is swarmed by police vehicles and has become the topic of every news headline in the nation.

The attack has garnered insurmountable grief. Speaking for myself and possibly other students, I feel a sense of overwhelming anxiety and sadness returning back to campus. Helena's empty desk is a reminder that I will never see her again, and it is a painful reality that I am unsure I can accept.

This goes for all of the victims: Their absence on campus is simply unbearable.

I initially feared that Parkland would become a tragedy pitied by the American public and then swiftly forgotten. I feared that it would spark a debate that would quickly dissipate. I feared that people would return back to their lives and worry about which celebrity was pregnant, which of their favorite television shows were canceled or what political scandal had surfaced. I believe that this time is different. The nation is expressing its outrage online, and media outlets are placing less attention on the shooter and more on the very issues that must be addressed. I believe that we finally have a captivated audience.

Laws must be put in place to rid our country of these massacres. Florida has one of the most lenient gun laws in the US. Here, it is too easy to get hold of a rifle. At the age of just 19, Nikolas Cruz was able to purchase an AR-15 and take innocent lives with astounding ease. Although he was mentally disturbed, the real issue is how he was able to access such a destructive weapon in the first place. He blasted apart walls and ripped into the flesh of human beings with less than a thought. From Newtown to Orlando and now Parkland, the AR-15 remains the weapon to blame, yet it can still be bought over the counter. Why?

It is because of organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA) that

defend the Second Amendment. Their representatives, such as spokeswoman Dana Loesch, have labeled the shooting as a mental-health issue and any criticism of gun accessibility as a liberal-led attack on their freedoms.

The NRA's power is intertwined with our government. The pockets of numerous conservative politicians are laced with NRA funds and, in effect, they push for lenient gun laws and drown out the voices of those in opposition. The NRA hand picks politicians and financially supports their campaigns, expecting compensation for their contributions in votes. During the 2016 presidential elections, Donald Trump received over \$30 million in NRA contributions, Senator Marco Rubio over \$9,000. Similarly, Florida Governor Rick Scott has been a long-time advocate for gun rights and has an A+ rating from the NRA.

I will forever hang on to the belief that as long as I and my fellow classmates use our voices, we will be able to pass stronger gun reforms and ensure that this never happens again. For Helena, for all of the victims and for the children afraid to step foot in school, I will push for a better future.

Kyrah Simon is a high school junior interested in politics and racial relations. She may not be the loudest voice in the US gun reform movement, but a persistent voice speaking out since the Ferguson shooting in 2014.

Trump in Ottawa and Singapore: The World Turned Upside Down

Gary Grappo
June 13, 2018

The American president hasn't just turned his back on and disparaged his country's strongest allies — he embraced one of its worst sworn enemies.

Legend has it that in 1781, at the formal surrender ceremony following George Washington and the American revolutionaries' decisive defeat of the British Army under Lord General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, the British Army band struck up the now famous — or perhaps infamous for some — ballad. Britain was the global power of the time. Yet, it had been defeated by a ragtag army of farmers, merchants and shop-owners led by a handful of professional soldiers. America has been turning the world upside down ever since.

In 1945, following a half-century of world wars, the Great Depression, a genocide, a holocaust and a run of revolutions on several continents, America helped turn the world right side up, bringing together nations to establish a rules-based, international order to ensure peace, stability and prosperity. Now joined by well over 100 nations, that effort has largely lived up to its potential, though not without hardship and challenges. The one constant that the world could count on — nearly always — for those

nearly 75 years was that America would be there to stand for stability, peace, human rights, free trade and the rules-based order.

Strike up the band again! Donald Trump's America appears to be upending that — and in the span of less than one week. Trump first dissed America's closest allies and best friends at the G-7 Summit in Ottawa, including France, which had dispatched its navy and army to fight with the Americans at Yorktown. They also include Britain and Canada — yes, even Canada — as well as post-World War II allies Germany, Japan and Italy. The world was left aghast.

Days later in Singapore, he met with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, leader of the world's best known pariah state. There Trump employed his self-touted dealmaker skills to schmooze, cajole and even pander to the world's most brutal dictator. Granted, his objective was vital and even noble — to denuclearize the unpredictable and threatening Hermit Kingdom. But following a meeting of less than two hours, including a 45-minute one-on-session, he announced “a very special bond with Kim” and even declared, “I do trust him, yeah.”

POLITICAL WHIPLASH

The American president didn't just turn his back on and disparage his country's strongest allies; he embraced one of its worst sworn enemies. Following Ottawa, Trump went into attack mode, tweeting

that the US gets “unfairly clobbered” on trade despite “protecting Europe at great financial loss.” Then in Singapore, when pressed by one journalist at the post-meeting press conference about trust and verification of Kim's denuclearization pledge (lavishly praised by Trump), the president seemed to shrug it off. “Can you ensure anything?” America won't trust its best friends to settle trade differences, but it can accept the pledge of an avowed enemy to eliminate its nuclear weapons. Sorry Mr. Reagan, “trust, but verify” is just old-style diplomacy. Now America has a president who “alone can fix it.”

For imagined and contrived offenses Trump and his administration admonish friends who are members of vital security alliances with the US and enjoy top ratings for their human rights records. But for the man who violated all international laws to produce and amass dozens of nuclear weapons, executed his uncle by firing squad, ordered a murder-for-hire hit on his half-brother and operates gulags across the country for an estimated 80,000 to 130,000 citizens for offenses against the “dear respected comrade” he has a “special bond” and anoints him “honorable.”

He wasn't done either. In his meeting with Kim, Trump promised to suspend joint US-South Korean exercises, a cornerstone of the US-South Korean defense alliance. The offer to Kim was neither agreed nor discussed with America's two staunchest allies in the Western Pacific, Japan and South Korea. (It was a really bad week for

Japan, first the gut punch in Ottawa followed by the sucker punch in Singapore.) Yet, one of Trump's many criticisms of his predecessor's nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 was that then-President Barack Obama had failed to adequately consult with and receive input from US allies, i.e., the Gulf States and Israel. His apparently spontaneous offer to Kim flies in the face of his earlier reproaches of Obama.

Trump's supporters assert that the American people voted for him to "shake things up." Starting with their revolution, Americans are not averse to shaking things up; it's in their DNA. But the shaking mustn't mean destroying, wiping the chessboard clean with nothing to replace it. It must be accompanied by shaping things up, too. That is presenting a strategy for genuinely addressing challenges. Trump has the shaking part but so far none of the shaping.

He cannot turn the world upside down and then fail to offer a replacement strategy for ensuring core interests of his country and of others — peace, security, stability and economic prosperity — and core values of liberty, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights are preserved. For that, it isn't only American policies and actions that are necessary. As the pre-1945 era tragically demonstrated, America needs allies and friends to stand with it in pursuit of these shared goals.

Some may proffer that Trump does have an alternative strategy. It's called

"America First." He's not outlined exactly what that includes. But more important, he and his supporters must understand what it means. First, this approach will place the US on the same level of other self-serving great and near-great powers, most especially China and Russia, and also would-be challengers like Iran and even Turkey. Second, in such a scenario the world enters into a new era of great power rivalry and competition for greater control — political, economic and military — as occurred in the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Third, the great powers then seek and recruit smaller states to form respective spheres of influence and then wait for opportunities to cleave off portions of a rival's sphere.

The US, isolated geographically in North America, will be at a disadvantage. The rules-based order — the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court and other recognized international and regional bodies currently in place to resolve conflict — will have little sway. The scenario leads to inevitable conflict as it did with the First and Second World Wars. Only in the early 21st century, the great powers — and even lesser ones — have nuclear, chemical, biological and cyber weapons never imagined in the early 20th.

FAREWELL TO FRIENDS

"America First" becomes America "alone." That cannot be in its own or the international community's interests. Yet

Trump seems to be turning his back on America's allies and best friends, those we typically turn to first in a crisis or conflict for support and consultation. Instead, he embraces the world's best known dictators, autocrats and potentates: North Korea's Kim Jong-un, Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, Saudi Arabia's King Salman, Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte.

Trump can't be faulted for wanting to address trade imbalances that may disadvantage the US and American workers. But must he villainize governments that hold the same interests and values as the US? Neither can he be faulted for reaching out to Kim. It was a strategic necessity as is diplomacy with all real and perceived adversaries. But must he embrace and exalt him and others who represent all that the US has stood against since its founding? Are these to be America's new friends and allies?

The shaking up is easiest. It's the shaping up — the formulating of strategies, the securing of allies and the actual building — that is the most difficult. And in that, Trump is showing precious little capacity. His country and the world are the worse for it.

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possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private and nonprofit endeavors. As a career member of the Senior Foreign Service of the US Department of State, he served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative, the Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, in Jerusalem. Grappo is chairman of the Board of Directors at Fair Observer.

Midterm Elections 2018: The War for America's Soul

Atul Singh

November 6, 2018

Even as pundits predict and pontificate, the midterm elections are only yet another battle for the commanding heights of America's torn soul.

In Silicon Valley, the sun is shining and it does not seem as if the US midterm elections are taking place. This author meets few people who discuss or care much about politics or the elections. In this post-truth world created by social media, some still have the hubris to declare that their app is the best way to change the world. In their view, politics is too messy and it is a waste of time to meddle with intractable problems involving the government.

In other parts of the US, the elections have a more real feel. The New York Times has declared the battle for Congress to be close. The Washington Post analyzes five possible scenarios for Election Day. In his analysis of the

election, Jon Sopel of the BBC declares that the midterm elections “are ALL about Donald Trump.” Sopel has a point. With the bully pulpit of the White House at his disposal, Air Force One to ferry him around and 55 million followers on Twitter, President Trump is proving to be a formidable and an indefatigable campaigner.

Historically, sitting presidents suffer in midterm elections. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama found their wings clipped after Americans placed their opponents in the US Congress. Opinion polls indicate that this pattern might be repeated and Democrats might regain control of the House of Representatives, if not the Senate. Pundits opine that the “pink wave” of a record number of women candidates might sweep aside a president with a reputation for racism and misogyny. Yet they might be missing two key facts.

FACT ONE: “THE ECONOMY, STUPID”

The “dark genius” James Carville coined the phrase, “the economy, stupid” in the 1992 presidential campaign in which unheralded Bill Clinton dethroned George H.W. Bush. The elder Bush was by far the more qualified candidate, but maverick candidate Ross Perot and an economic downturn brought his downfall. In 2018, Carville’s slogan still holds true.

Culturally, America is one of the most capitalist societies on the planet. Not only years of indoctrination courtesy the

Cold War, but also the structure of its economy make it uniquely consumerist, materialist and exceedingly capitalist. The US has no National Health Service à la its Anglo-Saxon mother ship, the UK. Decent health care is tied to one’s job. College fees remain frighteningly high. Childcare is prohibitively expensive.

Cash is truly king in the US and even dating apps are no exception. Premium members, who pay to play, can swipe till the cows come home, while freeloaders suffer a rationing of choices. An Arab friend, who wishes to remain unnamed, remarked aptly, “In Amreeka, everything is for sale.” So, money matters immensely in the land of the free and the home of the brave because Americans cannot lean on the state, the community or the family as in other parts of the world. And Trump has cut taxes, leaving families with more money in their pockets.

Furthermore, the American economy is humming along quite nicely. Trump can make the argument that solid growth, good job figures, rising consumer confidence, booming stock markets and huge pools of capital flocking into the US are making America great again. When Americans get around to casting their ballots on November 6, they might worry that voting for the Democrats might jeopardize if not derail a flourishing economy. Therefore, they might tell pollsters one thing, but end up doing another. “The economy, stupid” brought Clinton to power. Soon, we will

know if it will help Trump retain his hold on power.

FACT TWO: THOSE PESKY IMMIGRANTS

The US is an immigrant society. Most of the original inhabitants are conveniently dead or in reservations like endangered animals in a zoo. Wave after wave of immigrants, largely from Europe, have come to American shores and, for many, the Statue of Liberty defines the identity of this immigrant nation.

As journalist Annalisa Merelli brilliantly chronicles, fears of immigrants go back all the way to Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Even before the formation of the US, Franklin worried that German immigrants might not assimilate well and strain the social fabric of Pennsylvania. Worries about the Irish, the Jews and, in particular, the Chinese have reared their heads from time to time. In the late 19th century, the populist movement shut the door to Chinese immigration, which only opened again during World War II.

Fears of unrestricted immigration run high in the US. Not only Republicans but also Democrats have told this author that such immigration depresses wages in the US. Mexican immigrants do the hardest jobs in the US for a pittance. Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist and son of a blue collar Democrat, points out that this suppresses wages, hurts "the deplorables" and benefits "the party of

Davos." Many find more than an element of truth in Bannon's argument.

The migrant caravan that is headed from the Guatemala-Mexico border to the Mexico-US one is triggering subliminal fears among millions of Americans. President Trump has responded by sending 5,200 troops to the border, an active-duty force comparable in size to the American military contingent in Iraq. This is the first time after the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 that troops are back on the border.

That war ended with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and "Mexico ceded 55 percent of its territory, including parts of present-day Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Nevada, and Utah, to the United States." This time, American troops are on the defense, not offense. Their goal is to save their country from a flood of poor Hispanic immigrants.

Trump played on this fear of mass immigration from south of the border by tweeting a clever video that portrays an illegal immigrant smiling with glee and expressing no remorse for killing two policemen. It shows hordes of immigrants streaming toward the US and ends with a rallying cry, "Making America Safe Again!"

WHAT NEXT?

Regardless of how Americans vote in the midterms, the fundamental problems of American society will persist for now.

As of now, Democrats are still haunted by the Clintons who simply refuse to go away. They have no new ideas on student debt, education, health care, inequality, defense policy and even the environment. An Ivy League cabal of princelings rules the roost in the party that claims to represent the poor and the oppressed. And hysterical political correctness has become the refuge of its leaders, the vast majority of whom cannot think beyond clichés and sound bites.

On the other side, gun-loving and abortion-opposing Republicans have lost their cojones. Trump has conducted a hostile takeover of the party of free trade and imposed mercantilism on it. He has hugged the Saudis ever closer, damned Iran and castigated the European Union. So far, there has been no pushback from the Grand Old Party of virtuous family values to any of Trump's actions that militate against its long-cherished values.

In 2018, both parties have lost their souls. In the long run, it does not matter who wins the battle for Congress. The midterm elections are just yet another battle in a long-drawn-out war between rival values, visions and interests for America's soul. The haves and have-nots, creditors and debtors, the secular and the religious, the urban and the rural, and so on and so forth are no longer speaking with each other. People increasingly live in echo chambers and are intolerant of those they disagree with. The common bonds that civilize society and enable democracy are

frayed. Only reasoned discourse, not frenzied demagoguery, will reknit these bonds and end the bitter war for America's soul.

Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. He studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School. Singh worked as a corporate lawyer in London and led special operations as an elite officer in India's volatile border areas where he had many near-death experiences.

California Wildfires: It's Time to Tackle the Root of the Problem

Steve Westly

November 23, 2018

The real solution to reducing California's wildfires lies in building a world-class economy that moves off carbon-based fuels to sustainable energy.

Smoky skies and incinerated homes from wildfires are becoming the new normal in the United States and other countries throughout the world. Bad luck alone is not to blame. Climate change is

creating drier weather and is dissipating the snow packs that feed our rivers throughout the year. This creates deadly fire conditions. Worse yet, it now costs 12 times what it did in 1985 to fight these fires, draining state and local budgets. Californians know that we are on the cutting edge of dealing with this problem. We need to get smart about how to be on the cutting edge of solving it. Here are four things our government and utilities should be doing now.

First of all, improved forest management: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and wildfire management is no different. We can start by taking concrete steps to thin our forests. This requires that we increase the logging of smaller-diameter trees that are kindling for enormous fires. We also need to increase the area in which California allows controlled burns. Governor Jerry Brown took a major step toward this with an executive order doubling the area where forest growth can be thinned with controlled burns. Governor-elect Gavin Newsom should follow his example, further increasing the area where the state allows controlled burns.

Secondly, smart watershed management: Over one-third of California's land is forested, and these forests house the vast majority of the watersheds that hold snow mass and provide water for the state well into the spring. The same poor forest management that enable major wildfires — such as allowing excessive vegetation density and overpopulation of

small trees and brush — also causes the degradation of these watersheds. We should proactively manage the watersheds by reforesting areas that capture snow and doing controlled burns. Smarter management can substantially reduce wildfire exposure.

Thirdly, utility companies also need to make fire prevention a priority. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection determined that PG&E's power lines caused 16 of the Wine Country fires that killed 44 people and caused \$10 billion in damages last year. Here is what utilities can do to be part of the solution. First, PG&E and other companies need to use new technologies such as geospatial data to ensure tree limbs are not making contact with power lines. Low cost, high-resolution satellite imagery and drone technologies will make this traditionally difficult task much easier. Second, early fire detection and early warning to residents is essential. New technologies using LiDAR are available today that can detect fires within minutes. Utility companies also need to take a proactive role in more quickly using massive text/cell phone warning to do earlier evacuations. Third, every utility should follow San Diego Gas and Electric's and PG&E's lead by conducting strategic blackouts during high-wind events to reduce the risk of power line ignitions.

Common sense and preventative solutions are an important step to reducing wildfires, and California should lead in each of these areas. But

California's most important contribution to stopping wildfires will be to continue to lead the world in stopping what is causing wildfires — global warming. We are doing this by creating an economy built on sustainable energy. In the 1970s, Californians passed catalytic converter legislation requiring automakers to make cleaner cars. Within a decade, every automaker in the world had retooled assembly plants to meet the regulations. Similarly, in 2015, the California legislature passed a law requiring utilities to produce 50% renewable energy from our electric grid by 2030. Critics scoffed, but we will meet that goal 10 years early.

No one wants more fires. We know how to reduce their likelihood and severity, but the real solution lies in building a world-class economy that moves off carbon-based fuels to sustainable energy. That's a race we should all want California to win.

Steve Westly is the founder of The Westly Group, a large sustainability venture capital firm, and previously served as the controller and chief fiscal officer of the State of California from 2003 to 2007.
