

A high-contrast, black and white close-up photograph of a man's face in profile, looking towards the left. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the contours of his nose and cheek. The background is blurred, showing another person's face in a similar pose.

# Fair Observer

Monthly

March 2017

**FAIR** OBSERVER<sup>o</sup>  
the sense of the world

# Fair Observer Monthly



March 2017

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# CONTENTS

<b>About Fair Observer</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Share Your Perspective</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Fair Observer Quarterly</b> Atul Singh	<b>7</b>
<b>Donald Trump Should Look to Africa</b> Anthony Orlando	<b>9</b>
<b>It's Time to Make in India</b> Ankita Mukhopadhyay	<b>11</b>
<b>Breitbart News and the Return of Partisan Journalism</b> Prashanth Bhat	<b>14</b>
<b>An Indian Revolution: From Indira's Congress to BJP's Modi</b> Manu Sharma and Atul Singh	<b>21</b>
<b>Conspiracy Theory in a Post-Fact World</b> Peter Isackson	<b>26</b>
<b>The Fall of North Korea</b> Sebastien Smith	<b>29</b>
<b>After NAFTA: New Trade Opportunities for Mexico</b> Daniel Kapellmann	<b>31</b>
<b>King Salman's Return to Brunei Two Decades Later</b> Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik	<b>34</b>
<b>Defeating Systemic Corruption: Colombia's Next Major Challenge</b> Glenn Ojeda Vega	<b>42</b>
<b>Anti-Corruption Protests in Russia Gain a New Momentum</b> Lincoln Pigman	<b>45</b>

# 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.

We provide context, analysis and multiple perspectives on world news, politics, economics, business and culture. Our multimedia journal is recognized by the US Library of Congress with International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) 2372-9112.

We have a [crowdsourced journalism model](#) that combines a wide funnel with a strong filter. This means that while anyone can write for us, every article we publish has to meet our editorial guidelines. Already, we have more than [1,800 contributors](#) from over 70 countries, including former prime ministers and Nobel laureates, leading academics and eminent professionals, journalists and students.

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# Fair Observer Monthly

Atul Singh

March 31, 2017

In the northern hemisphere, this is the month of spring in many parts of the world. After surviving the winter, life returns with vivacity and vigor. Both these qualities were in ample supply in an eventful March.

At the beginning of the month, the chief executive officer of Uber got into trouble for behaving a touch rudely with a driver. The incident itself was relatively innocuous, but it touched upon issues that have largely been swept under the rug. The new economy pioneered by Silicon Valley has winners and losers. It has led to monopoly power for the likes of Google, Facebook and Uber. It might have led to greater efficiency, but it has also led to inequity. Blaming the charioteers of these big companies might be fashionable or politically correct, but these poor souls are operating with targets on their back.

The goal for every Silicon Valley boss is to grow. Scaling up is the name of the game. Failure to do so is death. In some ways, they still operate as per the rules of the game that the Dutch came up with. The purpose of the joint stock company is to maximize profits. Today, the fiduciary duty of any corporate boss is profit maximization. Anyone failing to do so loses his or her job. In the US, corporate bosses are like Olympian gods. Steve Jobs is venerated and his many sins are forgotten if not entirely ignored. President Donald Trump has sold his ability to lead on the basis of his track record of success as a real estate tycoon, reality-TV star and billionaire dealmaker par excellence.

Despite its avowedly Christian ideals, the US worships success. It is Darwinian in its mindset. Unlike the ancient Greeks who recognized that even the greatest of heroes could meet with tragic ends, most modern Americans believe that those who fail deserve to do so. The US has taken to heart the iconic 1950 song, "If You're So Smart, How Come You Ain't Rich?"

Underlying this cult of success is an almost religious faith in markets. Just as god does not play dice, markets do not lie. Some are weighed, measured and found wanting. They do not deserve empathy, sympathy or health care. Adam Smith's emphasis on

moral sentiments is lost on Trump's America. It focuses laser-like on success. Hank Paulson was the right man to run the US economy because he was a successful boss at Goldman Sachs. By this logic, Trump is the best man to make America great again because he has acquired money, fame and hot wives.

Even as the US fretted about the poor Uber boss' behavior, British Prime Minister Theresa May pulled the trigger on Brexit. Finally, after years of a rocky marriage, the United Kingdom and the European Union will part ways. The divorce promises to be messy, protracted and painful for all parties.

Three other developments of note occurred this month. First, the scandalous president of South Korea was booted out of office for corruption. This is a glorious triumph for the young South Korean democracy. Second, the Indian prime minister won a historic victory in India's largest state of over 200 million people. This gives him the mandate to reform India's dysfunctional state, but it remains to be seen if he has the aptitude or the appetite for long-overdue reforms. Third, the Dutch voted for their calm and composed prime minister, striking a blow against the far right. Yet politics in the Netherlands has shifted to the right. As Bob Dylan sang in 1964, "the times they are a-changin'."

*\*Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.*



# Donald Trump Should Look to Africa

Anthony Orlando

March 3, 2017

*As a businessman and president, Trump should encourage investment in Africa.*

It is no secret that President Donald Trump prides himself on being a dealmaker. It is a point he used time and time again during his presidential campaign to demonstrate why the United States should [withdraw from Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) negotiations, rework the [North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA), and compete against perceived [currency manipulation in East Asia](#). Trump suggested he would put “[America first](#)” and negotiate better deals.

Although it may sound counterintuitive at first, the president’s nationalist vision for the US can be brought together with international engagement and development through investing in Africa. Greater private sector investment in Africa will spur long-term development while bringing jobs, profits and influence to the United States in a way that is compatible with Trump’s conservative values.

## BEIJING MOVES TO AFRICA

Many in the international development community feel that Trump’s turn inward is a sign that America’s development initiatives might fall by the wayside. The refugee ban and “global gag rule” [enacted by executive orders in Trump’s first week](#) as president suggest he is not a fan of the traditional development infrastructure. Conversely, the [reported](#) resignations of more than half of his Global Development Council suggests that the traditional development infrastructure is not a fan of him either. But this does not mean opportunities do not exist, and the Trump administration could learn a lot from one of the president’s greatest rivals, China.

China serves as an example of successful investment in Africa. China’s direct foreign investment flow to the continent [steadily increased](#) from \$2.2 billion in 2012 to \$3.1 billion in 2014. Chinese companies are encouraged by the government, which also fully or partially owns companies across every major industry, to “go out” into the world. China has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Africa—from roads to dams to power plants.

The recent opening of the multibillion-dollar, [Chinese-funded Ethiopia-Djibouti railway](#) is an example of how investments lead to improved transportation and economic cooperation. These investments in turn lead to more capital generated, which is better for the economies of everyone involved in the long run.

The US should no longer let China take the lead on these initiatives. On the whole, Africans see China as a greater external influence over their continent than the United States, and [63%](#) of them see Beijing as a “somewhat” or “very” positive.

The top contributing factor to this positive image is unequivocally investments in infrastructure and business development. Thus, if President Trump is serious about improving America’s standing in the world, this is an area in which the US should compete.

The United States can increase its standing with Africans by deploying official envoys, as well as using business as a source of soft power. Simply put, investments will build relations and goodwill across the continent. Increasing business relations is not only good for America’s image, but investment on the continent has also proven to provide [high rates of return and a bright, long-term outlook for the continent](#).

This positive effect also adds to profits, jobs and new markets for the US. Investing in Africa is not as risky a bet as many Americans assume, and a healthy dose of competition between the world’s two largest economies will spur progress.

As president, there are numerous US government agencies that Trump can tap to start working toward this goal, including the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, Import-Export Bank, and the United States Trade and Development Agency (USTDA). Each of these agencies are mandated to assist US companies to invest overseas, and the USTDA has a focus on developing large-scale energy, transportation and telecommunications projects. Since its founding in 1992, the USTDA “[generated over \\$56 billion in US exports, supporting an estimated 300,000 US jobs](#).”

## **GET TO WORK**

Since President Trump also sees himself as a Washington outsider, he can push these initiatives in the same way he did as a developer and construction mogul: leverage his

network, name and now official standing to encourage private businesses to invest in this part of the world. Encouraging businesses to make long-term investments in Africa will bring money back to US shores, spur the American and African economies, and expand Washington's influence in the world.

Donald Trump is a developer, and he should do just that: develop. Trump can utilize his strengths as both a businessman and president to encourage American companies to invest on the African continent. He should encourage companies to go, bring the capital and know-how, drive a hard bargain, ensure the United States benefits and get to work.

*\*Anthony Orlando is an Africa fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.*

## It's Time to Make in India

Ankita Mukhopadhyay

March 6, 2017

*The Make in India campaign is an attempt to encourage foreign investment and manufacturing in the country.*

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over the reins from his predecessor Manmohan Singh in 2014, he made it very clear that he was a man with a purpose: to make India a [global manufacturing hub](#) that would attract foreign investment. The first step he took in this direction was to give a [100% allowance to foreign direct investment](#) (FDI) in many key sectors. This means that a foreign company can now easily set up shop in India, without requiring an Indian partner.

Then he launched a flagship program—Make in India—to encourage investment in sectors such as aviation, automotive, steel and defense. Modi's India finally seems to be walking toward a future where the traditional reliance on red-tape and high-level bureaucracy is fading in the minds of foreign investors.

If India gets rid of the various obstacles posed to investment in the country, it will become a profitable venture for companies, for it has an excess availability of labor. With over [80% of youth showing an interest in engineering](#)—the highest in the world—

India has the potential to blast its way into the league of developed nations in the coming decades. India also has four zones of production, forming an axis across the country: Delhi-Gurgaon-Noida in the north; Mumbai-Pune in the west; Jamshedpur-Kolkata to the east; and Bangalore-Chennai-Hyderabad to the south. However, many factors hinder the success of Make in India.

## **BUYING LAND AND MANAGING LABOR**

India allows 100% foreign direct investment in crucial sectors such as automotive and pharmaceutical industries. Earlier, carmakers such as Japan's Suzuki Motor Corp had to reach out to an Indian partner such as Maruti to invest and manufacture in India. Now, that roadblock has been removed by the Modi government. But the biggest problem plaguing large companies is the availability of land, production facilities and labor unions.

In September 2016, Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, said that she was in talks with BMW, a premium automaker, to open a manufacturing plant in the state. The road ahead is tough: Less than half a decade ago, [Tata Motors was pushed out of West Bengal](#) after completing construction of its factory after Banerjee alleged the land was illegally procured from farmers.

West Bengal also has a chequered history of labor strikes, which reduce productivity, and it [lacks proper access to production sites](#) in south India, from where parts for sedans and sports utility vehicles need to be procured, reducing cost-effectiveness. Buying land alone doesn't reduce problems in India: Maruti-Suzuki's Manesar plant, in the northern state of Haryana, [faced losses of over \\$375.2 million](#) in 2011-12, with a 6% fall in market share, after permanent and contract workers went on strike three times to demand better working conditions.

Coupled with these issues is the tussle between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition, the Indian National Congress party, over the [2013 Land Acquisition Act](#). According to the tenets of the act, the government can acquire land for certain infrastructural and developmental projects. But it is difficult for the central government to find a foreign partner in its projects amid such uncertainty.

## **WHERE IS THE MONEY?**

India has 29 states, each autonomous in its own way while still being part of the nation. This structure has spiraled into a multistoried taxation system, with each state implementing its own system, creating a problem for every manufacturer transferring/procuring parts from another state. While the Indian government is trying to fix this through a uniform goods and services tax (GST), scheduled to be implemented very soon, there is still [uncertainty](#) as to its uniform implementation.

Currently, the presence of a toll tax hinders mobility between states. The Indian government has also withdrawn the [exemption on payment of a minimum alternate tax](#) (MAT) on special economic zones (SEZ)—an area demarcated with relaxed financial policies. This has considerably reduced activity in the regions, hindering investment and production.

For investment, India needs infrastructure, for which, in turn, it needs money. In February 2016, [India's bad loans](#) totaled \$60 billion, with a large proportion coming from the corporate sector. State-controlled banks, like the State Bank of India, are still mired in losses, with a stronger bankruptcy law for smoother closure of companies yet to be passed.

According to an employee working with a top automotive firm in India, Make in India has turned the country into an assemblage platform for vehicles, but the reputation for Indian-made vehicles is still low. For example, [Suzuki launched its Indian-made Baleno sedan in Japan](#) last year and had to specifically iterate that “there was no problem with quality” to encourage customers to buy the car.

India still has a long way before a scheme like Make in India can be successful. Rather, Make in India needs to walk a longer road before it sees success. India has a large pool of labor that is still unskilled, and despite availability of land, its status as a largely agrarian economy still hinders the possibility of opening a plant on farmland.

The scheme is ambitious and needs time to grow amid various organizational and bureaucratic changes. The trouble is: Will its short-term shortfalls make any coming change in management reconsider its stance on the scheme?

*\*Ankita Mukhopadhyay is a journalist based in New Delhi, India.*

# Breitbart News and the Return of Partisan Journalism

Prashanth Bhat

March 9, 2017

*The popularity of Breitbart among conservative voters is an outcome of a long-term right-wing campaign against the progressive media.*

The 2016 presidential campaign was arguably the most divisive and polarized in modern American history. The election of a demagogue like Donald Trump to the White House not only exposed deep-rooted racial fault lines that continue to persist in American society, but also shed light on the economic resentment and cynicism that have been simmering in many parts of rural and suburban America.

Trump ran a campaign that was filled with hateful and xenophobic rhetoric that will most likely have far-reaching consequences on the larger public discourse in the United States. At the receiving end of his spiteful rhetoric were not only immigrants and minorities, but also journalists and the mainstream media. His constant branding of media as “biased,” “dishonest,” “rigged” and “[enemies of American people](#)” reinforced the perception of “liberal media bias” among Republican voters, and created an opportunity for the mainstreaming of ultra-conservative media outlets that were hitherto considered fringe.

Prominent among them is Breitbart News Network, a self-proclaimed platform for white nationalists and neo-Nazis. Its chairman, [Steve Bannon](#), who was handpicked by Trump to head his presidential campaign and was later appointed the White House chief strategist, is now perhaps one of the most powerful people in the country.

The mainstreaming of ultra-conservative and propagandist outlets like Breitbart is ironic because for years the US had prided itself as the global champion for the rights of journalists and positioned itself as the harbinger of professional values in the field. These values have come to be known as Anglo-American model of journalism and have influenced many media systems around the world. The parallel rise of Trump and Breitbart poses a great challenge to this model.

## HISTORY OF PARTISAN MEDIA IN THE US

The roots of partisan press in America go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the period between the 1780s and 1830s in US history is known as “party press era,” because newspapers back then received patronage from political parties in the form of subsidies and government printing contracts. This era began in 1783, after the end of the American Revolution when the political systems were still nascent and continued all the way until the rise of the [penny press](#) in the 1830s.

During this period, editors and reporters shaped news and editorial content for partisan purposes and even worked part-time for state legislators and US congressmen. Some of them served as spokesmen for political parties. Journalists unabashedly adopted [partisan views](#) such as Federalist or Anti-Federalist, Whig or Democrat, Republican or Democrat.

Newspapers were filled with vituperative commentary, vindictive stories and propaganda to sway public opinion in favor of the political party they were affiliated to. Politicians such as Alexander Hamilton, who used and supported the *Gazette of the United States*, and Thomas Jefferson, an anti-federalist who supported the *National Gazette*, exchanged verbal arrows using their respective publications.

The first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century brought drastic changes in lifestyle, technology and communication systems in the US, which saw increased political participation by the working and middle classes, higher literacy rates and rapid urbanization. These socioeconomic changes led to the rise in demand for newspapers, which in turn led to the production of penny press: cheap newspapers that not only served the male political interests, but also reported on the wider world.

Instead of depending on political parties for revenue, the penny press focused on targeting new audiences and avenues for advertisements, while politicians decreased their financial support to the press and sought other means to reach their voters. Thus, changes in press-party relations in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century redefined news and gave rise to a new era of objective journalism.

In the ensuing years, American journalism witnessed the emergence of a new occupational identity and development of professional ethics thanks to journalists who sought to make their profession more respectable. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalistic



professionalization was institutionalized with the establishment of journalism schools across the US, where future reporters were trained in professional values in addition to the skills required to perform their job.

## **MASS PRESS**

Buoyed by technological innovations such as radio, television and an ever-expanding domestic consumer market, the mass press developed and spread across the US in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Development of technological infrastructure and the consumer market led to the establishment of large advertising agencies and multinational media organizations that saw an opportunity in developing countries for the expansion of their business.

Countries that lagged behind in the development of media systems adopted and absorbed these technologies. In addition to media equipment and investment, much of the developing world imported values of practice that were in vogue in American newsrooms—the notion of objectivity in reporting, fairness, impartiality and balanced reporting, and ethics of newsgathering. At the same time, the high-minded purpose of journalism permeated into the American news consumers' psyche by the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now-standard reporting and interviewing techniques were also first [invented and developed by American journalists](#). US-based news agencies such as Associated Press played a vital role in exporting and disseminating some of these conventions, professional ethics and normative values overseas. Since skilled personnel were required to produce content for mass communication industries to sustain, Western media organizations mostly based in the US offered formal training to non-Western journalists and broadcasters.

When other national media plunged into crisis, as in the former communist countries, American ethics of objectivity were proposed as a model to emulate. Thus, Anglo-American news values influenced and shaped journalistic practices in many parts of the world.

## **CONSERVATIVE CHARGE OF LIBERAL BIAS**



Even as American newsroom conventions and journalistic values were shaping global news reporting practices, conservative leaders and politicians were making investment in think-tanks and journalistic institutions in the United States as a means of moving public debate to the right. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, conservative magazines such as *National Review* and *Human Events* were launched. These became the lifeblood of modern conservatism in the postwar period. During the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, Republicans actively began building a conservative network that included setting up universities, advocacy organizations, journals and media outlets. Many Republicans believed that such networks were crucial in order to win the “[war of ideas](#).”

At the same time, mainstream media’s negative coverage of politicians such as Barry Goldwater and President Richard Nixon increased the right-wing critique of news media. For several years, conservative media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity accused the press of “liberal bias,” which seems to have struck a chord with their core constituents. This is evident from the findings of a study conducted in the 1990s in which over two-fifths (43%) of randomly sampled respondents claimed that [news media exhibited a liberal bias in presidential election coverage](#).

Further, the percentage of the public responding that press treatment of the Republican candidate was unfair increased by 22% during the 1992 campaign and 9% during the 1996 presidential election. The launch of right-leaning Fox News Channel by Rupert Murdoch in 1996 cemented the notion of liberal bias among Republican voters, leading to a gradual decline of their trust in news media. According to a Gallup poll, [Americans’ confidence in media has eroded](#) from a high of 55% in 1998 to 32% in 2016. More significantly, only 14% of Republicans said they trust US media as opposed to 51% Democrats.

The conservative war on news media continues to date. The Trump administration is currently considering [privatizing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#) (CPB), which provides funding for the National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). During the presidential campaign, Trump severely criticized the establishment media of biased reporting and called news reporters “[the lowest form of life](#).” He has threatened to sue *The New York Times* and proposed to change America’s libel laws if elected president. At his rallies, his supporters frequently booed and heckled journalists. His attacks on news organizations were so intense that the Committee to

Protect Journalists (CPJ) had to intervene and pass a resolution declaring Trump “[an unprecedented threat to rights of journalists](#).”

In fact, a Gallup poll speculated that Trump’s aggressive anti-media rhetoric could be one of the plausible reasons why Republicans think so poorly of the media. The popularity of Breitbart among conservative voters is, in many ways, an outcome of this long-term campaign of the right-wing ecosystem against the progressive media.

## **MAINSTREAMING BREITBART**

Diminishing public trust in mainstream media, particularly among conservative voters, and the emergence of new media technologies provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of far-right media portals. Prominent among them include Drudge Report, VDare, The Gateway Pundit, Townhall, Daily Caller, Infowars and Breitbart News Network. While each of them plays a key role in promoting the ideas on the far-right, Breitbart is associated with white ethno-nationalist groups, which were until recently considered fringe elements.

With access to [President Trump’s inner circle](#), Breitbart has grown from being an outlier to a powerful political player in a short span of time. Established by Andrew Breitbart in 2007, the website is now closely aligned with members of the “alternative-right,” or “alt-right”—a term used to describe a group of white nationalists and neo-Nazis whose goal is to preserve “white identity” and “Western civilization.” Broad swaths of the alt-right believe in race-based nationalism and white superiority. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which monitors hate groups in the United States, found members of this group to be frequently advocating for ethnic cleansing, racial separatism, anti-Semitism and acts of violence against minority groups.

In an interview with [Mother Jones](#) in July 2016, Steve Bannon admitted that the website provided a “platform for the alt-right.” The site often features stories that attack Republican elites, foster anti-immigrant sentiment and promote political conspiracy theories. The views expressed on Breitbart are often so extreme that it has been disavowed by every other major conservative news outlet.

Yet in addition to Bannon’s role as Trump’s campaign chief, former Breitbart staffers Julia Hahn and Sebastian Gorka were hired to shape the Trump administration’s

policies. In doing so, Trump mainstreamed what was until then considered extreme even by traditional Republicans.

Trump's contribution to Breitbart's rise is evidenced by its growing popularity on the web. ComScore, an audience-measurement platform, ranked Breitbart 27<sup>th</sup> in the general news category with about 8 million monthly visitors as of October 2014. That same month, Pew Research Center released a survey report according to which only [3% of respondents got their news from Breitbart](#).

However, in June 2015, when Trump announced that he would run for the president, the site was visited by 5.7% of the general news audience, and by the end of the campaign cycle in October 2016, [Breitbart's traffic was at 9% of the market](#), with an estimated 18 million visitors.

Enthused by Trump's victory, Breitbart plans to launch its sites in Germany, Italy and France. It already operates in the United Kingdom, where it gives support to right-wing populist leader Nigel Farage. The move to [expand to Western Europe](#) is seen as an attempt to foment anger and anti-immigrant sentiment in that region. With the appointment of its former staffers to the White House, Trump has legitimized Breitbart and its [bigotry](#), helping to increase its visibility.

The shift of Breitbart and other far-right media outlets from fringe to mainstream marks the return of partisan journalism that was the norm in the United States during the pre-Progressive Era. Partisan papers have now been substituted by websites such as Breitbart. As was the case in the 1830s, Breitbart's content is filled with libelous [exaggeration](#), biased interpretation of facts, [misleading information](#), racist, [anti-Semitic](#) commentary and conspiracy theories—attributes that go against the professional values and journalistic ideals that defined newsroom practices in the US since the Progressive Era.

Such news outlets not only prime citizens' underlying predispositions, but also make them more extreme and divided. In this context, political scientist [Matthew Levendusky writes](#):

*“Active and engaged like-minded viewers are pushed even further to the extremes on the specific issues discussed on partisan media. If these viewers watch regularly, and are moved across a host of issues, then this can put pressure on candidates to take*

*more extreme positions on a number of issues ... Solving problems becomes less about what is best for the country and more about what is politically and ideologically expedient. While partisan media alone do not cause these effects, they certainly exacerbate broader trends towards division, gridlock, and consensus.”*

News is an important contributor to the formation of shared reality and public knowledge. Blatantly partisan outlets such as Breitbart disregard facts and spread conspiracy theories, thereby eroding common understanding from public life. This makes it difficult for lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to arrive at a consensus or find a middle ground on contentious issues.

Worse, such outlets redefine what constitutes news as they substitute facts, good judgment and accurate interpretation of data with “[alternative facts](#),” innuendo and blatant lies.

## **NO EASY SOLUTIONS**

There are no easy solutions to fighting partisan press. Since such outlets take advantage of ethical shortcomings of mainstream news reporting, progressive media can begin with fact-checking every news report to avoid any errors. This is particularly important because even a simple misstep in news reporting would give rabble-rousers like President Trump a chance to delegitimize news media and make it into the story, rather than leave the public to focus on critical questions concerning his administration.

Additionally, to face the twin challenges of declining public trust in journalism and the meteoric rise of the far-right press, progressive media outlets must work toward rebuilding local journalism. Journalists have been accused of being “[coastal media elites](#)” who missed the breadth of support for Donald Trump in rural and suburban areas. Local journalism not only brings to light the stories of disaffected citizens largely ignored by major networks, but also helps reporters regain public trust in institutions of news reporting.

Lastly, journalists must remain committed to the canonical values and professional ethics that have been adopted by newsrooms across the world. Although a few scholars contend that dispensing with the ethics of objectivity is the only way to fight Trump, digression from professional values will only play into the hands of faux

populists and give them an opportunity to further discredit media. Besides, an objective approach secures space for an honest public deliberation outside the partisan spin.

In this context, Kyle Pope, editor-in-chief of the Columbia Journalism Review, [writes](#): “Now a new era needs to begin, a period in which reporting takes precedent over opinion, when journalists are willing to seek out and understand people with whom they may have profound personal and philosophical differences. For decades, centuries even, that has been the definition of journalism.”

Just like the journalists who broke from their parties and embraced modern ethics of objective, independent, accurate and fair reporting during the Progressive Era, it is important for contemporary journalists to deliver a collective response to counter the resurgence and mainstreaming of partisan-press. In doing so, adherence to professional values of journalism is a good starting point.

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# **An Indian Revolution: From Indira's Congress to BJP's Modi**

Manu Sharma and Atul Singh

March 12, 2017

*Narendra Modi has given the opposition a thrashing and emerged as the most powerful Indian leader since Indira Gandhi.*

On March 11, India's rambunctious democracy took a new turn. [Five states](#) had gone to the polls. Of these, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur are relatively electorally insignificant in a country of over [1.2 billion](#) people. Everyone was waiting for the result in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the 800-pound gorilla of Indian democracy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a historic victory in India's most populous state. Over [200 million](#) people now inhabit UP, more than 16% of the Indian population. Even after all the influx of refugees and migrants,

the population of Germany was below [83 million](#) at the end of 2016. The number of people living in the United States was a touch more than [323 million](#) on July 4, 2016.

With its population, size and location, UP has always held the key to power in Delhi. Every pan-Indian emperor from Samudragupta to Akbar rose to power by conquering and controlling UP. Once India won independence in 1947, no Indian prime minister has become powerful without winning elections in UP. Indira Gandhi ruled India like a queen because she had UP in her back pocket or, to use an Indian analogy, tied away in the end of her sari.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

Modi has emulated Indira and won a landslide in UP. While Indira's Congress party won 309 seats in 1980, Modi's BJP has set a new record by winning 312 out of a total of 403. So, what is going on?

First, Modi has short-circuited traditional channels of power that have long held sway in Indian politics. Like India's infamous caste system, power and patronage in the country have been deeply hierarchical. It works like this: The chief minister lords it over his ministers. They in turn like bureaucrats to kowtow to them. These bureaucrats then dispense goodies to relatives, loyalists and favorites of their political masters. They dip their hands in the cookie jar in the process.

Power brokers play an important role in this traditional dispensing of spoils. Industrialists such as those of [the Bombay Club](#) once had the power to make and unmake ministers and even prime ministers. For too many journalists in Delhi have long given up speaking truth to power and focus on brokering deals with the purveyors of power. The [Lutyens' media](#), as this jet set group of journalists is termed, has been in bed for decades with politicians and bureaucrats who operate out of the imposing edifices that Edward Lutyens once designed for the British *Übermensch*.

Not only national but also local power brokers abound. They range from India's fabled holy men to local financiers. The latter bet on candidates and aim to back the winning horse. The entire retinue of such brokers clogs India's political system and ensures that little gets done. With Modi's emergence as prime minister, many power brokers are in hot water. In fact, the prime minister connects directly with the voters, and such



is his popularity that the BJP did not even announce a chief ministerial candidate for UP.

As the BBC rightly points out, the UP election was [a referendum on Modi](#) as prime minister, and the former [chaiwalla](#) (tea seller) has won big time. The very fact that Modi began life as a *chaiwalla* has played to his advantage. He connects directly to the voters. This makes power brokers redundant. It also makes regional leaders of the BJP irrelevant. Modi has inaugurated a new experiment in Indian politics of a de facto presidential style of government within the *de jure* Westminster model of parliamentary democracy—and people are voting for it.

Second, Modi has emerged as a man of action that Indians are so enamored of in their movies. While Barack Obama pitched [the audacity of hope](#), Modi has successfully sold his energy. Voters see him as someone with the clarity of mind and the courage of conviction to implement tough decisions such as [surgical strikes against Pakistan](#) and [demonetization](#) of high-value currency notes. Over the last three decades, such decisiveness has become alien to India. The last bold and decisive leader of India was none other than Indira, who nationalized banks, conducted a nuclear test and broke Pakistan into two during the 1971 war.

Third, Modi is first right-wing politician with several firsts to his credit. The man who began life as a *chaiwalla* is the [first person of a backward caste](#) to head a traditionally Brahmin-led party. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the last BJP prime minister, was a classically educated Brahmin who [wrote poetry and loved culture](#). Modi has little time for such luxuries and is infamous for being a hard driving taskmaster who works round the clock.

For the first time, Modi is marrying the fervor of Hindu nationalism to the [muscle of capitalism](#). As chief minister of Gujarat, Modi pushed forth industrialization and courted foreign investment. In more ways than one, Modi is the Indian version of Margaret Thatcher. Like her, he has taken over a party of the established elite and commandeered it to embrace markets more closely. Like her, he has made the bet that private enterprise is the way forward for the economy. And like Thatcher, Modi believes in a muscular foreign policy backed by a robust military strategy.

Modi is also the first right-wing Indian politician who has been able to set a [benchmark for good governance](#) vis-à-vis his left-wing rivals. He has championed his abilities as

an administrator, while pointing to his rivals' record of corruption, patronage and incompetence. Pre-2013, the BJP was like the Indian cricket team of the 1960s and 1970s with upper caste genteel leaders who lacked the killer instinct. Under Modi, the BJP has turned into a mean if not lean fighting machine.

Unlike Vajpayee, Modi has made the BJP into the natural party of power and transformed himself into the leader of the nation. It helps that his rivals have lost the plot. Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi and leader of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), has been in a hurry to win elections in other states before establishing a track record in Delhi. He wants to run before he can walk and acts not as chief minister of Delhi, but of the entire country. The AAP began with much promise, but is now a one-man band that [has now become a caricature](#) of monumental proportions.

## **SOCIALISM IN INDIA**

The parties of the socialist fold that have produced two of the last five prime ministers are in disarray. When they unite as they did in Bihar, they can still win. But the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are locked in a [fratricidal battle of mutual annihilation](#). Furthermore, they are too narrowly focused on the interests of a few castes and [capturing the Muslim vote](#). This has proved to be their undoing, allowing the BJP to change what the BBC calls "[the social arithmetic of Indian elections](#)."

The SP, until recently the ruling party of Uttar Pradesh, is primarily a [party of Yadavs](#). They are members of the agrarian landholding caste who have taken over the instruments of the state over the years. Identity politics is the name of the game, and caste matters, not merit. While Yadavs get to be illiterate teachers and [dancing policemen](#), the SP buy the Muslim vote by roping in [powerful leaders from the community](#), patronizing the Urdu press and handing out subsidies to Islamic institutions. It is not without surprise that Mulayam Singh Yadav, the founder of SP, is often called [Mullah Mulayam](#).

Apart from identity politics, the SP is infamous as a party of trigger-happy thugs. Even [The Wall Street Journal](#) has reported on SP's "*goonda raj*" (rule of goons) and its wanton record of violence. SP's reputation for brutality is matched only by its record of venality. SP's own legislators such as Mohammad Ziauddin Rizvi have bemoaned that "[corruption is at its peak](#)" in UP with administrative and police officers demanding



bribes even from legislators. Some of this money purportedly goes right to the top in UP. It is little surprise that [one of Yadav's sons drives a Lamborghini](#). Democracy is messy even in America, but it is downright dirty in UP.

In the 1970s, India experienced a great wave of socialism. Leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, Satyendra Narayan Sinha and Karpuri Thakur campaigned against corruption and misrule. Narayan—popularly known as JP—led [the JP movement](#) and the fight against Indira when she assumed dictatorial powers during the Emergency from 1975 to 1977. JP was locked up for his protests and so were thousands of others. These socialists were honest, upstanding and principled. The same cannot be said about their successors.

The socialist parties of northern India have been taken over by landholding agrarian castes. Once, they wanted liberation from the top castes such as Brahmins and Rajputs. Once in office, they developed a taste for power and realized that India's colonial state could serve their selfish interests. Ironically, instead of these landholding castes turning socialist, they have transformed socialist parties into feudal bastions of pelf and patronage.

All of these parties have also turned dynastic. The Indian National Lok Dal is dominated by the Devi Lal clan; the SP by Mulayam Singh Yadav's family; the Rashtriya Janata Dal is run by Laloo Prasad Yadav's household; the Biju Janata Dal is run by Biju Patnaik's son; and the Janata Dal Secular is the fiefdom of the sons of Haradanahalli Doddegowda Deve Gowda, a former prime minister. This is worse than the caviar communism that has made communist parties in India unelectable.

## **SECOND TERM IN 2019**

The election results of March 11 have demonstrated that the Indian opposition is in disarray. The historic Indian National Congress may have won Punjab, but it has no presence in UP. The party's base has largely been decimated and is led by fifth generation scion who lacks ideas, energy and verbal fluency. Rahul Gandhi is a modern-day Louis XVI who lacks the ability to lead, the energy to campaign or the interest to govern.

For all their faults, it is India's socialist parties that are the only challengers to the BJP. They are the only obstacle in the path of Modi and his utter domination of the Hindi

heartland. However, until socialists curb their venality, brutality, nepotism and divisions, the field is clear for Modi for a second term in 2019.

*\*Manu Sharma is a political analyst with an international footprint. Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.*

# Conspiracy Theory in a Post-Fact World

Peter Isackson

March 13, 2017

*The fact that something that contradicts official accounts sounds like a possible conspiracy theory doesn't mean it may not be true.*

It didn't take long, after WikiLeaks rang the opening bell, for the two contestants to reach the center of the ring and start circling and jabbing. On one side, Sean Hannity and his corner man, Rush Limbaugh. On the other, the media loyal to the Democratic Party establishment led by *The Washington Post*. Both appear to be hoping for a quick knockout. The one thing neither contestant in such a combat wants to do is to give the other side or even the public the time to think and observe and thereby discover any apparent weaknesses in one's skills.

The marketing of this event started months ago, when the Democrats began to panic as Hillary Clinton's certainty of winning in November 2016 seemed compromised by her own weaknesses, further highlighted by publication of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails, supplied courtesy of WikiLeaks. When Donald Trump finally prevailed in November, there were two good reasons to implicate the Russians in the email leaks: to explain away the Democrats' singular failure and to weaken Trump's political power by branding him Vladimir Putin's stooge.

## FIGHT OF THE DECADE

This has become the fight of the decade if not century, a fight that has deep implications, possibly even calling into question the status of the deep state. Round one was the presidential campaign. Round two: the election and its immediate aftermath. Round three: the transition. Round four was Trump's occupation of the

White House and first weeks in office. We're now in round five, since the knockout attempt—the announcement by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of its conclusive proof in round three (December)—turned out to be something of a [phantom punch](#), not quite as effective as Muhammad Ali's in the second Sonny Liston fight.

Round five has just started, with new WikiLeaks revelations indicating that the main evidence made public about the source of the DNC leaks may need to be re-examined after discovering that the CIA had acquired the capacity to create false-flag hacking operations. The implications of this are far from clear. We should expect in the coming days or weeks some serious analysis of what this might mean. Investigation, reflection and analysis are in order. But the two champions in the ring will keep punching, as furiously as possible. That's what sporting spectacles of this type are all about. That's how media culture works. And that is what partisan politics has become.

It's fascinating to see how quickly not just debate, but also investigation can be crushed by crying "conspiracy theory." It's one thing to dismantle a conspiracy theory. It's quite another to use the epithet to stop all reflection and investigation. One of the problems with the Russia/DNC affair is precisely the phantom punch, the fact the CIA never revealed any of the evidence it expected the public to believe conclusive. The CIA counted on an act of faith to support its conclusion.

[The Washington Post article](#), only a few days after the WikiLeaks publication, starts with this philosophical thrust: "The best/worst thing about conspiracy theories is that they only need to rely on a shred of evidence, but they can instantly confirm all of your preconceived notions."

The response from the opponent could quite logically be: "The best/worst thing about branding something as a conspiracy theory is that it doesn't even require one shred of evidence."

It's absolutely legitimate to point out that the handlers in the corner of the CIA's opponent, Hannity and Limbaugh, have a reputation for dirty tricks. They can be counted on to create the fiction they want people to believe. But citing their presence in their champion's doesn't allow us to assume that the game has been rigged, that everything they say or do is devious or false.

Even a stopped clock is right twice a day. It's too easy to focus on the messenger and pay no attention to the message. Especially as the actual messenger here is the anonymous source of the WikiLeaks publication—a CIA insider according to the CIA itself—and not the hired actors, Hannity and Limbaugh.

Both sides appear to have acquired the habit of inventing and propagating their own alternative facts. *The Washington Post* makes this incredible point, again expecting its readers to accept it as fact: "Importantly, the conspiracy theory also involves accusing the country's intelligence apparatus of conspiring against the president of the United States—a scandal that, if true, would be without parallel in American history."

Well, there was a precedent, and a far from trivial one: the JFK assassination. The probable truth of which was also silenced by calling all alternatives to the official account—micro-managed by former CIA Director Allen Dulles—a conspiracy theory. There is a mountain of evidence that the Warren Commission chose not to notice pointing in the direction of CIA involvement in that well-orchestrated event, though no official investigation has ever attempted to deal with any of that evidence, except on a piecemeal basis.

As a result, the nature of the CIA's involvement will remain forever cloudy in the history books. But assuming the Warren report is the definitive truth can only be considered an act of pure naivety.

## **REAL CONSPIRACIES**

The simple fact we always need to take on board is that conspiracies actually do exist, however rare they may be. The temptation among the powerful is often too great to resist, especially knowing that controlling public discourse—[perception management](#), [manufactured consent](#)—is the supreme art form mastered by modern politicians. It should, however, be admitted that not all apparent conspiracies actually are conspiracies. But when conspiracies exist, by definition they seek to remain invisible. Some succeed and some don't. Which is why it's important to remain alert.

The fact that something that contradicts official accounts sounds like a possible conspiracy theory doesn't mean it may not be true. Many official stories have been discredited. The Gulf of Tonkin incident or Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass

destruction, a point Trump himself made, to the chagrin of his own party, whose leaders were the ones responsible for that lie and the disastrous war that ensued.

As a matter of elementary logic, we should therefore never use the argument that because the authorities—and in particular the CIA—have examined the evidence and reached what they call a definitive conclusion, anything that contradicts it is a conspiracy theory. And yet that is what is happening once again.

All this should tell us that the best approach is an open mind rather than the reflex of immediately screaming conspiracy to quash all reflection and debate.

“The lady doth protest too much” ... and too soon!

*\*Peter Isackson is the chief visionary officer of SkillScaper and the creator of innovative solutions for learning in the 21st century.*

## The Fall of North Korea

Sebastien Smith

March 17, 2017

*If Secretary Tillerson isn't bluffing, the Kim dynasty's days may be numbered.*

Breaking with what had been a [quiet start to his job](#), US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned on March 17 that the Trump administration might be forced to [take preemptive action](#) “if [North Korea] elevate[s] the threat of their weapons program” to an unacceptable level.

He ruled out any more negotiations with the Hermit Kingdom to freeze its nuclear and missile programs, and declared: “The policy of strategic patience has ended.”

It is hard to imagine the increasingly paranoid [North Korea](#) shrugging off such a statement. Indeed, these are not words to be snuffed at. Tillerson's warning represents the toughest stance against North Korea that a US administration has taken in decades. The quiet American's words may serve as a spark to dramatic and devastating change upon the Korean Peninsula.

## METHOD IN THE MADNESS

Probably by calculation, Tillerson's statement is vague. It is unclear where the Trump administration may draw the line in regard to Pyongyang's weapons program, but that's likely the point: to deter any further progress or to give the United States a chance to strike without warning.

Besides, drawing a line will not matter. Since coming to power in 2011, North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-un has shown no tendency toward compromise on the issue. [Political scientists](#) have often concluded that the north maintains and expands its nuclear program for the country's very survival.

Though not without risk, an arsenal of nuclear weapons prevents the threat of invasion. So wherever a line is drawn, Kim is sure to ignore it. For the regime, a North Korea without nuclear weapons would mean no North Korea at all.

Neither did the secretary of state clarify whether preemptive action would be limited to destabilizing the north's nuclear facilities or committing to a full-scale assault with the aim of regime change.

Again, it may not matter. Even a limited strike would take the region down a path not seen since the Korean War.

If the regime survives a preemptive strike, the retaliation will be devastating for the peninsula. Just 35 miles from the border that separates the two Koreas, Seoul is within a path of destruction. Japan, an old imperialist foe of North Korea, may also find itself within the regime's crosshairs. Sensing an inevitable death, it is unthinkable what vengeance the Kim regime may unleash in its dying days.

If Tillerson really prefers action over strategic patience, then it is of utmost importance that the Trump administration should have a plan to limit the damage. Neither can the administration continue down its unilateral path. North Korea's nuclear facilities must be destroyed immediately and Pyongyang brought down with limited civilian casualties. And the US must cooperate with South Korea to best protect its population. China and Japan, too, will need to prepare for a conflict that could spillover beyond the peninsula. Even in a better turn of events, cooperation and caution is everything. If a limited attack quickly brings down an already unstable Kim dynasty, the US, South Korea and China

will have to confront an exodus of North Korean refugees pouring over the borders. And then there is the question of North Korea's future as a nation state.

Of course, world events seldom take such an optimistic path. Great upheaval, even for the better, comes at great costs.

And [from the U-turn over the One China policy](#) to infuriating a [British intelligence agency](#), the Trump administration has tended to lurch from one foreign policy mishap to another. This is a cause of great concern. For the sake of millions of lives, a crisis on the Korean Peninsula is a test the administration must get right.

It is now North Korea's turn to respond to the US government's new stance. But Tillerson needs to be several steps ahead.

*\*Sebastien Smith is a freelance journalist.*

## **After NAFTA: New Trade Opportunities for Mexico**

Daniel Kapellmann

March 20, 2017

*Mexico currently faces tough negotiations with the United States over the future of the North American Free Trade Agreement.*

At the beginning of January 2017, Ford canceled plans to build a \$1.6-billion car factory in San Luis Potosí, following criticisms by then President-elect Donald Trump. The project was expected to generate 2,800 jobs. Whereas it took some 10 years to negotiate and enforce a mechanism to strengthen commercial bonds between Canada, the United States and Mexico, today, after 23 years in existence, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) may be overrun in just a couple of months.

After US President Donald Trump presented a series of accusations against the Mexican government taking advantage of the treaty clauses, his counterpart, President Enrique Peña Nieto, announced at the beginning of February that no asymmetric

negotiations would be accepted. In parallel, the US government started driving investment out of Mexico through different threat mechanisms that include the announcement of potential tax increases of up to 35% on Mexican imports.

Given the current tensions between both governments in terms of security and trade, collaboration within the North American region may soon suffer robust adjustments. Even though potential modifications to improve NAFTA have been discussed over the past few years, the demands currently presented by the US may lead to an impasse.

## **NEW TRADE OPPORTUNITIES**

Although any reconfiguration of NAFTA is unlikely to take place at least before the end of the year, the Mexican government should be prepared to handle the potential negative effects of this change on its economy. This will be no small feat because at the present time the country is a low-skilled, export-oriented economy tied to the North American market as the [Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators \(SGI\) project analyzes](#) in its latest Mexico report.

Over the past two decades, [trade between Mexico, Canada and the US](#) increased from \$290 billion in 1993 to more than \$1.1 trillion in 2016. Several industries will most likely be affected by a reconfiguration of the current agreement. That includes automobile manufacturing, agriculture, food and beverages, as well as the production of other goods such as electronics and house equipment.

However, in a scenario that sees the suspension of NAFTA, the US is also not likely to be benefited in the long term. The lack of access to cheaper labor and products from the Mexican market may ultimately increase internal costs in the US, thus increasing the price of its products against other competitors such as China.

For this reason, any modifications in the treaty could probably become temporary or limited to certain areas. In spite of all the difficulties that the current reconfiguration of US-Mexican relations could bring along in the worst-case scenario, new doors are opening too, providing relevant opportunities for Mexico to start diversifying its economy and increase trade with countries other than the US.

In fact, as the [SGI shows](#), even before relations with its northern neighbor deteriorated, the Mexican government has actively participated in international trade negotiations to



reduce its dependence on the US. However, the SGI also notes that the Mexican government has had only limited success in this respect.

Given the uncertain future of a favorable agreement between Mexico and the US in terms of trade and labor, the intensification of commerce with South America, Europe and Asia will now most likely become an even greater priority for Mexican policy-makers.

During the first months of 2017, Mexican government started a third round of negotiations to renew its agreement with the European Union and manifested its interest in establishing a new deal with the United Kingdom. Additionally, negotiations related to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP, recently abandoned by the US) seek to strengthen the commercial bonds with Peru, Chile and Colombia. Attention has also been placed in maintaining close communication to exploit mutual interests with Canada and collaborate with Argentina as well as Brazil for obtaining alternative sources of products such as grains.

In the case of Asia, Mexico could seek to increase the flow of goods and services, as well as foreign direct investment with countries such as China, Japan and South Korea. China is currently placed as the second major business partner of Mexico and potential alliances could take place, for example, in the automobile industry.

## **RECONFIGURING THE MEXICAN MARKET**

However, intensification of trade with other regions will not be a simple task. It is not just because of its geographic location that Mexico is such a close trade partner of the US but also because of the complementarity of both economies. For instance, Mexico sends 80% of its manufactured goods across its northern border that are made out of goods that contain up to 40% of goods manufactured in the US.

In order to push for changes, the Mexican government will have to carefully evaluate the strategic redistribution of products between the different regions to avoid potential disruption of production chains. A drastic reconfiguration of the Mexican market could probably strengthen the country's economy, but it would most likely represent a complicated and long process in case NAFTA negotiations reach an impasse.

Although in the short term the Mexican economy may suffer temporary contractions, following these strategies would ultimately support the country to expand and become more independent through the establishment of stronger ties with other nations. It seems that there are alternative paths that may also lead to making the southern part of North America great.

*\*Daniel Kapellmann is a graduate student and a consultant.*

# King Salman's Return to Brunei Two Decades Later

Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik

March 20, 2017

*Saudi Arabia and Brunei are likely to bring their bilateral relationship to new heights as both nations face the challenge of transforming their economies away from oil and gas.*

Earlier this month, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud became the first Saudi monarch to visit the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, spending one day in this Southeast Asian Muslim-majority country 20 years after his first visit as the then-governor of Riyadh. As part of his three-week Asia tour, King Salman went to Brunei as well as China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and the Maldives, with the expressed intention to boost the kingdom's investment, commercial, security and cultural relations with Asian states, including four Muslim-majority nations. Although his visit to the monarchy in Borneo was brief, it was significant for several reasons.

The Saudi king met with Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, the sultan of Brunei, who also serves as prime minister, finance minister, defense minister and supreme commander of the armed forces. Both heads of state agreed to deepen Riyadh and Bandar Seri Begawan's cooperation on a host of global and regional issues, [especially counterterrorism](#).

The sultan of Brunei [thanked King Salman for making](#) his "important and historic visit" and hailed the "continuous, fraternal, friendly and bilateral relations binding" the kingdom and the sultanate. Before the Saudi king departed for his vacation in Bali, the

two monarchs agreed to deepen cooperation in the spheres of trade, investment, education, culture, youth and sports. The Saudi and Bruneian leaders highlighted the importance of strengthening bilateral cooperation in political, military, security and Islamic affairs.

Shortly before King Salman visited the sultanate, Brunei's ambassador to Riyadh, Hisham bin Abdul Aziz, [stated](#) that the Saudi monarch was visiting the Southeast Asian country due to its important location in the Asia Pacific and its membership in both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Jeddah-headquartered Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The ambassador asserted that the two countries share views on international issues, have common visions and are united in their rejection of extremism.

This rhetoric may seem to be standard diplomatic prose. Yet Saudi Arabia and Brunei are indeed aligned, and a growing relationship is bringing the kingdom and the sultanate closer to the point that Saudi Arabia can influence Brunei media. Five months ago, this was clear when Saudi Arabia's unhappiness with the Bruneian press' reporting on Hajj politics resulted in the sultan shutting down *The Brunei Times*, which claimed that [Saudi officials were raising Hajj and Umrah visas](#) because of the kingdom's economic problems.

## **SAUDI ARABIA-BRUNEI RELATIONS**

The history of the kingdom and the sultanate's relationship took off gradually and modestly. Saudi Arabia opened its [embassy in Brunei](#) at the level of chargé d'Affairs in 1995. Two years later, King Salman, as the then-governor of Riyadh, became the [first Saudi royal to visit Brunei](#). In 2001, the two governments upgraded relations and signed an agreement of cooperation in tourism and joint investments in gas, oil, petrochemicals, health, agriculture and livestock. Six years later the agreement finalized, leading to the development of an increasingly positive bilateral relationship.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations 22 years ago, Sultan Bolkiah has visited the Saudi Arabia on [two occasions](#), meeting King Fahd in 1998 and King Abdullah in 2011. These two trips to the kingdom came at pivotal times in Brunei's development. The sultan's meetings with both Saudi monarchs focused on Islamic and global issues. During the 2011 meeting, Riyadh sought Bruneian investment in one of

the “Six Saudi Economic Cities” plan as part of [then-King Abdullah’s economic program](#).

## **SAUDI VISION 2030 VERSUS VISION BRUNEI 2035**

Saudi Arabia and Brunei’s plans for transforming their economies away from energy dependence are similar. Like Saudi Arabia, Brunei’s long-term [economic challenge is to decrease its reliance](#) on the gas and oil sectors, which are responsible for 98% and 93% of national exports and government revenues, respectively. In total, 70% of the country’s exports are to India, Japan, South Korea and Thailand. Natural gas-thirsty Japan tops the list, receiving 36% of Brunei’s [exports](#).

Outside of gas and oil, there is little to Brunei’s economy. Although most estimates suggest that Brunei’s gas and oil exports will hold steady until at least 2030-40, the country is committed to an economic diversification agenda as outlined in Vision Brunei 2035. This plan, unveiled in 2008, seeks to capitalize on the sultanate’s potential to become a major Islamic finance hub in the Asia Pacific, or an “Islamic Singapore,” which requires [securing support](#) from Indonesia and Malaysia.

Tourism is another important pillar of Vision Brunei 2035. From 2002-13, Brunei’s tourism industry was the only one in Southeast Asia that did not grow. Unquestionably, the global media’s coverage of Islamic law implementation contributed to the ossified tourism industry’s inability to lure more tourists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who have opted to spend their vacations in other parts of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia and Malaysia where the practice of Islam is more tolerant. In Brunei, there are severe restrictions on non-Muslims’ rights to practice their own religion and, under the blasphemy law, insulting the Quran or declaring one’s apostasy are crimes punishable by death. Nonetheless, the Bruneian leadership is determined to make their country a more popular tourist destination.

Nearly a decade after launching Vision Brunei 2035, the sultanate’s economic system is demonstrating signs of strain. Of the country’s 420,000 citizens, those who work are mainly in the public sector, which means that Brunei’s civil service will suffer the most as the sultanate’s economic restructuring occurs. This same phenomenon is also taking place in Saudi Arabia. Brunei’s youth unemployment rate has increased in recent years, largely due to many youth waiting for higher-ranking public jobs, which

results in social restlessness among [young citizens](#). Brunei's domestic situation is similar to some of the discontent seen in [Saudi Arabia today](#).

## **NEW GEOECONOMIC REALITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

By pulling the United States out of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), one of President Donald Trump's first moves in the Oval Office was to null what was to be the world's largest free trade agreement. As a result, China's economic poise in the region can only expand further. Brunei, having been a member of the TPP as well as Beijing's alternative, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), is likely to shift toward China's geoeconomic influence. Officials in Bandar Seri Begawan and other Southeast Asian states, no longer able to count on Washington to promote a regional trade bloc aimed at countering Beijing's influence in the global economy, will [come to view China](#) as the "driver of trade liberalization" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For Saudi Arabia, which has an important role to play in China's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), Beijing's growing power in the global economic order is a valuable opportunity. Having redirected its oil sales to Asia (chiefly China) and away from the West at the start of the century, the kingdom has already made its geoeconomic pivot to the East. Recognizing the significance of the TPP's demise for Brunei and other Asian countries, King Salman's visit to the region came at an opportune time in which ASEAN members are seeking new partners while cautiously eyeing the potential for RCEP to deepen their links with the rest of the world via OBOR and other emerging Chinese-run trade corridors.

## **ISLAM, OIL AND IRAN**

King Salman's trip to the sultanate came with much symbolism. As the first Saudi monarch to visit Brunei, he sent an important message that he sees the sultan of Brunei as a fellow royal and that he approves of his religious legitimacy as the leader of his country's citizens. Brunei has a special geostrategic and religious position in Borneo and the greater Asia Pacific region. Brunei's authorities impose a version of Islamic law that is far harsher than what their Malaysian and Indonesian counterparts enforce, and the country is much more in sync with Saudi Arabia in terms of legal and religious strictures and hierarchy.

The sultan of Brunei decided to implement Islamic law in October 2004 for several reasons. First, he wanted to bring a new stability to Brunei, which the sultan saw as a requirement for [protecting](#) society from outside ills such as drugs and crime. Second, the sultan thought that by introducing Islamic law Brunei could attract more foreign [investment](#) from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). A third reason was the regional security environment with al-Qaeda running [rampant](#) in Saudi Arabia as well as the Asia Pacific. At this point, Bandar Seri Begawan sought to seek a closer relationship with its Muslim neighbors and Saudi Arabia to prevent any jihadist attack on Bruneian soil.

Brunei's Islamic law [rolled out](#) in three phases. The first phase focused on family and community. The second phase focused on property offenses. The third phase instituted punishments for adultery, abortion, homosexuality and blasphemy. It is important to note that roughly one-third of Brunei's population is non-Muslim, made up of Hindu and Chinese communities. The country's [religious minorities](#), including Buddhists and Christians who represent 15-20% of the sultanate's population, are adjusting to the new legal regime in the sultanate which, for example, requires Christians to notify the authorities of their [Christmas celebrations](#) and confine such traditions to their communities.

Like Saudi Arabia, Brunei has received ample criticism from activists across Western societies. Also, in Southeast Asia many voices condemn the expansion of Saudi influence in the region, maintaining that Wahhabism does not sit well in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Yet for Saudi Arabia, a conservative Sunni Muslim country such as Brunei offers the kingdom an opportunity to further use its position in the Muslim world to deepen its political, cultural and religious links.

The kingdom is also seeking to strengthen its leverage within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and work to make the cartel as influential in global oil markets as possible. Of course, with increased competition from non-OPEC oil producers, both the cartel itself and Saudi Arabia have lost leverage in the international oil market. Enhancing ties with more members of the cartel in terms of market share is a priority for Riyadh as it seeks to make its members more disciplined at a time when some in OPEC are considering the benefits of breaking away. The prospects of OPEC falling are deeply unsettling to both Saudi Arabia and Brunei as such a development would lead to oil prices falling based on a supply/demand equilibrium. Although OPEC's fall would unquestionably create some winners with

petroleum becoming cheaper, the Saudis would not benefit from the cartel's breakup. For Riyadh, securing closer ties in the energy sector with Brunei factors into Saudi Arabia's agenda within OPEC.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which visibly manifests itself in Middle Eastern countries where there are deep sectarian divisions, reverberates as far as the Asia Pacific. King Salman's visit to Brunei and other Muslim nations in the region was in no small part aimed at deterring the growth of such countries' relations with Tehran. In March 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [visited the sultanate](#) to discuss opening up Bruneian-Iranian trade following the lifting of sanctions.

For Brunei, Iran's economy of \$400 billion and large population of 80 million with a highly educated middle class offers ample [opportunity for investment](#). As Riyadh associates Iran's reintegration with the global economy with Tehran's increasingly emboldened foreign policy in the Arab world, which Saudi Arabia and some other GCC members view as the number regional threat, the kingdom will certainly use its influence in Southeast Asia to try and veer these countries away from Iran's economic lure.

## **SECURITY RELATIONSHIP**

In 2015, King Salman received Brunei's Lieutenant General Dato Abdul-Aziz Mohammed Tameet to [discuss defense cooperation](#). In March 2016, Brunei's Commander of Armed Forces Major General Baheen Muhammad Tawih attended the North Thunder [military exercise in Saudi Arabia](#). Brunei's defense capabilities are dedicated to maritime security and it has maritime disputes with [China](#) in the [South China Sea](#). As such, Saudi defense ties with Brunei is a recent development that is slated to grow, given the kingdom's interest in becoming an increasingly influential actor in Indian Ocean defense issues as related to protecting trade routes from piracy and counterterrorism initiatives. Both Brunei and Saudi Arabia have seen added investment from the United Kingdom in terms of British defense assets and positions of support.

The next step in upgrading Riyadh and Bandar Seri Begawan's security relationship would be to have Brunei join the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT). When Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman unveiled this now-41 nation alliance in December 2015, Brunei was not listed as a member.



However, the following month, Prince Mohammed met with Brunei's deputy defense minister to [discuss the sultanate's participation](#) in IMAFT. Saudi armed forces are now visiting Brunei [armed forces on study missions](#). The Saudi and Bruneian leaders agreed to enhance cooperation within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to advance their countries' interests and those of the Muslim world, [stressing](#) "the need to reject extremism and combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, whatever its source."

In light of recent developments in the Levant and North Africa, where the Islamic State (IS) is losing and/or has lost its strongholds in Mosul, Raqqa and Sirte, security officials across Southeast Asia are increasingly alarmed by the potential for more jihadists from the region to return to their home countries. According to Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, the Islamic State is determined to establish a caliphate that encompasses land in his country, as well as [Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia](#). As battle hardened fighters and experienced with new skills, IS militants from Indonesia, Malaysia and other Asia Pacific states will seek to relocate to new corners of the world to advance their nihilistic global cause, following the caliphate's military losses in the Levant and North Africa. So, Brunei will be keen to seek new partners in international counterterrorism efforts.

To protect its image and unite the Muslim world behind the kingdom's IMAFT, Saudi Arabia is seeking to convince the Southeast Asians that Riyadh is truly committed to their security. In terms of Saudi Arabia's own security interests, working with security apparatuses across the Asia Pacific region is valuable given the threat of Southeast Asian supporters of IS entering the kingdom as low-skilled foreign workers, from where they can launch attacks. Jihadist terrorists coming to the kingdom from the Asia Pacific region as *hajjis* (pilgrims) represents another threat. In September, 2016, [Al Arabiya reported](#) on Saudi authorities arresting a Bruneian pilgrim on terrorism charges.

## OUTLOOK

King Salman's three-week Asia tour takes place at a pivotal time in the kingdom's history. Determined to continue his predecessor's "Look East" approach to trade and investment, the king's visit to six Asian countries heavily factors into Riyadh's quest to secure more support for Vision 2030 from major economic powers in all corners of the world. Unquestionably, regarding Vision 2030, the most important legs of the Saudi monarch's tour were China and Japan. Compared to these two Asian powerhouses, Brunei has relatively little to offer Saudi Arabia in terms of cooperation for Saudi Arabia's economic transformation agenda.



Yet the symbolism and religious undertones of King Salman's meeting with the sultan of Brunei weigh into the kingdom's grander plans for protecting Saudi Arabia and its allies from trans-regional threats. The kingdom and the sultanate find themselves in the same boat in many ways. Both are deeply conservative Sunni Muslim countries often at odds with Western values that face similar economic dilemmas stemming from dependency on their hydrocarbon sectors and the rise of extremists such as IS and al-Qaeda.

As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Saudi king's visit to Brunei to meet with the sultanate's ruler was about the ruler of the Saud's kingdom conferring legitimacy upon Sultan Bolkiah. ASEAN members like Brunei usually only fit into an analysis on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as an afterthought. Yet as the leadership in Tehran seeks to expand Iranian trade ties with Southeast Asian nations, particularly the Muslim-majority ones, Saudi Arabia is unsettled by several ASEAN members' expressed willingness to do business with Iran. By visiting Brunei, the king is giving robust support to the sultan's rule. King Salman's trip was largely aimed at keeping the country within Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence and at a distance from Iran's.

Building on his first trip to Brunei 20 years ago, King Salman's visit to a Muslim-majority located in a strategically prized section of the South China Sea was an important gesture. With Brunei in a region where violent Islamist extremists are making their presence felt and as ASEAN member states are growing increasingly alarmed by the threat of more IS fighters relocating from the Levant to the Asia Pacific region, it would be logical to assume that counterterrorism cooperation will play a greater role in shaping the Riyadh-Bandar Seri Begawan relationship. King Salman's return to the sultanate was politically important for Brunei's government as it seeks to increase its religious legitimacy by engaging with the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.

Looking ahead, it would only be logical to assume that the kingdom and the sultanate will bring their bilateral relationship to new heights as both nations face the challenge of transforming their economies away from oil and gas, and protecting their monarchies from IS and other trans-regional threats.

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# Defeating Systemic Corruption: Colombia's Next Major Challenge

Glenn Ojeda Vega

March 24, 2017

*If corruption is not eradicated to level the political playing field, the systemically flawed democratic process will destroy any prospects of a lasting peace in Colombia.*

Colombia's big city streets are full of ambulant vendors offering you anything from chewing gum to a single cigarette to prepaid cell phone minutes. Walking through Bogota's roads during the first weeks of 2017, you could also purchase a small booklet detailing the [new public conduct code](#). For the first time in over two decades, the government has updated the code that now includes significant fines for offenses such as loitering and jaywalking.

This new reality for the average Colombian contrasts starkly with the political corruption currently pervading the government, so it is not just average Colombians who need to revise their code of public conduct. Today, international corruption scandals such as those disclosed in the [Panama Papers](#) have stained the reputation and credibility of the highest echelons of the Colombian political class.

Corruption is an urgent issue that must be tackled if Colombia expects the [ongoing implementation of the peace treaty](#) with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to succeed in achieving a lasting peace and a robust democracy.

## **DARK FORCES AND DIRTY MONEY**

To many observers, and even some political figures, the implementation and execution of the peace deal would represent the end of dirty money and dark forces within civil society and politics in Colombia. However, as the dust of armed civil conflict and fratricidal war begins to settle for the first time in half a century, Colombia must tackle the swamp of corruption that has been quietly spreading within the country's leading institutions.

Recent corruption scandals throughout Latin American have highlighted the importance of a free and robust press as well as the systemic weaknesses and lack of transparency of Colombia's democratic institutions. For instance, throughout the last two decades, it is estimated that the Brazilian construction giant, [Odebrecht, paid some \\$800 million in political bribes](#) throughout a dozen countries in order to secure the construction of public projects.

Another major source of corruption controversies in Colombia is the state-owned petroleum company, Ecopetrol. For instance, a decade ago, Ecopetrol began construction on the ambitious Reficar project to build South America's largest oil refinery in the coastal city of Cartagena. Today, the project is yet to be completed, has gone over budget by \$4 billion dollars, and ongoing investigations point towards mass contracting fraud, possibly [implicating the ministerial cabinet](#).

It is tragic that the FARC has intended to advance its political agenda through violent means for more than fifty years. However, the level of systemic corruption uncovered puts into perspective other deep-seated issues facing the country. Furthermore, the reliance on corrupt practices by mainstream politicians and political parties in Colombia will be a severe impediment to the successful implementation of the peace treaty with the FARC guerrillas.

As part of the peace treaty with the national government, the FARC is set to transition into a democratic political formation—a FARC political party, yet to be officially formed—with representation in Congress and participation in electoral politics. This has sparked contentious debate within Colombia given that the FARC party is [guaranteed a number of seats in the national Congress](#) during the next two electoral periods while it completes its transition into national politics. While some politicians argue that this measure is necessary for the FARC to successfully become a non-violent political movement, those who opposed the peace treaty claim that such a concession to the FARC is too generous and undemocratic.

## **UNFAIR ADVANTAGES**

Nevertheless, given its extremely polarizing nature, the eventual FARC party will be held to higher standards and put under higher scrutiny in terms of transparency and financing than Colombia's traditional political players. The freedom with which mainstream political formations in Colombia utilize dirty money to finance their

campaigns and keep their electoral machines running is shamefully evident to all sectors of civil society.

After weeks of mounting public pressure and revelations, President and Nobel Peace Laureate Juan Manuel Santos made a public declaration on March 14, 2017, recognizing the presence of [illegal funding during his 2010 presidential campaign](#). President Santos stated that he was unaware of said funding at the time and called for those responsible to be punished.

The uneven playing field that will exist between the FARC and mainstream parties in Colombia could jeopardize the proper functioning of the democratic transition agreed to in the peace deal. The transition mandates that all guerrilla fighters convene in specified camps throughout the country to hand over their weapons and begin reintegration into civilian life, all of this under the supervision of the United Nations.

Simultaneously, mid and high-level FARC officials will go through a special court process where they will confess their illegal activities in exchange for shorter and alternative sentences. Finally, the FARC party commits to non-violent political participation without funding acquired through illegal activity, under the supervision of the competent national authorities. In this regard, the corrupt practices that are part of the machinery of mainstream political parties will represent an unfair advantage over the FARC party and could give the FARC a legitimate reason to cry foul against the government, potentially undermining the negotiated peace itself.

If corruption is not eradicated to level the political playing field, the systemically flawed democratic process will destroy any prospects of a lasting peace. Even though some [6,000 guerrilla members have already demobilized](#) as part of the implementation of the peace treaty, several members are defecting and hedging their position by staying in place while the process evolves. Some of these are FARC elements involved in illegal economic activity that could easily morph into drug-financed non-state actors. They include the [Daniel Aldana mobile column](#) and [the Teófilo Forero column](#) as well as Front 48 and Front 57.

As Colombia traverses a unique and historic moment, the Colombian people must pressure the political class to revise its own code of public conduct and possibly hand out booklets throughout the power halls of Congress. If not, we can expect new non-state actors to emerge either as fully rogue criminal groups or as political proxies for

the FARC party. The latter scenario is particularly likely, especially if the future FARC party decides that it needs a dirty political machine to do its groundwork.

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# Anti-Corruption Protests in Russia Gain a New Momentum

Lincoln Pigman

March 29, 2017

*The political awakening of Russia's youth does not bode well for the entrenched regime.*

On March 26, protesters hit the streets across Russia over corruption allegations against Prime Minister and former President Dmitri Medvedev. As Russian courts prepare to prosecute those detained during Sunday's unsanctioned protests, as well as the employees of [Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation \(FBK\)](#), it is important to identify what sets Russia's latest series of protests apart from those of the recent past and how it may affect the country's political landscape as the 2018 presidential election nears.

What is immediately striking is the cause of the protests: "[He Is Not Dimon to You](#)," an investigation into Medvedev's wealth published on YouTube by anti-corruption activist and one-time Moscow mayoral candidate Navalny on March 2. The video, which has been viewed more than 14 million times, implicates Medvedev (Dimon is a nickname for Dmitry)—a close ally of President Vladimir Putin who briefly replaced him as president from 2008 to 2012 in what was widely considered an act of political theater—in owning secret assets, including mansions, yachts and a vineyard.

Viewed out of context, Navalny's latest investigation is unremarkable. Medvedev is not the first Russian official to have ill-gotten gains exposed by Navalny, whose brother, Oleg, is currently serving a three-and-a-half-year sentence meant as an (apparently ineffective) leverage over Alexei. Navalny's greatest hits include investigations

targeting Yuri Chaika, Russia's prosecutor general, and Igor Shuvalov, the first deputy prime minister.

Despite the egregiousness of their alleged corruption—Shuvalov was found to have used a private jet to regularly fly his family's pet corgis around the world—both men remain in their posts.

## **WIDESPREAD CONTEMPT**

The outbreak of protests, which [Navalny began organizing](#) on March 15, owes to a specific condition that was absent in the cases of Chaika and Shuvalov: widespread contempt toward Navalny's target. Medvedev increasingly appears to have given up on pretending he represents the interests of Russians. The country's middle class made its disapproval of him known when it led the protests of 2011-13, aggrieved at the sight of a self-professed modernizer handing over the reins of power to Putin—a reactionary force that few middle-class Russians wished to see back in office having come to believe that Russia had abandoned its historical tradition of leaders never stepping down.

The working class has joined the chorus of Medvedev's critics thanks to a string of gaffes highlighting the prime minister's indifference to Russians' economic difficulties. In August 2016, [Medvedev told Russian teachers](#) distraught over meager pay that their predicament was no one's fault but their own: "You didn't go into business, as I understand, so there you have it."

Worse still, in May 2016, while visiting Crimea, the annexation of which has come at a hefty cost for Russia and its people, [Medvedev told worried pensioners](#), an especially vulnerable segment of the population, "There's just no money right now. ... You hang in there. Best wishes! Cheers! Take care!"

Medvedev, once commonly cited as a potential successor to Putin, made these recommendations as he literally escaped the people in whose name Russia had invaded Ukraine. He neatly symbolizes [Russia's outrageous economic inequality](#) in his clear indifference to the economic problems of ordinary Russians and to the optics of Navalny's allegations, which he has responded to by [blocking Navalny on Instagram](#) and going [skiing during Sunday's protests](#).

Medvedev's complacency may stem from the appearance that his place in power is guaranteed. However, recent weeks give reason for doubt about Medvedev's job security. His behavior has combined with increasing negative attention over Navalny's accusations to drive even the so-called "loyal" opposition in Russia's parliament to demand an [official investigation into Medvedev's alleged wealth](#).

More embarrassingly, Putin appears to be subtly marginalizing the prime minister. At a meeting of Russian officials on March 14, Putin offered a mocking explanation for [Medvedev's absence](#) that almost certainly undercut the prime minister's authority: "The [flu] epidemic here is waning. Nonetheless, the situation is still serious. See, we weren't able to save Dmitri Anatolievich." In a counterproductive move that made him look even more side-lined, Medvedev [refuted](#) Putin's comments on March 23, saying he had never fallen ill.

Russian analysts say [Medvedev is under pressure](#) from both elites and the public, and are increasingly considering the possibility that he will be [forced to resign](#).

## **PURSUIT OF POLITICAL POWER**

Like Medvedev, Navalny is at a critical juncture in his pursuit of political power. Having been rendered ineligible for the office of president by a recent [ruling on the Kirovles case](#), which has plagued him since 2010, Navalny needs all the public attention he can get in order to remain relevant in Russia's brutally cynical political landscape. [Navalny has vowed to continue his presidential campaign](#), begun in December, despite the legal obstacle disqualifying his inclusion on the ballot and a media blackout that has limited his efforts to social media, the grassroots and opposition-friendly news outlets. Medvedev's situation has given Navalny an opportunity to keep the spotlight on himself, even at the cost of prosecution, and to unite an otherwise divided opposition movement around the universally resonant cause of anti-corruption.

Sunday's protests appear to have accomplished just that, with [Navalny once again under arrest](#), his organization's activities indefinitely [suspended](#) and an estimated [60,000 people said to have taken part in the countrywide demonstrations](#), according to reputable independent radio station Ekho Moskv.

That Navalny managed to organize protests from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok is highly impressive. The FBK [announced](#) that 99 locations around the country hosted



demonstrations, even [Dagestan's Makhachkala province](#), where 92% of voters supported Putin in the 2012 election.

By contrast, intermittent protests by truckers over a highway tax enriching the brothers Rotenberg—close friends of Putin at the receiving end of numerous government contracts—have remained largely contained within Russia's western parts. Similarly, the 2011-13 protests took place mostly in Moscow.

## NEW WAVE

Commentators have heavily emphasized the role of youth in Sunday's protests. Indeed, [schoolchildren and university students](#) came out in great numbers across the country, giving rise to a consensus that "the ranks of protesters in Moscow [since the demonstrations of 2011-13] have grown younger," as articulated by [Kommersant](#). "This group missed the Bolotnaya [Square protests] because of its age," *Novaya Gazeta* observed.

This specific group's media consumption habits make it immune to the state propaganda that dominates Russian television, the same medium that refused to cover Sunday's protests as part of an unmistakable [media blackout](#). (It was such a slow news day that a march in Italy commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome [made](#) the cut.) These are Russians unable to recall a Russia not governed by the United Russia party or Putin, and unlikely to recall a time when Russia was not at odds with the international community.

Putin's promise of a *russskiy mir*—Russian world—encompassing the "near abroad," which has become almost completely hostile to Russia, and images of Russian aircraft bombing Aleppo do not resonate with the youth involved in Sunday's protests, who have been deprived of their ability to study abroad—or worse, in the case of working-class families who struggle to make a living.

The government appears to have realized this shortly before the demonstrations, with multiple educational institutions [warning schoolchildren and students not to take part in protests](#), and one Russian senator even [threatening](#) to remove those minors found to have joined the demonstrations from their families. Already, reports of attempts to [prosecute](#) parents whose children attended protests have emerged, and there is talk of [legislation barring minors from participating in demonstrations](#).

The government has explained away youth participation on Sunday using the classic narrative of [paid protesters](#)—an ironic charge to level against the opposition given [United Russia's conscription](#) of children for campaigning purposes during the 2016 election season.

Alarming, the presence of [children](#), [teenagers](#) and [young adults](#) at Sunday's protests failed to deter the use of brute force by Russian police. Images of young people being hauled away by riot police, wearing astronaut-like helmets and the sort of padding one expects to see on soldiers, spread like wildfire on social media before the protests had even come to a close. Some [suspect](#) that the national guard, an internal military unit established in spring 2016 and widely regarded as a safeguard against any Maidan-like movement in Russia, saw its first deployment on Sunday, just one day before the official [event](#) celebrating its invaluable contribution to Russian society.

The timing is coincidental. But the police's ruthless conduct on Sunday raises an important question: Was the decision to use brute force against Russia's youth made in the Kremlin, or on the squares where protesters stared down police? [Footage](#) of groups of riot police beating lone protesters can come to symbolize injustice for a broader part of society than that which attended Sunday's protests.

Commentators had latched onto one such photo, that of Olga Lozina—a young woman in white carried off by five officers wearing black—well before it [emerged](#) that Lozina had not even been a participant in the Moscow demonstration but had been arrested on her way from McDonald's along with her mother and sister.

Brute force proved counterproductive in Ukraine, where it enraged revolutionaries into digging in instead of intimidating them into fleeing. Although Russia in 2017 is not Ukraine in 2014, the open and disproportionate use of violence risks provoking a wider conflagration as an example of the abuse of state powers, especially if it becomes a staple of protests in Russia.

Reports of detained [protesters being tortured](#) are similarly dangerous. It certainly appears that the government is willing to escalate, with [Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin](#) commenting that Russia's police had acted “softly.”

Sunday's protests have underlined a number of developments in Russian politics. Medvedev's behavior has alienated not only the middle-class Russians who had abandoned him after he became prime minister in 2012, but also working-class Russians and even Russia's political elites.

Navalny has gained from his predicament. However, his inclusion on the ballot in 2018 is far from certain, and Navalny must first cross the bridge that is his 15-day prison sentence before returning to an admittedly altered political landscape.

That landscape now recognizes Navalny as the opposition leader in Russia—not an opposition leader—and acknowledges that the opposition's ranks have swelled thanks to the political awakening of Russia's youth. How the government will respond to this new series of threats to United Russia's continued dominance in Russian politics is not yet clear. But the signs thus far do not bode well.

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