The Interview

2019

Fair Observer°

The Interview

2019

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,000 contributors from nearly 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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Join our network of more than 2,000 contributors to publish your perspective, share your story and shape the global conversation. Become a Fair Observer and help us make sense of the world.

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We have a reputation for being thoughtful and insightful. The US Library of Congress recognizes us as a journal with ISSN 2372-9112 and publishing with us puts you in a select circle.

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Conversations That Matter

Atul Singh

December 28, 2019

This unique feature involves conversations with interesting people from around the world on some of the most important issues of our time.

Human beings evolved to converse. The Interview on Fair Observer involves insightful conversations with thoughtful people on issues that matter. It is usually conducted by a team member, but sometimes guests produce interviews as well.

Our goal during interviews is to find a diverse array of people who provide light from different prisms. Subjects range from art and religion to climate change and geopolitics. These conversations give us glimpses from around the world and expand not only our knowledge, but also our consciousness. Some highlights of 2019 are described below.

In February, Nilanjana Sen, a former associate editor, and Anna Pivovarchuk, our deputy managing editor, spoke to Shahidul Alam, an eminent Bangladeshi photographer and social activist. For years, Alam has campaigned for greater democracy and civil rights. In 2018, the Bangladeshi government put him in jail for criticizing its crackdown on students. Sen and Pivovarchuk found Alam in a defiant mood, promising to "remain a thorn for the oppressor" and shining the light on the injustice in his country.

In August, Kourosh Ziabari, our Iran-based correspondent, interviewed Joyce Banda, the first female president of Malawi. In a wide-ranging interview, Banda discussed genital mutilation, women empowerment, child welfare and shifting Malawi from tobacco to legumes cultivation. She also argued against outside intervention in Africa because it often leaves behind conflict and catastrophe. Instead, Banda said Africa must come up with its own model of democracy.

In September, Dina Yazdani, our US-based correspondent, interviewed Tahir Abbas, an academic and author of "Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle." He examined the factors leading to the rise of Islamophobia and this phobia, in turn, contributing to radicalization. He also shed light on Islamism and Muslim identity, which he argued are multihued, complex and nuanced instead of the monoliths that they are perceived to be.

In October, Ankita Mukhopadhyay, our India-based correspondent, interviewed Kishore Mahbubani, the legendary Singaporean diplomat and the founding dean of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Mahbubani argued that Western dominance was a historical aberration and that the West has to learn how to share power with the East. In a thoughtful interview, he proposed reforms for international institutions, Anglo-Saxon media, poverty, plutocracy and much more.

In December, Naveed Ahsan, our ex-North America editor, interviewed David Petraeus, a decorated general and the former director of the CIA. Petraeus discussed protectionism, productivity, public education, manufacturing and growth. The general also dwelled on the top-three strategic priorities for the US and the top-three geopolitical threats to the global economy.

Most pertinently, Petraeus touched upon the Thucydides' Trap, which envisages conflict between an entrenched superpower and a rising one. The former spymaster believes that managing US-China relations will remain one the central questions for decades to come.

In a nutshell, The Interview is a unique feature that combines breadth and depth, diversity and quality. It brings in a dash of personality and intimacy to issues that may seem abstract but are very real for all of us.

*__Atul Singh__ is the founder, CEO & editor-in-chief of Fair Observer

Being Black in America

Kourosh Ziabari & Akil Houston
January 9, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Akil Houston, an associate professor of African-American studies at Ohio University.

Anti-black racism in the United States continues to be a problem over half a century since the abolition of Jim Crow laws. These laws enforced segregation between black and white Americans in public places.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in employment and banned race-based segregation, as well as sporadic efforts by successive US governments to tackle racial inequalities, racism still looms large in 21st-century America.

Even if it is not a national trend, minorities in the US continue to receive discriminatory treatment from law enforcement officials and face major obstacles in securing housing, health care and quality education, as well as experiencing irregularities in the justice system. To make matters worse, things have escalated under President Donald Trump.

Some scholars talk about the existence of structural racism in the US, and there are statistics that corroborate this. In 2018, a poll by NBC News/SurveyMonkey found that a majority of Americans believe racism is a major issue in the United States. According to the poll, 64% said "racism remains a major problem" in society. This is while 45% of Americans believe race relations are getting worse.

In 2017, a poll by Quinnipiac University scholars found that more than six in 10 Americans say the "level of hatred and prejudice in the United States has increased since Trump was elected president."

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Akil Houston, a filmmaker, social critic and an associate professor of cultural and media studies at Ohio University, about racial inequality, the politics of race and the portrayal of African-Americans in the media.

Kourosh Ziabari: The election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States in November 2008 was a turning point for the nation and for African-Americans. How do you evaluate his performance in terms of challenging and bridging the divide between black Americans and the rest of society?

Akil Houston: I don't wholeheartedly agree with the premise of this question. Symbolically, sure. The election of Barack Obama did not change the material conditions for black America. Yes, his election was inspirational, for US citizens who longed for evidence to support their belief in meritocracy or for those who misguidedly felt his win signaled the dawning of a post-racial country.

The Obama presidency was not remarkably different than any other concerning key issues impacting African Americans. I would argue — as others have — it would be, and was in some instances, more damaging to have a black man speaking from the platform of the presidency reinforcing the myth that racial inequality in the United States is the burden of black America — the question also gestures toward this.

In a 2016 interview with The Atlantic, Barack Obama highlighted what would be a common theme in his approach to race when he said:

"[A]s a general matter, my view would be that if you want to get at African American poverty, the income gap, wealth gap, achievement gap, that the most important thing is to make sure that the society as a whole does right by people who are poor, are working class, are aspiring to a better life for their kids. Higher minimum wages, full-employment programs, early-childhood education: Those kinds of programs are, by design, universal, but by definition, because they are helping folks who are in the worst economic situations, are most likely to disproportionately impact and benefit African Americans."

This perspective does not focus on racism as the key factor in the divide, nor does it offer any

specific remedies for black America. In fact, as many historians, journalists and those from the "alternative" or "radical left" and progressive camps argued, conditions worsened during his presidency. While the obstructionist role Republicans took during his tenure cannot be undervalued, the administration took a position of non-position on racial matters.

Ziabari: President Donald Trump is openly called a racist by many of his detractors, including journalists and academics. His views on minorities and immigrants are well known to those who follow US politics. Has life become particularly difficult for African-Americans under President Trump in terms of opportunities and civil liberties?

Houston: While the current administration's use of dog-whistle tactics may create the impression that these are recent trends, anti-black resentment has been rising since the Obama White House years. Acts of terror, from church shootings, instances of police brutality and the deaths of people like Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Sandra Bland and far too many more, demonstrate that living while black continues to be challenging regardless of who sits in the White House.

Long before this administration, there has been a historical pattern of intense resistance to African-American enfranchisement. This racial resentment typically peaks after periods of significant inclusion efforts, for instance, in response to reconstruction in the 1860s, the human rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s and most recently as a response to the presidency of Barack Obama in 2009. This political moment is consistent with this historical pattern.

Ziabari: One of the major grievances of black Americans about how they are treated pertains to the law enforcement and the justice system in the United States. It's said that African-American wrongdoers and felons receive harsher sentences than white Americans when they commit the same crimes. Is this assertion demonstrable by facts and figures?

Houston: Yes. The book Slavery By Another Name by Douglas A. Blackmon, The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander and perhaps more reader friendly for a lay audience is the book Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. These books are a small sampling of the many books, peer-review scholarship that provides history, context and empirical data regarding incarceration, sentencing and the historic disparity within the US justice system.

Ziabari: How are black Americans depicted in mainstream media in the United States? Is the portrayal realistic, fair and objective?

Houston: This is a broad question and there are a number of variables to consider. For instance, things like overall representation, context of representation and in what forms, must be taken into account. While there are more images of African-Americans than in previous eras, African-Americans continue to be underrepresented as subject area experts — outside of sports and race — in broadcast news content and overrepresented in comedies, sports and reality-TV programming.

Ziabari: Some scholars argue that the decline in incomes and socioeconomic inequality that black and brown Americans experience today mean nothing has changed and improved significantly for African-Americans five decades after the abolition of Jim Crow laws. Do you agree?

Houston: Empirical data supports this statement. While I wouldn't paint the African-American experience with a broad generalized brush, or state nothing has changed at all, there are still significant gaps between various groups based on race and gender. The National Urban League's State of Black America annual report noted in 2017 that fewer black Americans are dropping out of high school and more are earning associate's degrees. However, racial disparities still plague other areas of life.

Ziabari: An article in the American Journal of Public Health in 2004 noted that over 886,000 lives could have been saved if black Americans received the same care as whites. This is in reference to the number of African-Americans who died between 1991 to 2000 due to the lack of medical insurance, inadequate insurance, poor service and other factors. Is discrimination against African-Americans in the health sector so serious today?

Houston: I would preface my response by first saying: It is essential to be mindful that anti-discrimination laws do not operate exclusively on behalf of black people. While the adage that if white America has a cough, black America has the flu rings true, these disparities in health care impact the entire nation. Health care is as much a class issue as it is a race issue. The continuing debate on affordable health care and how the government will address treatment for pre-existing conditions and infant mortality rates in the African-American and Latino communities, coupled with the fact that people of color often complain that their physicians do not listen or misdiagnose them, provide ample evidence that these factors are present today.

Ziabari: How are African-American artists using arts and culture to reflect on the discrimination and inequalities they face today?

Houston: When I see this question, I wonder why it is posed as if it is the sole province of marginalized groups like African-Americans. Most often these same questions are not raised with white artists and their work and how it reflects on the discrimination and inequalities of society.

As the scholar bell hooks once pointed out, ironically, more than any other group, white artists are able to produce cultural products like film and music without being subjected to a constant demand that their work engage or challenge systems of domination based on race, class and gender. As a result, it is often these works that are the most problematic. Yes, there are some artists who engage these issues as there have always been. Artists continue to engage the complexities of life. Regardless if it is the work of playwright Suzan Lori Parks, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, or singer and actress Janelle Monae, artists continue to push the boundaries of creativity by exploring these issues of the day.

Ziabari: How do you think African-Americans can debunk the myths about their community and enjoy greater social, economic and educational opportunities? Is it through political activism that they should overcome discrimination and difficulties?

Houston: This question assumes that some act or role by African-Americans is the salve to the nation's centuries-old racial quagmire and doesn't address the centrality of American racism in explaining sustained black-white disparity. Throughout US history, African-Americans have attempted all matters of redress, from enlisting in the armed services, the ballot, respectability politics, civil disobedience and other forms of dissent. From the nadir of the Civil War to the present, this has been consistent for African-American activists and their allies.

In 1968, the late writer James Baldwin was asked a similar question by Esquire magazine. His response was that, if "the American black man [and women too] is going to become a free person in this country, the people of this country have to give up something. If they don't give it up, it will be taken from them." I would argue that the "give up" portion has to do with the assumption that the promise of a just and truly democratic society is the responsibility of the marginalized. As Baldwin cautioned then, and I would echo now the responsibility is in large measure on white citizens who can influence the national conversation and the behavior of their families and friends in ways that marginalized groups cannot.

Ziabari: As a university professor, do you think black students feel unrestricted and also

enthusiastic about engaging and interacting with students of other races, especially white students, or do racial gaps keep them apart and make their collaboration challenging?

Houston: Given the racial climate in the United States, one would be hard-pressed to find black students who didn't feel some level of anxiety about interacting with other student populations. However, black students like other student populations are generally open to collaboration if the university is sincere in its commitment to foster an inclusive, welcoming learning environment.

Also, it is important, again, to note that black students are a diverse group. If there is a real interest in solutions, the first step is to stop thinking of black students as a monolith. These students have different worldviews, politics, goals and various identities that distinguish them from other generations of black students and each other. I would argue some faculty have these challenges around collaboration. The university campus is in many ways a microcosm of the larger US. Rather than expecting marginalized students to be the ones to shift, more progressive schools have found ways to institutionalize diversity efforts and change the way they engage these student populations.

*__Kourosh Ziabari__ is an Iran-based correspondent at Fair Observer. **Akil Houston** is a cultural studies scholar.

Europe Has a Bumpy Ride Ahead

Kourosh Ziabari & Yves Leterme
January 22, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to former Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme.

In geographical terms, Europe is a continent with an assortment of landscapes, climates and ecosystems. It is an assembly of peninsulas, islands and landforms located in the Northern Hemisphere, bounded by the Arctic Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

The cultural, economic and social diversity of Europe is unparalleled. The continent is home to the biggest trading bloc in the world, the European Union, which contains the Schengen Area of borderless movement. Europe is a popular arrival destination for migrants from the Middle East and Africa, as well as European migrants who cross national boundaries. As of 2017, nearly 4% of EU citizens of working age lived in other member states of the union.

European institutions have transformed the continent into a land of opportunity, cooperation and freedom of choice. EU members now top international indices and rankings in freedom of the press, good governance, human development, religious freedom and economic growth.

Yet the EU faces challenges that are not easy to overcome. The United Kingdom, one of the biggest economies on the planet, will soon leave the bloc. Populism is also on the rise, while unemployment and economic stagnation continue to affect European states.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to former Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme about the challenges and opportunities ahead for the European Union. He is currently the secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), an intergovernmental organization based in Sweden.

Kourosh Ziabari: German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced in October 2018 that she will not seek re-election in 2021. She has dominated European politics for over 13 years. In what ways will Merkel's retirement affect European politics and, specifically, German-Belgian relations?

Yves Leterme: Angela Merkel has undoubtedly played a very important role for the European Union but also world politics. Her pragmatic leadership, her ability to repeatedly

solve both internal and external crisis, and her sturdy commitment not to deviate from traditional Christian Democratic and liberal values such as solidarity, democracy, unity and freedom have made her one of the great leaders of our time. Those same qualities have also been cause for the strongest criticism, not least in her approach to the 2015 migration crisis, of which the repercussions ultimately resulted in a significant decline in support.

There are of course those who worry that without Merkel, Europe and the democratic world have lost one of its [supporting] pillars, who until now was able to withstand storms and major changes on the geopolitical scene. However, the responsibility to defend democracy and our universally agreed values should not rest on Germany's shoulders alone. I believe it is important that other leaders, but also all of us, rise to the occasion and do our part.

For Belgium, I believe the departure of Angela Merkel will not mark the end of our two countries' recent history of excellent relations and fruitful collaboration. However, I am convinced that Belgium will aspire to continue on the same path with the new administration of Germany.

Ziabari: Recent figures show that the European Union has experienced a serious decline in fertility rates and that Europe is not a young continent anymore. The major threat to such dynamic economies as Germany is the fact that the population is aging and that families are not willing to have more children. Do you consider the demographic fluctuations in the EU to be a key challenge for the future of the bloc's economy?

Leterme: Yes, of course I do. Unfortunately, with so many other major issues such as Brexit, terrorism and trade-wars on the EU table, these concerns have not managed to surface up to the top of the debate. But entire welfare systems and ultimately the sustainability of our quality of life in Europe depends on this.

In my opinion, there are three elements to this question.

First, what can we do better so that [birth rates] can be raised? Based on the figures, we can see this problem affects some European countries more than others, so what lessons can be drawn? Why do families in Sweden, Poland and Romania have more children than in Italy, Spain or Greece? Is it purely a question of economy, of job-security and benefits or are there other aspects as well? And what if we were to compare European countries to countries on the Eurasian continent, for example? What role has globalization played in all this? We also need to work together with other countries and regions experiencing similar challenges — China and Japan are just two of these examples.

Second, how can we recalibrate the labor market and pension systems so they are better adapted to current life and health expectancies of the European population? Can we elaborate a "flexicurity" system for pensions where retirement options are more flexible than today? We know that, in the majority of European countries, people live longer with a higher degree of health today than they did when most pension schemes were established. There are 60 to 80-year-olds who happily could and would like to continue working, maybe part-time, whilst there are 55-year-olds who need but can't afford to retire. We need to move away from rigidity to increased flexibility when it comes to these issues, but also look more concretely at how we can fill the labor market needs we know we will have.

Third, how can our labor markets become more efficient in supplying the demand we have? For example, in the care and service sector but also in highly-skilled jobs in the tech and ICT industry. Do we need to think about retraining our own populations or also reassessing how can make work-related immigration more efficient, attractive and accepted?

Ziabari: In 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or

OECD, which you worked with as the deputy secretary-general, reported that in 2020, 40% fewer people will join the workforce than will go into retirement. How are EU economies, including Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, going to tackle the issue of labor-force scarcity? Would the easing of immigration laws help them to recruit more educated workers to fill their vacancies?

Leterme: This is exactly the major discrepancy I was talking about. But to me it is not only a question about immigration, but also enabling people to work longer if they can and choose, retrain and reskill our internal populations and especially the ones outside of the labor market, but also offer more fluidity, both in and out of the European labor market system. We also need to be proactive and put measures in place as soon as possible, both when it comes to trying to fill the gaps we know we will have due to the major retirement groups, but also due to the significant changes ahead in the labor market due to technological advancements, automatization and robotization.

We need to be foresighted enough to consider that in 20 to 30 years' time, our labor markets will demand significantly different kinds of skills and jobs than we have had for the most part of the 20th century. Just think of how self-driving cars will change all jobs related to delivery of people and goods, or how computer programs are increasingly used for previously manual service jobs — cashiers at supermarkets or flight crews helping with check-in. In just a few years, the customer has gotten used to book, pay and check-in without any human intervention, but with the help of software designed by IT developers. This labor market revolution will have as much, if not a greater, impact on societies as the demographic change.

Ziabari: The major part of the 2008-09 financial crisis took place in your first and second governments and also during the term of Herman Van Rompuy. Your country's biggest banks, Fortis and Dexia, faced severe problems and the value of their stocks plummeted dramatically. You tried to manage the situation through bailout plans and nationalizing the banks. Is Dexia Bank Belgium experiencing better times right now after nationalization? Has the bailout plan helped the economy?

Leterme: The crisis of our banking and financial sector, and later the crisis of the sovereign debt, was the most dangerous one since the Great Depression caused by the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The balances of at least three of our major systemic banks with large retail and investment operations were severely affected by the fact that the underpinning payback-capacity of American borrowers was weakening and led to bankruptcies.

Each bank is based on trust — the trust that clients will not all together at the same time withdraw their savings. Precisely this fundamental trust became a real risk at the end of September 2008 when the general public learned that the bank, where they had their deposits and savings, might not be able to pay them back their money. Closing the banks was not an option. The only possibility, therefore, was to provide sufficient cash that was guaranteed by collaterals offered by the Belgian state.

Once it was clear that Fortis was out of control, I decided to nationalize the bank, since I was not ready to take risks with taxpayers' money without being able to decide how the bank was managed. These decisions were the only realistic possibility to address the shortage of money, cash as fuel for the banking activities. In the case of Dexia, we decided a capital increase and a special vehicle to phase out the structured, affected, "toxic" assets. I am convinced that the options we chose were the only sustainable ones.

As I pledged 10 years ago, the state will recover all its money and could even make some profit, given the condition imposed by EU authorities and by us — that the guarantees we provided and money we put in the system had to be reimbursed with an additional benefit. By doing so, we made the Belgian economy very

resilient. Belgium was one of the first countries on the continent to be severely hit by such a crisis, but it managed to overcome the challenges in some three to four years and without having to impose too important sacrifices onto the average citizens, families and taxpayers.

Ziabari: Do you consider the rise of far-right populism, exclusion of minorities and increased momentum of anti-immigrant rhetoric in some European countries to be a threat to diversity and contradictory to the values upon which European institutions work?

Leterme: The developments you describe are indeed a worrying reality in many European countries. However, even more worrying is the pace of these developments, the inability of the traditional political parties on both sides of the political spectrum to respond to these challenges, and of course the fact that in a global political context this seems to be the trend. At the UN General Assembly in 2018, several opening speeches were by authoritarian leaders, who contrary to the spirit of the United Nations focused on their own agendas rather than the world's. And this is in a time when multilateralism and international cooperation is needed more than ever to solve the global challenges the world is facing — from climate change to economic inequalities, terrorism and ICT.

It is needless to say that when populist, nationalist, isolationist leaders gain momentum, they offer seemingly simple, quick-fix solutions to these challenges by either focusing on a scapegoat — whether it is in the shape of immigrants, Muslims or Mexicans — or counterproductive but simple solutions, such as increased trade tariffs, walls and harsher migration policies. It is truly astounding to me how so many can be persuaded through these messages, through fear and simplification.

In Europe, we see similar tendencies and increased lines of conflict and polarization. Whilst many may agree with the key challenges ahead, the way of surmounting these challenges differ significantly. I believe that we have some difficult years ahead where we need pragmatic but also visionary leaders who know their history, who have learned from the past but have the capacity to take the EU into the future.

Ziabari: The European Union seems to have accepted the reality of Brexit, even without a deal. Do you think Brexit will serve the long-term interests of the United Kingdom with all of its costs and benefits and the uncertainty it imposes on the future of Britain?

Leterme: The simple answer is we don't know. This is the first time a country has exited the EU, and if the expert analyses are correct, it is likely that it is going to have a serious negative impact on the UK economy, especially if no agreement is reached. As a European and as a supporter of the EU project, of course I would have preferred if the UK would have chosen to remain in the EU. The past two years' discussions have been very difficult for both sides, and have taken a lot of energy and attention from other important topics we need to address on the EU level — climate change, demographic change, inequalities, the labor market, terrorism, ICT. What I would like to see is that if and when Brexit happens, we continue to maintain close and strong ties with the UK, both on the economic but also political level.

The UK remains an important player on the world scene, and although it will be mainly the UK bearing the consequences of Brexit, we also need to be ready to see how we can make the transition as smooth as possible and continue to engage.

Ziabari: Russia recently placed sanctions on senior Ukrainian officials, businesses and cultural figures, including former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Ukraine levied sanctions against numerous Russian officials and businesses in 2018. Where do you think the battle between Russia and Ukraine is headed to? Is there anything the European

Union can do to alleviate the tensions between the two sides?

Leterme: I want to believe there is always something one can do. Apathy is the worst enemy for progress and development. Nevertheless, the situation is complicated and, in my view, the EU needs to stand firm in its position against Russia with regards to the unlawful acquisition of Crimea, the attacks toward Russian citizens on EU soil, and the infiltration and manipulation of facts, spread of fake news and propaganda. Sanctions are one option of keeping this pressure, as well as a close monitoring and condemnation of all attempts to destabilize Europe or the values it adheres to.

On the other hand, we also need to be prepared to facilitate dialogue in order to alleviate the increased level of conflict between Russia and its neighbors.

Ziabari: The 2019 European Parliament elections could determine the future of Europe after Brexit. Recent polls in France showed that Marine Le Pen's National Rally has overtaken the centrist party of President Emmanuel Macron. Are you concerned about the upcoming elections? How is the situation in Belgium?

Leterme: I think that at this point in time we need to remind ourselves that polls are just polls and not election results. This said, it is a worrying stock-taking on the general mood in one of EU's founding nations and one of the oldest democracies. I sincerely hope that by May 2019, the results will be different than the polls.

The situation in Belgium is generally not so worrying as in other countries. The extreme parties, left and right, represented around 14% of the electorate in the last local elections. Of course, we experience populist tendencies, but there is a very pragmatic approach to politics. Belgian citizens are reasonable people.

Ziabari: You're the secretary-general of one of the world's prominent organizations that works to promote democracy and good governance. Would you please elaborate on the efforts you have made in less democratic countries, including those of the EU in which democratic institutions are less effective or where democratic values are not fully implemented by governments? How is it practically possible to institutionalize democracy in societies where people grapple with autocratic regimes that violate human rights, suppress civil liberties and freedom of the press?

Leterme: International IDEA, the institute that I'm leading, is indeed the sole intergovernmental organization that only focuses on advancing sustainable democracy. We try to do this by developing and providing cutting edge comparative knowledge products and tools on democratic governance, but also provide support to those working with democracy on the ground. We identify ourselves as a think-and-do tank. Although we have a global reach, we only engage and operate in countries where we are asked to provide assistance and support. This is why we have primarily been active in countries where there is an opening for democratic reforms.

However, this doesn't mean that we don't monitor and assess how democracy is faring and the challenges it is facing, both on a global, regional and national level. It is through these assessments that we have also seen the worrying trend of democratic backsliding, especially in Europe. This is when leaders with authoritarian tendencies are democratically elected, and then start dismantling or disempowering democratic institutions from within the system. In those cases, it is important to go to the root of the problem: Were people dissatisfied with the form of governance or rather the lack of delivery, of accountability and the prevalence of corruption?

In these cases, we need to re-establish trust between the electorate and the public authorities, to enable increased transparency, accountability and inclusion. On all these aspects, International IDEA has been working with organizations and public authorities and has developed both knowledge resources and tools to be used on the

ground, like the digital party's portal or the online financial disclosure system for political finance.

In addition, we work with citizen engagement, constitution-building, political party support and anti-corruption. All with the aim of improving the integrity of politics, bridging the gap between citizens and politicians, and restoring trust in the democratic systems.

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Europe Is Determined to Save the Iran Deal

Kourosh Ziabari & François Nicoullaud
February 4, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to François Nicoullaud, the former French ambassador to Iran.

It has been more than 300 years since Iran and France launched official diplomatic ties. The initial contact between the two nations dates back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries, when the kingdom of Persia tried to secure support from European nations against a powerful neighbor: the Ottoman Empire.

France was a popular destination for Iranian kings wishing to spend their time abroad, and Iran was a strategically important country at the crossroads of the Silk Road with unlimited access to the Persian Gulf. This made Iran-France relations particularly close. The two countries maintained cordial ties until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which changed the political landscape of the Middle East and caused a shift in Iranian foreign policy.

Iran-France relations suffered enormously as a result of the anti-Western tone of the revolution, and ties were cut for 11 months following the Gordji Affair. This refers to the case of Wahid Gordji, a translator at the Iranian Embassy in Paris, who was suspected by French intelligence of being behind the 1985-86 bomb attacks in the French capital.

There were other reasons for the decline in Iran-France relations. The most controversial surrounded the Iranian nuclear program, which started in the early 2000s and lasted until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was agreed in 2015. The JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear deal, was signed by the Iranians and leading world powers, including the US, Britain, France, China, Russia, Germany and the European Union. During the talks, France was accused by the Iranian government of taking a hardline approach.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to François Nicoullaud, the former French ambassador to Iran, about the ups and downs of Iran-France relations and the new US sanctions.

Kourosh Ziabari: You were the ambassador of France in Tehran for four years. How does France see its relationship with Iran? Is Iran a partner for France in the fight against terrorism, an ally, a potential threat as the Trump administration and Arab nations say, or a country with which France maintains normal diplomatic relations?

François Nicoullaud: Relations between France and the Islamic Republic have seldom been "normal." From the zenith of the return of Khomeini to the nadir of French support for Saddam Hussein during the Iraq-Iran War and its consequences in terms of bomb attacks and hostage situations, they have gone through a kind of seesaw movement that is still ongoing. Today, President Macron is trying hard to keep the balance equal between Iran on one side and the United States and Saudi Arabia on the other side, but this looks like an almost impossible task, with the very real risk of displeasing everyone.

Ziabari: How do you evaluate your tenure as the French ambassador to Iran? How have bilateral relations developed?

Nicoullaud: I had the luck to be posted in Iran between 2001 and 2005, exactly during the second mandate of President Khatami. This was a time of internal political opening, even if the situation was far from perfect, and also a time of mutual engagement between Iran and Europe, in which France played a crucial role. It was the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, who convinced his English and German partners to go together to Tehran in order to open negotiations on the looming nuclear crisis. This common visit of three major European ministers, which took place in October 2003, was a unique event in the long history of Iran.

This first endeavor failed for several reasons after two years of efforts, but the dialogue that was then established never fully stopped. It morphed into different formats and finally led to the conclusion in 2015 of the Vienna nuclear agreement, also known as the JCPOA.

Ziabari: Why did US President Donald Trump withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, which was the outcome of months of intense negotiations and committed diplomacy on all sides? How will Trump's decision to pull out of the JCPOA affect US relations with Europe?

Nicoullaud: Personally, I see no rationality behind such a decision. I believe the first motive of President Trump was to destroy President Obama's most emblematic achievement in the international field. In doing so, he has, among other consequences, offered to the Iranians a gift that they had been dreaming of for a long time without ever coming close to it: a rift between Europe and the United States on a major political issue.

Ziabari: How do the new US sanctions against the Iranians affect Iran-France trade? Since the sanctions don't have the backing of the UN Security Council, should France feel obliged to follow them and cap its business deals with Iran?

Nicoullaud: Without any doubt, the new American sanctions seriously affect French and European trade, which had started booming right after the beginning of implementation of the nuclear agreement in January 2016. See the withdrawal of Total, Airbus, Siemens, Peugeot and Renault.

European governments and the European Union do not feel bound by such unilateral American decisions, but this is of little avail. All significant European companies have, one way or another, business interests in the US economy. The American market is obviously more attractive to them than the Iranian market. Therefore, they can be easily convinced by the US administration to abide by American laws, and eventually punished if they do not comply. And European governments, being immersed in a free-market economy, have no way to dictate their behavior to major European companies.

Ziabari: Do you think Europe is determined to preserve the JCPOA and convince Iran to remain in the deal? Or is pressure from the United States so unbearable that the JCPOA will eventually fail?

Nicoullaud: I do not question the determination of Europe to preserve the JCPOA, but the necessary tools have still to be built and put to use. No magic solution will bring back Total or Siemens to Iran. However, it should be possible to protect at least a steady flow of current trade between Europe and Iran. There are some people working hard on such a mechanism. All of this addresses complex, sensitive issues, and time is needed to produce results. In between, of course, sanctions are producing their effects, so we see a kind of race against time to establish this mechanism.

On the other hand, I strongly believe that the Iranians have no interest whatsoever in leaving the JCPOA. What would they gain by restarting producing stockpiles of enriched uranium for which they have no immediate need? By remaining faithful to their commitments, they keep the high moral ground in this quarrel, and

this will present visible benefits in the long run. My guess is that most Iranians in charge are quite conscious of this point.

Ziabari: Iran's nuclear program was just one of several sticking points between Tehran and the West, and the JCPOA was apparently the best solution. Do you think the other differences over which Iran and the international community continue to spar — including Iran's support for militant groups in Lebanon and Palestine or its role in Syria and Yemen — can be similarly settled through diplomatic engagement?

Nicoullaud: They could eventually, but certainly not through a bilateral negotiation between Iran on one side and Western countries on the other. Such complex, multifaceted issues can only be solved through a collective engagement involving the other major regional actors. Do you remember the Madrid Conference in 1991, following the Gulf War? It failed miserably because — among other reasons — Iran was not invited, but this is the kind of format one should be thinking of at the end of the ongoing Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. The idea has already been floated for several years, but apparently the time is not ripe.

Ziabari: An issue on which Iran faces pressure is its ballistic missiles program. Shouldn't Iran be able to develop and advance its own means of defense in the presence of several adversaries who have different visions for the future of the country, including regime change?

Nicoullaud: The JCPOA negotiators have been criticized for not having included at least the Iranian ballistic issue in their agreement. But one has to understand that such an issue could not be part of the negotiating mandate of the Iranian diplomats. The nuclear issue is a civilian matter. The challenge was to find strong enough limitations to an existing civilian program in order to stop any kind of diversion to military goals. It was therefore normal to have professional diplomats in charge of the negotiation.

But the ballistic program is a matter of defense, in the hands of the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps]. There could be no question of letting civilian diplomats meddle with it. To address the issue, it would have been necessary to modify in-depth the format of the negotiation. So, all in all, it was a wise decision from Iran's partners to agree to limit the deal to the nuclear issue.

Aside from this somewhat technical point, one has to understand that a sovereign state cannot accept unilateral limitations to its defense capacity without undermining the very core of its sovereignty. This kind of surrender happens only under duress, usually after being defeated in war. Voluntary restrictions of defense capacities can only take place on a reciprocal basis — be it bilateral or, even better, multilateral. Iran is not the only country to possess ballistic missiles in the region. Any solution to the alleged threat of the Iranian missile program can only be sought at regional level in a framework of mutual concessions. It could start, for example, by a simultaneous accession of Iran and its main neighbors to The Hague Code of Conduct, which provides for a mutual effort of transparency on ballistic arsenals.

Ziabari: In 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo published a set of demands that Iran should grant in order for future negotiations between Tehran and Washington to take place. He said Iran should act as a normal country to be accepted in the international community. Do you think Iran's policies and actions are not representative of a normal country?

Nicoullaud: Iran, especially since the foundation of the Islamic Republic, is clearly not a "normal" country. But, after all, is the United States a "normal" country? Is France? Is Saudi Arabia? Is Russia? Is China? It would be interesting to hear from Mr. Pompeo his

definition of a “normal country” and see what remains on the map.

Ziabari: President Trump has been heavily criticized at home and abroad for eulogizing US adversaries and alienating US allies, which is said to be the outcome of his political inexperience. How do US-France relations look like today?

Nicoullaud: The French-US relationship is going through a rather rocky path. In spite of the efforts made by President Trump and President Macron to develop strong personal relations, in spite of their reciprocal visits to Paris and to Washington, the positions of the two countries have proven to be too far apart on too many important subjects: climate, international trade, European defense and, last but not least, Iran.

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Shahidul Alam: “I Will Remain a Thorn for the Oppressor”

Nilanjana Sen, Anna Pivovarchuk & Shahidul Alam
February 25, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to the renowned Bangladeshi photographer and activist Shahidul Alam.

At a time when censorship is growing across the globe, Shahidul Alam — a renowned Bangladeshi photographer and social activist — has pledged his life to represent the downtrodden and insists that he “will remain a thorn for the oppressor.” Over the years, Alam’s work has concerned itself with the representation of political violence and social change.

Having first obtained a PhD in chemistry from the University of London, Alam returned to Dhaka to focus on photography, setting up the award-winning Drik Picture Library in 1989. His work depicts everyday life in Bangladesh, following the lives of sex workers and women who joined the Naxalite movement to fight against oppression, telling the story of the Rohingya refugees and showing the resilience of marginalized indigenous people and survivors of natural disasters. What becomes immediately obvious from his work is a deep concern for the lives of working people. Alam’s powerful depictions of lives of migrant laborers and those engaged in the informal sector explain his belief in recognizing the role they need to play in improving governance in Bangladesh.

In August 2018, Alam was detained following an interview with Al Jazeera in which he criticized the government’s use of violence against students protesting road safety in Bangladesh. Held under the controversial Information and Communication Technology Act for more than 100 days, Alam’s imprisonment garnered a wave of support from around the world, putting pressure on Sheikh Hasina’s government. Now out on bail, Alam continues to face charges that can mean up to 14 years in prison.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Shahidul Alam about the current political climate in Bangladesh, his work as a photographer in a censored environment as well as his sense of duty toward his homeland.

Anna Pivovarchuk: First of all, from all of us at Fair Observer, we want to express our relief at your release from jail. We are very glad to see you well and free. Your arrest in August 2018 has garnered enormous support from around the world. Were you aware of the numerous campaign efforts fighting for your freedom?

Shahidul Alam: I am not free. The case against me still stands. I am merely out on bail. If sentenced, I potentially face up to 14 years in jail.

So the pressure to drop the case needs to continue. On the other hand, if one cannot freely express one's opinion, if dissent is quashed, if it is impossible to question authority, then no one in Bangladesh is free.

There were several stages to my detention. In the first phase, immediately after I was abducted and tortured, I had no idea of how much others knew. I had tried screaming out to people, but didn't know if others knew either where I was, or if I was alive. I managed to see the TV when I was being taken to the police headquarters the following morning, and saw that information of my arrest was on the newsfeed. I didn't know what was happening outside, but was confident my friends and the global community would be supporting me.

While in jail, other inmates told me of the statement by Nobel laureates. In the first jail visit, Rahnuma [Ahmed, Alam's partner] and Saydia [Gulrukh, journalist and director at Drik agency] told me about the letter by Raghu Rai, and later I also learnt of the statement by Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky and others. I didn't have detailed information, but knew by then it was a massive campaign.

Pivovarchuk: What was the hardest part of your detention?

Alam: Accepting the fact that I could not play an active part in the resistance. I knew the country was in trouble, and I had a role to play. There was much more work to be done, and I felt I wasn't doing my share. At the jail visits, I tried to tell my friends to concentrate less on me and more on the movement. The second hardest was hearing the stories of my fellow prisoners. Many inmates came to tell me their stories — stories of injustice and pain which tormented me, especially as there was little I could do besides being a sounding board.

Pivovarchuk: Indeed, Bangladesh's social and political milieu has been growing increasingly violent and intolerant of dissent, with brutal and often deadly attacks against free thinkers. You have strong connections to the UK, where you hold residency, yet you chose to live and work in your homeland. What prompted this return to Bangladesh, given the difficult conditions when it comes to freedom of speech and expression?

Alam: I was studying and teaching in the UK. Even as a student, I worked and earned money. I was given residency in the UK by virtue of having been a taxpayer for many years. I never applied for it. I am a Bangladeshi citizen and my allegiance is to my people. I also consider myself to be a global citizen, and global issues do concern me, but Bangladesh has given me far more than I'll ever be able to give back. Yes, there are difficulties, but as a privileged Bangladeshi, the onus is upon me and others like me to do what we can to right these wrongs. I can hardly expect someone else to fix my country.

Nilanjana Sen: Do you see similar trends with regard to censorship of critical voices occurring worldwide? Or does something set the South Asian context apart, and Bangladesh in particular?

Alam: Levels differ widely, but I do not know of a single nation that does not champion freedom and democracy in its rhetoric but actively opposes it in its practice. Bangladesh and South Asia are at the wrong end of this spectrum, Scandinavian countries being at the other end. But as long as the military-industrial complex plays such an important role in the world economy, critical voices will be suppressed. Besides, powerful nations find it much more expedient to work with pliant dictators than with messy democracies. As long as our autocracies satisfy major corporate interests, as long as they do the dirty work of powerful nations, they will be supported. It is the same across the globe. Morality has little to do with global politics.

Sen: As a photographer, given the constraints under which you often work, what are the kind of compromises you have to make? What are the challenges when you work in a

censored environment? And are there any surprising advantages?

Alam: There are times when one takes advantage of people's vanity or allows the powerful to fall into their own traps. I am aware that I have not always made full disclosure when avoidance has been an option. I have also been deceptive when my survival has depended on it. In an ideal world one would not have to resort to such tactics, but when one considers the greater public good, some compromises need to be made. That people are so susceptible to their own conceit is surprising. When people surround themselves with sycophants, they leave big chinks in their armor. Arrogance leads to vulnerabilities, which can be exploited.

Sen: Your work is concerned with representation of political violence and social change. You probe the roots of censorship, capture images of marginalization, giving your subjects a voice — all of which has given you an activist label. As you capture the spirit of the time and the historic moments in Bangladesh, do you think you can do this objectively? And what does objectivity even mean when it comes to human suffering, like we see with the Rohingya refugees, for example?

Alam: In an unequal world, staying on the fence means supporting the status quo. I do take sides and am clearly on the side of the oppressed. But I wear my allegiance on my sleeve. I take pains to ensure I am not being unfair, or am not distorting facts or misrepresenting the story, but yes, I take positions, whether it be Rohingya refugees or downtrodden peasants. I will remain a thorn for the oppressor.

Sen: Do you think photography is a better tool than other art forms to question authority? Is it a medium that can overcome barriers – national, regional, cultural — more easily, perhaps?

Alam: It is precisely because I recognize the power of photography that it is the weapon of my choice, but it is not always the best weapon. There are times when words or dance, or even silence might work better. Often it is a combination that works best. I am not married to photography. I will use it when it works, to maximum effect, and abandon it when it fails. I use the most powerful weapon in my arsenal, and often it is photography.

Pivovarchuk: The recent election, where the ruling Awami League won a disputed, yet a landslide victory, suggests little scope for change at the moment. What are your hopes for Bangladesh in the near future? What needs to happen for change to take root?

Alam: The Awami League knows it rigged the elections. They know their "victory" is hollow. It is a weakness they will constantly need to defend. There is a suppressed anger that is very difficult to contain. Even people who are sympathetic to the Awami League resent that the nation has been robbed. There is a climate of fear, but fear does not buy allegiance. The youth who took to the streets continue to be angry.

What gives me hope is that they still believe. That they have not sold out. There are very committed people working at grassroots levels. They lack resources and are not plugged into networks. With the right guidance and support, they can become drivers of change. The real heroes of Bangladesh are the migrant workers, the garment workers and the millions who work in the informal sector. They are the ones who generate the bulk of Bangladesh's wealth. If they can gain skills and move up the value chain, and are not exploited in the process, and if they can have a say in the process of governance, Bangladesh can surge ahead.

***Nilanjana Sen** is a former associate editor and **Anna Pivovarchuk** is the co-founder and deputy managing editor of Fair Observer. **Shahidul Alam** is a Bangladeshi artist, journalist, educator and activist.

Poets Speak Out Against US Sanctions On Iran

Kourosh Ziabari & Sepideh Jodeyri
March 6, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to exiled Iranian poet and journalist Sepideh Jodeyri.

Iran's relations with the United States seem to have come to a nadir under the current administration. One of the first decisions President Donald Trump took after entering the White House was to introduce a widely-contested "Muslim ban," preventing the entry of the citizens of Iran and several other Muslim-majority countries into the United States. He also withdrew the US from the UN-backed Iran nuclear deal and reimposed hard-hitting economic sanctions against Tehran.

The proponents of the sanctions say they will result in a change in the Iranian government's behavior and compel Tehran to restrain its regional influence and militarism. Opponents say the measures are controversial because of their detrimental impact on the lives of ordinary citizens.

In October 2018, the International Court of Justice ordered the United States to ease sanctions it imposed on Iran after abrogating the July 2015 nuclear agreement following a complaint lodged by Iran that Washington had violated the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations and Consular Rights. The judges specifically ruled that the United States had to remove "any impediments" to the export of humanitarian goods including food, medicine and aviation safety equipment. The US responded that it would ignore the ruling and immediately withdrew from the treaty.

On January 22, a group of distinguished American poets and literary figures gathered at the Busboys and Poets in Washington, DC, to read their work and speak out against the US government's campaign of economic sanctions on Iran and the deteriorating relations between the two countries. The event, No One Wants to Believe the Garden is Dying: American Poets against US Sanctions on Iran, was organized by Sepideh Jodeyri, an Iranian poet, literary critic and journalist living in exile in the United States, and featured guests like Charles Bernstein, Pierre Joris and Nicole Peyrafitte.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Sepideh Jodeyri about the effects of US sanctions, the role art can play in political protest and the future of the relationship between America and Iran.

Kourosh Ziabari: What was the motivation for organizing the poetry event?

Sepideh Jodeyri: You've certainly heard of the way the famous American poet Allen Ginsberg or the noted music icon Roger Waters protested war, inhumanity and injustice in the world. It was so inspiring to me, and my motivation was to find a way that might be effective in reducing the suffering that the people of Iran have been subject to since President Trump imposed these new economic sanctions against my homeland. If not effective, at least it was a way to protest. As an Iranian poet who lives in the United States, I couldn't keep silent while witnessing this [injustice].

I believe that, in the first place, the Islamic Republic's corrupt rulers are responsible for Iran's economic crisis, but we cannot deny that reimposing sanctions has made the situation worse. So I absolutely agree with the Iranian political prisoners like pro-reform activists Dr. Farhad Meysami and Narges Mohammadi when they speak out from prison against the unjust sanctions. You know that I dedicated the event to Farhad Meysami because of an open letter he wrote from Tehran's Evin prison, in which he denounced both the Islamic Republic and the US government's policies.

But the problem is that hardliners in Iran, as well as pro-war and pro-sanctions Iranian activists abroad, have dominated all the tribunes so that nobody can hear the independent voices

— the other voices. I thought it might be helpful to hold such an event to let American people know what is happening to the Iranian people as a result of the US sanctions. I think all of us who live in the US are responsible for the people who would die of hunger or lack of medication in Iran if we keep silent and don't raise our voice in protest.

You remember that more than 500,000 children died in Iraq as a result of US sanctions. I don't want it to happen to Iranian children as well. Never. But it is going to happen, according to the reports we are receiving from the ordinary people who live in Iran.

Fortunately, the event was well received by the American audience. Busboys and Poets, a famous location in Washington, DC, was full that night, with some people even standing at the door.

Ziabari: What sort of feedback did you receive?

Jodeyri: Both the Americans and Iranians in the audience later on informed me that they enjoyed it so much. The poets were amazing! They were very well aware of what was happening inside Iran. All of them spoke against the sanctions before they started to recite their poetry. For example, the winner of the Bollingen Prize, Charles Bernstein, who came from New York to take part in the event, made a long and great speech. He said, "I have come here to protest the Trump sanctions against Iran; sanctions that dangerously escalate the conflict with Iran while hurting ordinary Iranians who are themselves the chief victims of Iran's tyrannical theocracy. This a view that is hardly controversial as it is the shared by the EU and the Obama administration and over 60% of Americans."

He criticized both the US and Iranian government, and, in another part of his speech, he even criticized the Israeli government. He believes that the three governments are responsible for this disaster in Iran. And I agree with him.

I write so much, mostly poetry and sometimes essays. I hope my pen reflects my people's suffering. I am trying to do so. And that is all I can do as a poet and essayist who has been in exile for eight years.

We have also received more than 300 positive messages from the people inside Iran in the first two days after the event was held. They were mostly ordinary people who were sending their thanks via Instagram, Facebook and Telegram. They shared the news of the event on their social media and Telegram groups. So we received more messages than we expected. Even now, a couple of months after the event, I am still receiving positive messages. I wish I could take a more effective action to support the people of my homeland.

Ziabari: Charles Bernstein, Pierre Joris, Nicole Peyrafitte, Sarah Browning and Leslie Bumstead all recited their poetry. Were there other poets as well? Why did you choose them to present their work?

Jodeyri: Yes, there were a few more poets as well: Rod Smith, Bevil Townsend and K. Lorraine Graham from Washington, DC, who attended the event and recited their poems, and Mandana Zandian, an Iranian poet from Los Angeles, Alireza Behnam, Somayyeh Toosi, Amir Ghazipour and Sara Afzali from Iran who shared their work by sending audio files and their English translations. I also recited my poetry.

I knew their views on the sanctions as we had discussed them together several times before I decided to hold such an event. So, considering their knowledge of the situation, I thought that they were the best options to make it happen: to hold a poetry night with American and Iranian poets against the US sanctions on Iran.

Ziabari: What were the most notable commonalities in the works of American and Iranian poets ? Was there anything that links their views and approach to Iran-US relations and the anti-Iran sanctions?

Jodeyri: I suppose yes. The commonalities were their anti-war and pro-peace views. And I believe that the sanctions are playing the role of an economic war that drives millions of innocent people into poverty, illness and death. The American poets recited their poems in which they criticized Trump's policies and also the US and Israel governments' warlike [stance]. The Iranian poets' works that were shared during the event were mostly against war and injustice.

Ziabari: Do you think poetry, and art in general, can bridge the gaps between Iranians and Americans, and perhaps bring the two nations closer together at a time when their politicians are fiercely clashing?

Jodeyri: That was one of my goals for holding such an event — to build that bridge. I am thinking of holding more events to introduce Iranian experimental and avant-garde poetry to American poets and also writing some literary essays in Persian on American experimental and avant-garde poetry in order to introduce it to the Iranian [public].

I am sure that poetry and art can bridge the gaps, as they have done before on different occasions and milestones in history, for example during the Vietnam War. We know that many poets and artists such as Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and others took action and participated in demonstrations against that war. They recited poetry and sang songs during similar events. And I think it was effective in making people aware of the [impacts] of the war.

Ziabari: A common denominator in the poems recited by the American and Iranian poets at your event and their statements was opposition to the sanctions President Trump placed on Iran. How will the sanctions undermine the civil rights movement in Iran and affect the ordinary citizens? Is it possible to counter the negative effects of the measures?

Jodeyri: That's a good question. As I mentioned, this had been exactly my main motivation for organizing such an event. According to the United Nations special rapporteur, Idriss Jazairy, sanctions must be just and must not lead to the suffering of innocent people. International sanctions must have a lawful purpose, must be proportional and must not harm the human rights of ordinary citizens. None of these criteria are met in this case. Reuters has reported that global traders have halted food supply deals with Iran because the new sanctions have paralyzed banking systems required to secure payments. Food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies are exempt from sanctions, but the US measures targeting everything from oil sales to shipping and financial activities have barred many foreign banks from all Iranian business, including humanitarian deals.

So that's how the sanctions affect the ordinary citizens in Iran. In terms of the civil rights movement, we have to consider that activism is mostly not permitted, or at least it is not considered to be a job in Iran. The civil rights activists are voluntarily taking part in such actions. When even the middle-class has to work three shifts a day under the economic crisis, how can people have the opportunity and time for voluntary activities? Under such conditions they would logically focus on the jobs that earn them income, not the voluntary ones.

I think to counter the sanctions, in the first place, the Iranian government has to [come up with] a strong economic plan. Unfortunately, most of the experts and politicians who could share their views and experiences to help avoid such a crisis are in prison, in exile or considered outsiders. For example, one of the leaders of the Iranian pro-democracy Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was the prime minister of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, managed the economy in such a way that wartime Iran didn't face an economic crisis. But we know that he and the two other Green Movement leaders have been under house arrest for eight years now.

So I think we have to make the people of the world, especially the US, aware of the effects of

these sanctions on the people of Iran. Hopefully, if protests take place, the US government would be convinced to lift the sanctions — at least the most harmful ones.

Ziabari: During President Obama's tenure, remarkable steps were taken toward a détente between Iran and the United States. President Trump's harsh stance seems to have undone all of what was achieved under Barack Obama. Is it possible for Iran and the United States to resume working on easing these tensions?

Jodeyri: I absolutely agree with you about President Obama's positive steps in this regard. Harsh stances always empower the hardliners. In this case, as we see, it has empowered hardliners in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. I think it affects the entire Middle East. It has been a struggling region for a long time, so [antagonism] against any country in the Middle East can affect the whole region. As long as neoconservative and conservative politicians who are mostly pro-war rule the US, and even some parts of Europe, there is less hope for a change in the situation. Hopefully, if a pro-peace politician, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, wins the next presidential election, we would witness a big change.

Ziabari: Are you in touch with fellow poets, journalists and writers in Iran? What do they say about the future of their country? Are they optimistic that Iran's relationship with the outside world can improve and that isolation will end?

Jodeyri: Yes, I have been in touch with my fellow poets in Iran during the eight years of my exile. And I am in touch with many from my Iranian audience via social media. Most of them are ordinary people. Unfortunately, they are not optimistic at all. When you are under economic pressure and when your basic rights are violated by the government, you cannot be optimistic. You might have heard about the suppression of the workers' protests in the southern Iran. They are protesting because they haven't been paid for months. I mean, they are protesting for their basic rights, and they are suppressed. How can we expect them to be optimistic?

I think isolating Iran would definitely empower the hardliners and would definitely increase corruption. That's what we have always seen in the countries in similar situations. I am a poet, not a politician. So, I don't know what the best way is to push the Iranian government to improve its relations with the outside world and with its people, but I am sure that these sanctions are the worst way to do so.

Ziabari: Is the Iranian community in the United States outspoken enough to make sure the American leadership is aware of the Iranian people's resentment toward the sanctions and the Muslim ban?

Jodeyri: Unfortunately not. There are many Iranian human rights activists and organizations in the US that are expected to support human rights in Iran. But as they are all getting their budget from the US, Saudi Arabia and Israeli governments, they just follow those governments' guidelines, which are not necessarily beneficial for the people of Iran. So, what we see these days is that these activists are even supporting the sanctions and the Muslim ban. That might seem crazy, but it happened. And it makes all of us who are concerned about the future of Iran very hopeless.

Another tragic point is that even those of the US mainstream media who are considered to be critics of Trump's policies are rarely giving voice to Iranians whose views are against the sanctions, war and the Muslim ban. I think they expect Iranian activists who live in the US to just criticize the Islamic Republic government and not the US government. So we rarely see articles against these sanctions being published in the US mainstream media. It is crazy that the exiled activists such as me who don't have a [platform] in their country — because of being considered outsiders and enemies by their countries' governments — are censored by the US

government as well for opposing the sanctions and war.

Ziabari: As a poet and translator living in exile, what do you think you can do for your fellow citizens in Iran? How do you relate to their difficulties?

Jodeyri: I write so much, mostly poetry and sometimes essays. I hope my pen reflects my people's suffering. I am trying to do so. And that is all I can do as a poet and essayist who has been in exile for eight years. I always encourage my audience to just listen to the opposition inside the country, not even to me, because we cannot feel and be aware of exactly what is happening in Iran. I think Farhad Meysami can. Narges Mohammadi can. Bahareh Hedayat can. Mir Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnavard and Mehdi Karoubi can. Abolfazl Ghadiani, Jila Baniyaghoub and Bahman Ahmadi Amoui can. Esmail Bakhshi, Sepideh Gholian, Reza Shahabi and all of those who are fighting for the human rights and justice from inside Iran can.

They are true human rights activists who are paying the cost of their activism. When we are out of Iran, it is better to focus our activism on protesting the pressure the governments of the countries where we currently live put on our people in Iran in addition to supporting their activism against corruption inside Iran. This is my opinion.

***Kourosh Ziabari** is an award-winning Iranian journalist and correspondent at Fair Observer. **Sepideh Jodeyri** is an exiled Iranian poet, translator and founder of Khorshid, the Iranian Women's Poetry Prize, which is one of only three nongovernmental and independent poetry prizes in Iran. She has published several books of poetry and translation so far, some banned from publication in Iran.

Staging a Revolution: The Gulabi Gang Makes Its India Theater Debut

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Suba Das
April 12, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to award-winning theater director Suba Das about his play, "Pink Sari Revolution."

In 2006, Sampat Pal Devi, a woman from the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, started a vigilante group, the Gulabi Gang, to fight against domestic violence and other human rights abuses against women. The group is popularly known by the pink saris adorned by its members — gulabi means "pink" in Hindi. The Gulabi Gang, which grew into an army of over 400,000 female fighters for women's rights, achieved national prominence in 2011 when it organized mass demonstrations in front of a police station for a 17-year-old Sheelu Nishad, who was raped by a local politician and falsely accused of theft in an attempt to silence her.

Sampat Pal's vigilante group has fought numerous human rights abuses over the last decade and has become a symbol of women's empowerment in north India. However, every movement has its share of problems, and the Gulabi Gang is no exception. The group has been fervently criticized for its use of violence to get justice, and Pal stepped down in 2014 following charges of corruption. She eventually followed a path in politics, while the Gulabi Gang continues its fight against human rights abuses without the effervescent leader.

In February 2019, the British Council, in partnership with UK's Curve Theatre, India's National Council of Performing Arts (NCPA) and the Arts Council of England organized a special one-off performance of Pink Sari Revolution — a play based on Sampat Pal's life. Directed by award-winning dramaturg, Suba Das, the play was first premiered in Vritain as a part of the UK-India Year of Culture in 2017. Helen Silvester, the director of British Council West India, said:

"We are delighted to support the powerful work Pink Sari Revolution by Curve Theatre, UK, in India for the first time in collaboration with the NCPA. We are committed to supporting women and social change through the arts, while connecting UK and Indian artists and creative industries."

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Das about his journey in making the Pink Sari Revolution, his fascination with the character of Sampat Pal, and the challenges of telling the story of India's famous vigilante group to a foreign audience.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: How did you become associated with the play and the British Council?

Suba Das: I decided to make the play after reading the book Pink Sari Revolution. I was captivated by the book and knew that there was an amazing show that could be made from that source material. This was a costly project as it required me and my collaborators to travel to India and work with artists in India, which is not normally possible for UK arts organizations. The Arts Council England's Reimagine India fund, along with support from Curve Theatre and the British Council, enabled me to pursue the adaptation and commission Purva Naresh, a Mumbai-based playwright.

The fund enabled me to make the adaptation with authenticity, which is very important — otherwise you end up creating work that doesn't engage fully with the nuance and political situation of another country. The fund enabled me, Purva, our designer and choreographer to travel to Uttar Pradesh to meet Sampat Pal, spend time with the gang and meet all of the characters whose stories we ended up telling in the play.

Mukhopadhyay: What themes did the play focus on? Did its impact change in the light of the #MeToo movement?

Das: We started making the show three years ago — it predates the #MeToo movement in that sense. I have seen many portrayals of Indians society in art and on stage, and in film here in the UK, but I have never encountered a palpable sense of strong female resistance. We are usually used to showing the Indian female body as the body of a victim. Sampat, on the other hand, fights, and what I found extraordinary was the current of resistance and strength of women who are defying their boundaries.

I found that deeply inspirational and that was what I wanted to highlight in the play. In fact, the #MeToo movement broke out the same week the Pink Sari Revolution premiered, which is not surprising, you know. We do live in a misogynistic, patriarchal society.

Mukhopadhyay: Can you tell me a bit more about the challenges you faced when staging the play?

Das: The challenges that emerged were mostly around the process of making the play. Our playwright, Purva, was concerned about telling an Indian story in the UK. All of us working on the play had to ensure that we were approaching the topic with sensitivity. There was also the challenge of synthesizing an interaction between two different dramaturgical and theater-making cultures. This is kind of why the British Council fund was created, to allow that creative exchange to take place.

Another challenge was language, since the piece is predominantly in English. We were concerned about how to bring that texture and authenticity in a foreign language. I didn't want to feel that I had no authenticity, and the play wasn't true to the language form and the literacy and mannerisms of the people we were talking about. This was an interesting technical challenge that we faced.

Mukhopadhyay: How did you explain the concept of the Gulabi Gang to foreign audiences? How did you tailor issues like caste?

Das: By making the play very good, of course! In any play, whether its Shakespeare or Ibsen, a part of the responsibility is in creating

the world of the play. Creating the exposition, content, wider political narrative, weaving that into a text but still telling a human story is part of the playmaking skill. Great theater is always about mixing the personal and political. It's also about telling a personal human story because that's what people come to theater for. Through the mechanism of doing all this, you're educating your audience.

I was there as an arbitrator of that, asking questions like, Okay, in a UK setting this scene may not make sense as the audience may not know this and this. We had to find a way to organically weave the content in that scene so that the audience can follow that. But these are many assumptions, as the audiences are very intelligent, to be honest.

One of the specific things we theatrically added into the piece is the focus on one case Sampat Pal fought, in which a young girl was raped by a politician. Amana Fontanella-Khan, the writer of Pink Sari Revolution, had framed the entire history of Sampat Pal, Bundelkhand and the issue through the lens of this specific case in her book. Amana gave that framework to begin with, which enabled us to widen our lens while making the play. In addition to that framework we also punctuated the play with chorus sections in which the ensemble of players simply shared stories on stage — a kind of a heightened, magical, "poor theater" way. We explained the mythology of the location in which the story was based through interruptions in the narrative as a kind of poetic thing.

Our playwright Purva highlighted that the location had a history that went back to the Mahabharata [ancient Hindu mythological text] — it was on the banks of the river Chambal that Draupadi [the leading character of the Mahabharata] was disrobed, it was in that part of India where Phoolan Devi [a bandit] rose up and staged her bloody rebellion. This enabled a larger mythological, historical and political context around the contents of the play.

Mukhopadhyay: How did you go about conducting the research for the play?

Das: We understood the context primarily through Amana's research. Amana lived with Sampat and conducted a range of interviews with Sampat and all the women and figures involved in the gang over a two-and-a-half-year period. We arrived in India with a massive bank of journalistically rigorous data because of Amana's work. The research was very important to me, and I was very clear with Purva and the team from the beginning and throughout the process that we were not inventing our own story — we were adapting Amana's content for the stage, as Amana's content was rigorous.

To expand our own understanding, we went to meet Sampat. We also met the survivor, Sheelu Nishad, who was raped by the politician. (We couldn't meet the rapist and his family as it was not possible.) After meeting them, we realized how diligent Amana had been at her fact-checking.

Mukhopadhyay: Why did you choose to tell Sampat Pal's story?

Das: Because she's amazing. Show me anyone else like her. She's a great character. She's flawed. Just read her biography or life story. In addition to reading Amana's book, I read all of the other stuff out there about Sampat. I also spent time with a documentary filmmaker, Kim Longinotto, who had made a documentary, Pink Saris, about Sampat and was out in the field with her for about six months to get a perspective on this woman.

The reality is, Sampat is a tragic hero. She's done amazing things, but there is also complexity around her movement. Her movement does contain violence, and there have been accusations of corruption thrown against her. I was interested in all of that because the reality is that you tend to put women on stage in lead roles, and they need to be perfect. That's boring and not theatrical. Macbeth is not perfect, King Lear is not perfect, none of Arthur Miller's heroes are perfect. Artistically, I was really interested in asking

myself, Could we put a flawed woman on stage and allow her to be a hero with her flaws — in spite of them, because of them, and with them. Sampat Pal provided the raw material to do that.

Mukhopadhyay: How was the play received? Did you notice any difference in the reception between India and the UK?

Das: I was terrified to bring the show to India! I was always worried about what people will make of it. I mean, I am a British man telling this story about Indian women. I was absolutely terrified — I should be terrified. If I am making this work, I should be terrified, as every artist should be held accountable for their performance. The great relief was that the response was extraordinary — probably one of the most moving experiences I have had in my career.

The response was overwhelming, and we received a standing ovation. Another thing that stood out for me was that six girls who had been saved from sex trafficking by a charity came to see the show and loved it. It's an amazing feeling to think that you read a book a few years ago and now there's a show that's reaching these people — that's time well spent, you know.

When we staged the show in the UK, we had over a 1,000 people [backstage.] A lot of people who had stayed behind were women who, in some way, had survived sexual or domestic violence, and they wanted to stay with us afterward, stay in that space. What was exhilarating about presenting in the UK was seeing multicultural audiences feel like they had something to learn about her from this show.

After the show, white mums came up to me with their white daughters and told me that this issue is so important to my relationship with my daughters. To be able to successfully do that through a brown woman's story is rare. There's a tendency for people to say that this art doesn't cross over to our culture when you present something that's culturally specific. I believe that art should aspire to a conditional universality. Of course we live in a universe that is white, and black is the niche, and some people believe that white stories have a lot to teach non-white people, but non-white stories have nothing to teach to white audiences. It was quite heartening to know that we made something that challenged that status quo successfully.

Mukhopadhyay: How do you think the representation of women in theater has changed over the last decade?

Das: I think the conversation of female representation in theater is becoming more complex in the UK, and that's great. This is partly happening because there are more women leading institutions and organizations. I think we have to really take stock of this issue because it's easy to imagine that in the liberal arts space there aren't abuses of power, or there aren't prejudices. The #MeToo movement, which revealed shocking abuses of power, made us all confront the fact that actually it's not everyone in the arts is the "good guy" who is liberal, accepting, tolerant and diverse. #MeToo made people in the arts actually think that maybe we are not as good as we think we are.

Mukhopadhyay: How did you build your sensitivity about female issues when you were making the play?

Das: I surrounded myself with an amazing female team and greatly empowered my playwright Purva to correct me when necessary. I had told her that she was allowed to shoot me if need be. But yes, it was hard. I mean, "What right do I have and this?" was the question I was asking myself frequently. A lot of men step into making this work and don't ask themselves that question. I worked with community groups and went around asking them if this was right to make this show. They said, No one else went off and raised £200 million to make a show about Sampat Pal. I realized that maybe I did care and that partly helped me to let myself off the hook and not be so harsh on myself.

Mukhopadhyay: Is there message that you would like to give to someone from a non-

traditional background who wants to make a career in the arts?

Das: I grew up on a council estate, which is a poor social housing in the northeast of England. My father came to England in the 1970's from India from a very rural, poor background. He worked in a restaurant and tried his best to look after his family. He took me and my twin brother to the library twice a week, and we managed to get scholarships to a very good school. Then we both worked very hard, and then we both went to Cambridge. I became the youngest-ever director of the National Theatre and the first British Asian director for the Royal Opera House. In reality, I have worked really hard and I have found that my hard work has been rewarded. Not everyone has been that lucky.

I appreciate that hint of luck. The reality is that if you're talking about the whitewashing of the arts. It's only when you know the rules that you know how you can bend, break [them] or be subversive. The danger is waiting for permission. If you sit around waiting for an opportunity, nothing will happen. I didn't sit around waiting to see if someone will ask me if I want to make the Pink Sari Revolution. I went out and found the money, worked with amazing organizations and won their confidence to tell this story. One should have a grip on the tools of production — you need to know what the system is in order to step into it and tell the stories you want to tell.

***Ankita Mukhopadhyay** is a New Delhi-based correspondent at Fair Observer. **Suba Das** is the associate director at Leicester Curve, one of the UK's major producing theaters.

There Is No End in Sight for Turmoil in the Middle East

Dina Yazdani & Gilbert Achcar
April 18, 2019

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Gilbert Achcar, professor of international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

The Middle East and North Africa continues to reverberate from the 2011 Arab Spring protests that rocked the region eight years ago. The protests, which have also been referred to as uprisings, revolutions and revolts, led to the overthrow of lifelong dictators in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. While Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring with new competitive elections, consensus politics and a series of democratic reforms, Egypt entrenched authoritarian rule with the election of the military commander Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after he led a coalition to depose President Mohamed Morsi.

Sisi has since ruled with an iron fist, limiting the number of opposition candidates allowed to compete in elections and cracking down on any form of dissent. Amnesty International has described Egypt under Sisi's rule as "an open-air prison for critics" and "more dangerous than ever" for activists.

Libya, meanwhile, is fragmented between two rival governments split between the eastern and western parts of the country. The political vacuum created in the wake of the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi enabled the rise of armed groups that gain significant influence over political factions, further complicating the peace process and prospects of a unified country. General Khalifa Haftar, who heads the Libyan National Army in the east with the support of Egypt, the UAE and France, has begun advancing on Tripoli in a bid to expand his power to the west, threatening to ignite another full-blown civil war with the UN-backed government.

Then there's Syria. President Bashar al-Assad responded to peaceful protests in 2011 with a brutal crackdown that threw fuel on the fire, which grew into a brutal civil war, now in its ninth year. The conflict is being fought on multiple fronts, from a civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition, a sectarian proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a

war against the Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist groups. The conflict has left over half a million Syrians dead and over 12 million displaced both internally and around the world. With IS losing its last remaining stronghold of Baghouz in March, many are speculating whether the conflict is coming to an end in Syria.

The Arab Spring has also helped alter political dynamics throughout the region, at the forefront of which is Saudi Arabia and Iran's cold war over competing spheres of influence. Iran has undermined Riyadh's ambitions to position itself as the region's leader by bridging its Shia sphere of influence across Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The two countries have transformed Yemen into a sectarian battleground to swing the pendulum of power in their favor. Under the Trump administration in Washington, however, Iran has found its regional influence and power waning as the US has thrown its support behind the kingdom.

While President Donald Trump has sent mixed messages with his Middle East foreign policy — from withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal to calling for a complete withdrawal of US troops from Syria to bolstering the US's support for both Israel and Saudi Arabia — his actions have had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on the region.

Gilbert Achcar is professor of development studies and international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Professor Achcar is an expert on the Middle East and North Africa, and has written profusely on the region, particularly on the Arab Spring and the regional order. His published work includes Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising and The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising.

The region is a fluid environment and constantly shifting, and our interview with Professor Achcar took place prior to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepping down in Algeria, Haftar's advance on Tripoli and the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, all events that transpired over the span of the past two weeks. At the same time, much of the region is static between Saudi Arabia and Iran's relentless power struggle and the Syrian conflict. You can find Professor Achcar's most recent take on the revolution unfolding in Sudan here.

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Achcar about the ongoing turmoil in the region, his vision for its future and reasons for hope, if not optimism.

Dina Yazdani: Last December, President Trump announced that the US had defeated the Islamic State in Syria, and that he was withdrawing all US troops from the country. Last month, after agreeing to keep 400 US troops in Syria, he claimed again that US forces had reclaimed 100% of IS territory. Is the Islamic State truly defeated — can it ever be defeated?

Gilbert Achcar: That's a good question indeed. The very nature of such networks makes it very difficult to suppress them. ISIS is the continuation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq and then re-emerged in Syria during the civil war, turning into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, then the Islamic State tout court after it spilled over back into Iraq. This kind of terroristic enterprise will carry on as long as there are factors breeding violent hostility to the United States and the local regimes. We will keep seeing various brands of terrorist networks popping up as long as the underlying causes are there.

Yazdani: Since IS lost the territory it managed to conquer in Iraq and Syria, do you anticipate them resorting to more guerrilla warfare or splintering into smaller groups that will make it harder for US and other forces to crackdown on them?

Achcar: Well, it wasn't difficult to foresee that in the face of overwhelming power — the whole world is leagued against ISIS — they wouldn't be able to hold on for long to the vast territory they controlled at their peak. That they

managed to keep a portion of it until very recently is what is most surprising indeed. It is a testimony to their determination, enhanced by the sense of being trapped in their last recesses.

But otherwise the logical response by fighters in the face of such circumstances is to abandon the territory under their control and resort to guerrilla warfare and/or terrorist attacks, whether in the same region or at large. One shouldn't forget that ISIS, or IS, has spread to other regional territories such as the Sinai and Libya, as well as territories beyond the Arab world in sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere. So how can one claim to have terminated them when they have managed to form an extensive international network still active in several territories?

Yazdani: Trump has made it clear that defeating IS was America's only mission in Syria in his view. Since he claimed that the group has been defeated, at least territorially, what is his strategy in Syria? Do you believe that US troops are going to be gradually withdrawn, and who would replace them if they do? Does this not play in the hands of Iran, which has been pressuring the US to leave?

Achcar: There is a fundamental contradiction in Trump's position on Syria. It is manifest in that many of those who are usually very much in agreement with him are for once rather unhappy with the position he took on Syria. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, sees eye to eye with Trump on practically everything, except on this issue. That's because Trump's desire to remove troops from Syria clashes with Netanyahu's anti-Iranian priority, for the one key function of US presence in Syria is precisely to make sure that the vast territory east of the Euphrates, which is now controlled by the US-backed Kurdish troops and their Arab partners of the Syrian Democratic Forces, doesn't fall under Iranian control.

If US troops leave northeastern Syria, Kurdish troops won't remain in the Arab parts of that territory. They will withdraw into the Kurdish areas, into what they call Rojava. The major threat for them is Turkey, not Iran. The Turkish president is seizing every opportunity to promise that he will invade the Kurdish-dominated territory in northeast Syria. The Arab-populated territory east of the Euphrates would thus become open to Syrian regime control, which means either Russian or Iranian control, or both, since the Syrian regime as an independent factor is but a fiction nowadays — it depends fully on its two backers. The withdrawal of US troops will inevitably be an invitation for other powers to get control of that large swath of territory.

For Iran, this would be a very important opportunity because it would allow it to complete the corridor that goes from Tehran through to the shores of Lebanon, which has become the main axis of the Iranian regime's expansionist drive. That's why some of the closest people to Trump on the issue of Iran were very disappointed by his announcement of US withdrawal from Syria. They exerted pressure on him, which led him to compromise and agree to keep a reduced number of troops.

Yazdani: What's next for Syria?

Achcar: Very difficult to tell, not only for Syria, but for the whole region since it entered a protracted period of destabilization starting from the 2011 Arab Spring. The explosion was long overdue after the accumulation of so many economic, social and political problems in the region. It took a very tragic character in Syria, unfortunately. What we are witnessing now is not the Syrian regime's victory over the Syrian opposition, but indeed the victory of the alliance of Iran and Russia on the ground in Syria.

The big question, at least for the foreseeable future, is, therefore, What will happen between the two partners of this victory? How will the relations between Russia and Iran in Syria evolve? That's the big question because, although the two countries converged in shoring up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, they have quite different agendas. The issue of Iran is a major card in Vladimir Putin's hand: He is in the best

position to prevent Iran from consolidating its presence in Syria. He wouldn't do any of that just for the sake of controlling Syria because he already controls what is of any need to him there. It would rather be a bargaining card in his relations with Europe and the United States.

For Europe, the refugee issue is the most serious outcome of the Syrian tragedy, the millions of Syrians who had to flee their country and take refuge either in adjacent countries or in Europe. They are concentrated in such large numbers in some countries, especially Syria's neighboring countries, that it can't be contemplated that they could remain there for many years without becoming a major source of tension.

Many countries have a major stake in getting those refugees back to Syria, and Russia holds the keys to that because it is the only power that can provide a credible safety guarantee to the refugees and entice them to go back to their homeland. Russia is seen by the Syrians as a pro-regime power, for sure, but one without a stake in the sectarian or ethnic revenge wars that unfolded in the country. Iran, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of that. A major part of Syrian refugees would not contemplate going back to parts of Syria that are dominated by Iran, a power motivated by a sectarian political agenda.

This said, the only safe prediction one can make about Syria, or the whole region for that matter, is that the situation won't stabilize in the foreseeable future. The turmoil is not going to cease there for many years to come, if not decades.

Yazdani: Earlier this year, you wrote in Al-Quds al-Arabi (an English translation was posted on the Jacobin website) that the old Arab regimes' despotic order will eventually collapse. Can you explain what you mean by despotic order and what will it take to precipitate these regimes' collapse?

Achcar: The despotic character of the order that is prevailing in the Arabic-speaking region is obvious, with very few exceptions. One of them is today's Tunisia, the only one of the six countries where the Arab Spring did peak that managed to maintain its democratic gains. Another is Lebanon, a country which has a long-standing different political tradition because of its multi-confessional political system. But beyond that, most of the states in the region are either autocracies or military dictatorships in the sense that the military controls the regime, as is the case in Egypt and Algeria, for instance. The eight Arab monarchies are all absolute monarchies, even those with a constitution and parliament. Sovereignty belongs to the king, or emir or sultan in all eight cases, not to the people. All remaining countries have authoritarian regimes.

This despotic order cannot remain in place forever. Of course, the question is, After how many years will it end, and after having done what kind of damage and caused the death of how many people? What I meant, however, is what I have been saying since 2011, from the very beginning of what was called the Arab spring: I have been emphasizing the fact that it was not going to be a smooth, peaceful and brief phase of democratic transition as the label Arab Spring did convey. The 2011 revolutionary shockwave affected the whole region. A major surge in social protest occurred in almost all its countries during that year, with six countries witnessing major uprisings. This was not a coincidence or merely a result of linguistic contagion. It was the product of the accumulation over decades of several explosive factors, most crucial among which were low rates of economic growth leading to the world's highest rates of unemployment — especially youth unemployment, male and female.

The same explosive ingredients are now being produced massively at higher speed. Unemployment, youth unemployment, and all sorts of social and economic problems are only getting worse. They are not at all on their way to ease off in the region. That's why I emphasize the fact that it is a major structural crisis that can't be solved short of radical change in the region's social, economic and political order. Of course,

such a change is not easy to obtain, especially in the face of regimes that are resolved to massacre in order to remain in power.

It takes exceptional leaderships to be able to steer through such a change, and they are nowhere on the horizon for now. This means that we are facing the prospect of many years, probably several decades, of turmoil in the region. And there's no guarantee, to be sure, of a happy end. If a radical change for the better doesn't happen, the alternative is more chaos and violence, and more descent into barbarism of which ISIS was a such a crude illustration.

Yazdani: You mentioned earlier that the Arab Spring has shaken the entire region. Are the protests that we are witnessing today in Sudan, Algeria, Jordan and Gaza a second wave of the Arab Spring? I think it is also interesting to note that these countries did not undergo massive upheavals in 2011, unlike the six countries that you mentioned earlier, nor did they see any significant political transformation during that period.

Achcar: But you should have added Tunisia to the list. Tunisia was the country that opened the way to the Arab Spring when the movement started there in December 2010 and achieved a victory in January 2011. Since 2011, there has been a setback for the whole wave on the regional scale: In 2013, a shift occurred from revolutionary upsurge into reactionary backlash with a partial restoration of the old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, and reactionary violence turning into civil war in Libya and Yemen. Despite that, the underlying structural crisis kept getting worse everywhere, leading to social and political struggles starting, or resuming, in various countries.

The ongoing upsurges in Sudan and Algeria are not lightnings in a blue sky. Sudan had witnessed a wave of protests in 2011, and then again in 2013, and a new round last year before the present upsurge. In the face of harsh repression, it took time for the movement to gather momentum into the kind of massive mobilization that we have been seeing in recent weeks. In Algeria, there were limited protests in 2011, and the regime quickly offered economic concessions, like the Saudi kingdom did. They managed to buy the people's quiescence by injecting oil money in the form of increases in wages and social spending. In Algeria, there was an additional factor that is now at play in all Arab countries, which is the fear of getting into the kind of tragic situation that developed in Syria over the last few years or the one that Algeria has been through in the 1990s.

But as we can see now, even such a deterrent as the terrible decade of war that Algeria has witnessed 20 years ago was not enough to deter indefinitely its people from rising. The young people now came to the fore. They want to change the regime. It won't be easy, for sure. But the fact is that the Algerian people have joined in its turn the regional aspiration of the people to affirm its will. "The people want…" is the slogan that you hear everywhere. The people want to overthrow the regime, or the people want this or that. This is very important, and it will certainly carry on. Whatever defeats there may be, repression won't solve the core problems. Even in Syria itself, and despite the magnitude of the tragedy, social protest has been recently on the rise. This is to say that it is a revolutionary process for the long haul, and that more countries will join the fray sooner or later.

Morocco is another country that has already witnessed important waves of social protest. The crisis is simmering there, and sooner or later it will explode. Anyone believing that Egypt has reached long-term stability under Sisi's dictatorial rule is fooling themselves. That's another country where the boiling point will be reached again, rather sooner than later, because the social and economic conditions are becoming unbearable.

Yazdani: There's increasing scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — his growing litany of human rights abuses, from the Saudi-led war on Yemen to

the brutal killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and, more recently, the mass detention and torture of high-profile activists, particularly women rights activists. Do you think that the kingdom is feeling any pressure either politically or economically from the international community to reverse course, especially as it is positioning itself as a regional leader and even as a global player? And is the Trump administration's close relationship with MBS helping or hurting human rights in the country?

Achcar: Reversing course in the Saudi kingdom would take the dismissal of the crown prince from his position — he is basically a spoiled brat. He grew up in an environment where he believes everything is permissible to him. And he is very ambitious and without scruples. He's the product of a rotten monarchy where a few thousand princes have almost unlimited access to state resources. What we see today concentrated in one person does not represent such a major change in the situation of the country. It's just that MBS has become the single embodiment of the ruling elite at the expense of the other members. But for the rest of the people, the climate of terror has always been there.

The fact that MBS is backed by Trump and his family — Jared Kushner being in a central position in this regard — played a key role in limiting the domestic impact of the damage that resulted from Jamal Khashoggi's botched assassination. The Saudi kingdom is so closely linked to the United States that if Donald Trump were to leave the scene and be replaced by a president with a different attitude, it might well lead to the dismissal of the crown prince. It is certainly a problem for a regime that is so dependent on the United States for its security to be ruled by a person who, aside from Trump and Kushner, is loathed in the US and the rest of the world.

Yazdani: I would like to ask a question that would invite some optimism or flowery picture of the future of the Middle East, but I don't want to manufacture any optimism if it doesn't exist. So instead I'm going to ask, What is the biggest threat to stability in the Middle East today?

Achcar: Well it's not a threat — it's a reality. The main factor of destabilization is the socio-economic blockage of the region. Add to that several factors that are pouring fuel over the fire. One of them is, of course, the Israeli state. Netanyahu's provocative policies have tremendously increased anger at the regional level, not only among the Palestinians. The war in Yemen is a major source of tension in addition to its being the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Iran's behavior in the region and the Saudi-Iranian sectarian rivalry are also key factors in increasing tensions all over the region. So, there are many factors of destabilization and hardly any at all working in the opposite direction.

But as you said, we can't manufacture optimism, and it would be utterly artificial to end on an optimistic note when dealing with such acute and immense problems. I make a distinction, however, between optimism and hope. Optimism is, of course, the belief that the best will occur, but hope is different — it is conditional. Hope is the acknowledgement, while hope exists, that there is a potential for something better.

And from that point of view, I would assert categorically that there are reasons for hope. The potential exists. There's a new generation that is not willing to be subservient as previous generations have been, a generation of young rebels who will keep fighting, especially when their own future and even their own present are at stake. The key issue is that of leadership, as I mentioned earlier. Will we see the emergence of organized movements and leaderships capable of coping with the immense task of transforming this part of the world? If the young generation manages to produce an organized movement able to channel their formidable energy into bringing the needed transformation, the region could get

out of this very dark tunnel and back on the track of modernization and development.

This is a big "if," for sure, but in the face of the pessimism that prevails today, it is important to emphasize that the potential exists. When optimistic euphoria prevailed in 2011, I sounded pessimistic to some, and today I would sound optimistic to others or even the same. But I'm neither pessimistic nor optimistic: It's just a matter of recognizing the scale of the problems and the existence of a potential that has not been crushed and would be very difficult to suppress.

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Learning From a Nobel Prize Laureate

Kourosh Ziabari & Joachim Frank
May 1, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Joachim Frank, the 2017 Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry.

The Nobel Prize, the most prestigious in life sciences, is awarded annually to individuals who have made the most notable contributions to the fields of chemistry, physics, physiology or medicine, literature and peace. Since Alfred Nobel founded the eponymous prize with the money he made from his numerous inventions, which famously included dynamite, in 1859, one of the world's most respected awards was born and has been annually celebrating outstanding achievements, innovations and discoveries in culture, academia and sciences and major contributions to global peace ever since.

The prize in economics was introduced in 1968 by Sveriges Riksbank to commemorate the inventor on the bank's 300-year anniversary. The monetary value of each Nobel Prize is about $1.1 million, which comes along with a diploma and a medal.

The Nobel Prize in Chemistry has been awarded to a total of 181 laureates between 1901 and 2018. The Polish physicist and chemist Marie Skłodowska Curie is one of the most prominent scientists who received a Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1911 for her discovery of the elements radium and polonium and her work on artificial radioactivity.

The German chemist Otto Hahn is another distinguished Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry who was recognized by the Nobel Committee in 1944 for his discovery of nuclear fission — a discovery that led to the development of nuclear weapons. Frédéric Joliot, who was 35 years old when he received the award in 1935, is the youngest laureate in chemistry so far. The oldest Nobel laureate in chemistry to date is John B. Fenn, to whom the award was presented in 2002, when he was 85 years old. Five women are among the Nobel Prize laureates in chemistry.

The late Swedish sculptor and engraver Erik Lindberg designed the Nobel medal for chemistry so that it "represents nature in the form of a goddess resembling Isis." The first recipient of the Nobel Prize in chemistry was the Dutch physical chemist Jacobus Henricus van't Hoff in 1901.

Joachim Frank is a German-born American biochemist who was awarded the 2017 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his work on image-processing techniques that are pivotal to the development of cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM). The two other recipients of the award who shared it with Frank were Swiss biophysicist Jacques Dubochet and British molecular biologist Richard Henderson.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Joachim Frank about his academic career, his work on single-particle cryo-electron microscopy and his life after being awarded the Nobel Prize.

Kourosh Ziabari: How did the Nobel Prize in Chemistry change your life and career? Had you ever expected such a recognition or did it come as a surprise?

Joachim Frank: It changed my life profoundly. On the positive side, numerous invitations from all over the world have brought opportunities to meet and interact with interesting people that I would never have met otherwise. My wife, who accompanied me on several trips, and I enjoyed generous hospitality wherever we go. I received special honors by my German high school and my German universities. However, the erratic schedule has come at a price. I find it more difficult to get projects done because of constant interruptions. I still have to find a better way to plan my day-to-day activities and to coordinate my future trips.

To what extent it changed my career, I will only be able to tell in a few years. Right now I have only one year to look back to. I do, however, feel free to define new directions and take higher risks than before.

Have I ever expected such a recognition? Yes, I felt at a certain point, around 1985, that my work would be transformative, but I didn't know whether and when the technique would reach the present perfection — i.e., close to atomic resolution. I also didn't know whether my contributions would be recognized as standing out among all the other claims. Most importantly, the example of Ernst Ruska showed me that decades can go by without this kind of recognition. In fact, many scientists never got the recognition they deserved.

Ziabari: You and the two other scholars who were awarded the 2017 Nobel Prize in Chemistry began your research on electron microscopes in 1970s. Don't you think the prize should have been awarded sooner?

Frank: No, it makes perfect sense. Only after 2012, when the direct electron detection cameras came out commercially, did the technique become a competitor of X-ray crystallography, and the vast potential could be seen and appreciated. This is radically different from the fate of Ernst Ruska, who invented the electron microscope in 1931 but got passed by for many years, even though electron microscopy revolutionized biology and materials science starting in the 1950s. He finally shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with the inventors of Atomic Force microscopy in 1986, almost as an afterthought.

Ziabari: Why is it important for chemists to be able to freeze molecules and record their activity visually? Does cryo-electron microscopy have any medical and pharmaceutical benefits, as well?

Frank: I would think it's important for biochemists, not chemists in general, since the molecules general chemists are concerned with are too small to be visualized by cryo-EM. It's important for biochemists and biologists since life processes are constituted by molecules interacting with one another in the cell. Cryo-EM is better than X-ray crystallography in recording activities of molecules authentically, unconstrained by forces of crystal packing.

Going by my own experience, my advice is to go through life with peripheral vision: Look out for opportunities from unexpected events. There is no straight path to success.

Cryo-Electron Microscopy has medical and pharmaceutical benefits, just as the other methods of structure determination. It simply expands the range of molecules for which atomic or near-atomic structures can be determined. Many ion channels and receptors fall in that category, but also many molecules that have multiple components and exist in numerous combinations of these components, such as the spliceosome.

Ziabari: What were some of the major limitations of the early modes of electron microscopes and imaging techniques, including the early prototypes that were used in 1931, X-ray crystallography that began to be utilized in early 1950s and the nuclear magnetic resonance in 1980s? In what ways

was your discovery innovative and unprecedented?

Frank: Electron microscopes were initially not equipped to look at molecules — buildup of contamination during imaging was high since the vacuum in the column was not high enough, and devices to trap contamination close to the stage were not yet developed. Imaging biological specimens, which by nature are hydrated, under vacuum conditions posed a problem that could only be solved by big compromises — negative staining and air-drying of molecules deposited on a carbon grid, or thin sectioning of plastic-embedded cells and tissues, or looking at replicas of freeze-fractured cells. The introduction of cryo-methods in the late 70s and early 80s made a huge difference in this regard.

X-ray crystallography has at least three limitations. First, it requires the molecule to form highly ordered crystals. Second, in these crystals, because of packing forces, the molecule might not assume the conformation and shape relevant to its function. And third, large sample quantities are often needed to search for conditions suitable for crystallization.

NMR is largely confined to investigation of small molecules.

"Discovery" is not a correct term for the work I have done. "Invention" might be a better term to use.

It was innovative since at the time I began work on it, the concept of "structure" was synonymous with "crystal structure" — molecules needed to be arranged in regular order, helical, icosahedral as in viruses, or planar two-dimensional, to be afforded a "structure." This thinking may have been due to the influence of people working in X-ray crystallography. As a consequence, all efforts by electron microscopy to determine molecular structure centered on samples with ordered arrangements of molecules. The only exception was my mentor, Walter Hoppe, but he pursued a route that I considered unrealistic: tilting a grid on which molecules were deposited into many angles, and then forming a 3D image of the whole field from the projections collected. This was unrealistic since it resulted in the accumulation of a large electron dose, which destroyed the molecule in the process.

My innovation, compared with my mentor's idea, was in the realization that molecules in solution existed in thousands, millions of "copies" with identical structure, so all one had to do was put the solution on the grid and take a snapshot of these multiple "copies" at very low dose. The molecules did not need to be tilted — they already existed in many different orientations. And since they existed in so many copies, averaging could be used to get rid of the noise associated with the low dose.

Ziabari: How does your innovation in cryo-electron microscopy make it possible to carry out detailed observation of the dangerous Zika virus, which was otherwise impossible?

Frank: My part of the innovation has to do with reconstructing molecules that have no symmetry whatsoever. The Zika and other viruses have icosahedral symmetry, meaning that the virus shell is composed of 60 copies of a subunit is exact order. In this case, specialized mathematical, computational procedures can be used to obtain the reconstruction, but these were already developed by Tony Crowther at the LMB/MRC in Cambridge in 1970. So, for obtaining the structure of the Zika virus, Jacques Dubochet's contribution in developing cryo-EM as a technique of sample preparation is the most important.

Ziabari: At the same time as being a scientist, you are also a fiction and short story writer. Have your scientific achievements boosted your literary career and brought your works of literature into limelight?

Frank: Just a little of that has happened: A one-page article appeared in The Wall Street Journal, which was based on an interview, and the whole article was about my fiction writing. This, in turn, brought me an invitation to give a lecture and read from my work at the prestigious

Writers Institute founded by William Kennedy in Albany. William Kennedy attended the event, and this I considered a high honor. Editors of some fiction journals I had my work in made a point of mentioning my award in an editorial. Otherwise, the few pieces I submitted after last October were all rejected. I suppose editors will loathe the idea of making decisions based on achievements in other areas, and in fact I'm tempted to leave out the note about the Nobel Prize in my bio altogether, to avoid this kind of bias.

Ziabari: Please tell us about the Frank Lab. What are the major research activities you and your team carry out at there? I noted that you study translation at the lab. What is this process all about?

Frank: We study translation, meaning the translation of the genetic code residing on the messenger RNA into a sequence of amino acids linked to form a polypeptide, which in turn folds to become a protein. The molecular machine that makes this happen is the ribosome, a large, very complex molecular machine. In my lab, the ribosome was used extensively to develop the single-particle techniques, before its structure was known. The reason was that it is large, very stable and has high contrast. Then at the beginning of the 1990s, when we got the first cryo-EM reconstructions of the ribosome, I realized we could actually make contributions to biology, so I hired ribosome biochemists and invested in centrifuges and other fancy equipment needed in a wet lab.

Now, more recently, we are working on two further innovations to cryo-EM: one is time-resolved cryo-EM, which is a method to visualize short-lived states of a molecular machine in the range of 10 milliseconds to one second. The other one is to map the entire continuum of states of a molecule by analyzing very large cryo-EM datasets, and essentially get a picture of the molecule's energy landscape, which gives us much more information than before about the molecule's function.

Ziabari: What's your advice for young, aspiring scientists who want to follow your path and make groundbreaking achievements in their fields of study and research?

Frank: Going by my own experience, my advice is to go through life with peripheral vision: Look out for opportunities from unexpected events. There is no straight path to success. My entire research career was full of accidental discoveries, but you need to have a mindset to see the opportunities at every step along the way. And mentors can be very helpful in setting you on your path, but mentors can also be wrong, so use your own critical mind in every decision you have to make.

*__Kourosh Ziabari__ is an award-winning Iranian journalist and correspondent at Fair Observer. **Joachim Frank** is the 2017 Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry.

India's 2019 Election Is a Choice between a Strong and a Helpless Government

Nilanjana Sen, Varuna Shunglu & Maheish Girri
May 16, 2019

In this guest edition of The Interview, Nilanjana Sen and Varuna Shunglu talk to Maheish Girri, the national secretary of the BJP.

In 2014, the world's largest democracy elected the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power, with Narendra Modi as the prime minister. Modi came to victory on the promise of creation of jobs and development across India. This promise of 10 million jobs hasn't been met, and in 2018 unemployment in India was at a 45-year high. An independent study suggests that the informal sector, where around 11 million jobs were lost, was most severely hit by government policies such as demonetization.

But as Modi seeks re-election five years on, India ranks 77th among 190 nations in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. This is a marked improvement from 142nd place in 2014. Policies such as the financial inclusion initiative Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana have successfully integrated 310 million marginalized Indians into the banking system. The BJP government has also initiated notable technology interventions. The new national crop insurance portal captures real time information from farmers on harvest losses. In order to improve connectivity, the government has prioritized the availability and usage of broadband services across the country.

On May 19, the six-weeks-long exercise to elect 543 members to India's next Parliament will come to an end. This time around, not only is Modi's promise of acche din — Hindi for "good days" — being questioned, there is also growing concern of the challenge posed by the ruling party to the secular fabric of the country. As issues like construction of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh — which saw the demolition of Babri Masjid mosque in 1992 that led to intercommunal rioting, resulting over 2,000 fatalities — repeatedly find their way in the election manifesto of the BJP, it stirs fears among the public of a very specific kind of majoritarian politics.

The opposition parties in states like Uttar Pradesh have come together in an attempt to save democracy and challenge the divisive politics of the ruling party. In a similar move, the chief ministers of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, and N. Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh, have maintained their willingness to unite with other opposition parties at the national level to "save India" from the BJP. The BJP continues to maintain its commitment to fight against dynastic politics, corruption and terrorism. It has pitched the election to the Indian voters as a choice they will make between a strong and a helpless government.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Nilanjana Sen and Varuna Shunglu talk to Maheish Girri, MP, the national secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party, about the significance of the 2019 election, the government's economic policies, the growing importance of the issue of national security, as well as how India should respond when its core interests are challenged in the international arena.

Varuna Shunglu: What makes India's 2019 general election special? On what issues is the Bharatiya Janata Party fighting this election?

Maheish Girri: The 2019 general election will play a pivotal role in shaping India's image as an emerging nation. If you look at it from a political standpoint, 2019 Lok Sabha [lower house of India's Parliament] election has managed to unify a variety of opposition parties into a so-called mahagathbandan. This arrangement comprising of opposition parties does not aim to promote development and is only aimed at unseating Narendra Modi and the BJP, thus pushing the voter to decide between mazboot (strong) and mazboor (helpless) sarkar (government).

In the words of our prime minister, the "2014 Election was [fought] to fulfil hopes and expectations, but the 2019 general election is going to fulfil the dreams of Indians."

In the last five years, India has seen considerable progress on various fronts under the visionary leadership of Narendra Modi, and if he is not elected back to power, India will again fall prey to dynastic politics that led India into a state of hopelessness, with policy paralysis, rampant corruption and sluggish development. The 2019 Lok Sabha election will be a big game changer.

Nilanjana Sen: In the recent past, national security issues have prominently figured in the BJP's election campaigns. What explains the new-found focus while communicating with the voters?

Girri: National security is not a new-found focus of the BJP or the prime minister. Ever since he assumed power, Narendra Modi has

emphasized the need to strengthen the army and the national security system. For years, India has lacked a concrete national security doctrine, and our security policy was subsumed by foreign policy. It is only after the Modi government came to power that our defense policy has been given due importance. Therefore, it is definitely a big election agenda for the BJP.

Going forward, as suggested in the BJP election manifesto for 2019, the focus is going to be on national security and zero tolerance against terrorism. The manner in which India has retaliated against terrorist activities, such as the Pulwama attack in Kashmir and its robust response to Pakistan's shenanigans, has brought to light the courage that Narendra Modi has displayed in countering terrorism. This is unlike the previous government that failed to act against terrorism.

Shunglu: The BJP has been criticized by the opposition parties for not being policy-oriented, and some major policies like demonetization have hit small entrepreneurs and farmers. In the coming years, if brought back to power, what measures can we expect from the government to strengthen the economy?

Girri: Narendra Modi had assumed power at a time when the economy was growing at the slowest pace in a decade, and high hopes were pinned on his administration considering the remarkable electoral victory in 2014. Under Modi's leadership, India emerged as the fastest growing economy in the world. Demonetization and the Goods and Service Tax (GST) are two major economic reforms that have taken place under Narendra Modi's leadership. While demonetization aimed to wipe out the black money, the GST was a landmark legislation that streamlined India's indirect tax regime.

With Modi's government rolling out a series of major reforms that made it easier for firms to get construction permits, pay taxes and carry out trade across borders, the ease of doing business in India has also improved significantly over the past few years. The development work of the next government of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would be multi-layered, with a focus on work for the development of villages, those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, women and the youth.

The BJP aspires to make India the third largest economy of the world by 2030. For rural development, the BJP has promised to spend 25 lakh crores ($356 billion) in the next five years, including 6,000 rupees ($85) yearly income support to farmers and pension to small and marginal farmers above 60 years of age.

Shunglu: Post the Pulwama attacks, analysts and many in the opposition are debating the BJP's stand on Kashmir. At a time when militancy is a major concern, what exactly is the BJP's policy on the region? Do we need a more robust political solution for Kashmir?

Girri: Kashmir's problem is a very old one, and this issue must be treated with sensitivity and understanding. As far as the challenge being faced in Kashmir is concerned, the BJP in its 2019 election manifesto has reiterated its resolve to abrogate Article 370, which gives autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir, and annul Article 35A of the constitution, which the party finds discriminatory against non-permanent residents and women of the valley state.

The party also aims to make all efforts to ensure the safe return of Kashmiri Pandits and provide financial assistance for the resettlement of refugees from West Pakistan, Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, and Chhamb.

Sen: As far as India's foreign policy is concerned, if re-elected, what will be the priorities of the Modi government while engaging with its immediate neighbors in South Asia?

Girri: Ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, the face of Indian foreign policy changed. The situation in South Asia does not seem to paint a perfect picture, I

may agree. India's relations with some of its neighboring countries have been problematic.

India views China and Pakistan as its biggest security challenge in the South Asian region. But unlike his predecessors, Modi has chosen to be more assertive when it comes to national security. Pakistan today has been isolated in the world arena due to the prime minister's diplomacy. He has built successful relations with the leaders of the world. Modi has also transformed India's "Look East" policy into a more aggressive "Act East" policy that seeks to connect India to East Asia through better trade, infrastructure and regional institutions.

Sen: There have been talks about the growing challenges to India's autonomy, especially in light of the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on Iran, which happens to be a major oil supplier to India. How will India respond to such postures when its core interests are challenged by countries like the United States?

Girri: For India, Iranian sanctions present both political and financial problems, due to its strong relationship with both Iran and the United State of America. India and Iran have traditionally maintained cordial relations. India continues to be Iran's second-largest buyer of crude oil, next only to China. At the same time, India is also keen to preserve its close partnership with the United States of America. Therefore, India will have to work on a two-fold strategy: negotiate with the Trump administration to get special exemptions in the case of Chabahar Port, for example, and at the same time maintain its current economic and security ties with Iran.

*__Nilanjana Sen__ is a former associate editor at Fair Observer and **Varuna Shunglu** is a yoga and meditation teacher and an entrepreneur. **Maheish Girri** is an Indian member of Parliament for the Bharatiya Janata Party

Finland Is Warming at Twice the Global Rate

Kourosh Ziabari & Satu Hassi
May 21, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Satu Hassi, Finland's former environment minister.

Finland is a country of fascinating and stark contrasts — long and glittery summer nights and short, snowy winter days, the midnight sun and the winter darkness.

The country earned its nickname, the Land of the Midnight Sun, because of the sun that doesn't set at all in its northernmost parts during summer months. Finland is a land of islands, boasting some 187,888 lakes, and is believed to be one of the most extensive and unspoiled natural environments in Europe.

However, Finland has been affected by global warming and climate change in its own ways. The Finnish Meteorological Institute has projected that in the near future, temperatures will rise, precipitation will surge, snow cover and soil frost will reduce, cloud cover will increase, sunshine will decrease and sea level in the Baltic Sea will rise. June 2017 was the fourth warmest in 137 years.

In 2015, Finland's national Climate Change Act entered into force, laying down provisions on climate policies and monitoring the implementation of climate objectives.

The long-term greenhouse gas emission reduction target set by the legislation is aimed at 80% by 2050. The Ministry of the Environment is tasked with multiple responsibilities to mitigate the impacts of climate change on Finland.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Satu Hassi, Finland's former environment minister, about the northern European nation's fight against climate change and its government's policies to tackle global warming.

The interview was conducted at the end of 2018. The text has been lightly edited for clarity.

Kourosh Ziabari: How is Finland affected by global warming? Do you think it can win the fight against climate change?

Satu Hassi: In the north, including Finland, the warming rate is approximately double compared to the global average. Finland has warmed approximately two degrees Celsius after mid-19th century. For example, now almost all of Finland, including the northern part of the country, Lapland, is snow free, which we find extremely unusual in the second half of November. For example, a few weeks back, there was a World Cup winter sport event in Ruka, in northern Finland, but there was no snow. They had to produce snow artificially for the cross-country skiing lanes.

Ziabari: Finland is known as a forest-rich country, with forests considered to be "green gold" and part of its national identity. How does the government's new climate and energy strategy unveiled in 2017, which is based on increasing logging by nearly 25%, undermine the potential use of these [woodlands] as a carbon sink?

Hassi: I disagree strongly with our government on the plans to increase logging. This would reduce the carbon sink formed by our forests, which would be as bad for climate as increasing greenhouse gas emission. Reducing our forest carbon sinks in the way the government has planned would be irresponsible.

Ziabari: You once mentioned in one of your interviews that collection systems for plastic recycling are inadequate. Is it something specific to Finland, or is the whole of Europe suffering from this? Is there any significant investment underway to make up for the inadequacy?

Hassi: The inadequacy is global. Recently I read that even fish caught from the Amazon River had pieces of plastic in their digestive system. In Finland we have recently improved to some extent, and separate collection of plastic waste has increased. Now it is possible for normal families to bring their plastic waste to containers, which will be brought to a plastic recycling [plant], not incinerated.

Ziabari: Are the negative environmental impacts of aviation a serious challenge or concern for the European Union? An agreement to exclude international aviation from the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) for another four years was reached between the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2014. That period has expired now. How is the situation presently?

Hassi: Originally, the EU directive which brought aviation to the EU Emissions Trading Scheme was written in such a way that after a transitional period of some years the ETS would cover all flights arriving to EU and departing from the EU. But China and the US threatened to start a trade war. The EU bowed to this pressure and amended the directive in such a way that only flights inside the EU are covered by the ETS. I very much hope the ETS could be developed to cover all flights between the EU and the rest of the world.

The ideal solution would be emissions trading covering all flights globally or a global carbon tax for all flights. The revenues could be used to support climate measures, both mitigation and adaptation, in developing countries.

Ziabari: How is the European Union, and Finland in particular, dealing with concerns over worldwide food insecurity? A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization shows that the diversity of cultivated crops fell by 75% during the 20th century, and one third of today's varieties could disappear by 2050. What are the implications of this decline in the diversity of nutrients for EU citizens?

Hassi: It is very worrying. This has been an issue of political debate in the European Parliament. For example, the Greens have argued

that the EU agricultural policy should encourage genetic diversity of crop species. But for global food security, I think climate mitigation is even more important. A warming climate will reduce crops, especially in the tropical and subtropical latitudes.

Ziabari: You once referred to air quality as one of the success stories of environmental policy. How is the situation with air pollution in Europe today? While 80% of Europeans are exposed to particulate matter level above the limits stipulated by the World Health Organization, is air quality a major concern, or has it been tackled?

Hassi: The air quality in European cities is much better than it used to be, which you can see with your own eyes. For example, in Finnish cities the new snow stays white much longer than it did in the 1980s — but still there is a lot of work to be done. It is still estimated that 400,000 Europeans die prematurely because of air pollution. But emission standards for power stations, factories and cars have been tightened several times. The sulphur dioxide emissions are less than 10% compared to their peak value in the 1980s.

The most recent sector to reduce air pollution emissions is shipping. The maximum sulphur content of maritime fuel was reduced from 1% to 0.1 % on January 1, 2015, and on January 1, 2020 it will be reduced from 3.5% to 0.5% in all other sea areas. This is a major step forward for air quality, especially in coastal areas.

***Kourosh Ziabari** is an award-winning Iranian journalist and correspondent at Fair Observer. **Satu Hassi** is the former minister of environment of Finland in the second cabinet of Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen and a former member of the European Parliament (MEP). She is currently a member of parliament of Finland.

How Ideology Affects Our Acceptance of Climate Science

Dina Yazdani & Arek Sinanian
May 29, 2019

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Arek Sinanian, a climate change expert.

The science is clear on climate change. Looking back at this past year, we've witnessed how climate change has manifested in more extreme weather, from record-breaking hurricanes, storms and flooding to heat waves, droughts and wildfires. Scientists have linked climate change to human activity and emphasized that the problem will not go away on its own. Instead, it will take a global, concerted effort to mitigate the impact of climate change today, while staving off its worst effects in the future.

In October 2018, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that the planet would face "catastrophic" climate change if we do not dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The planet's average temperature has risen about 0.9°C since the late 19th century. Most of that warming has taken place since 2010, registering five of the warmest years on record.

Global initiatives like the Paris Climate Agreement have sought to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C of pre-industrial levels, as even half a degree Celsius higher — which, if we continue emitting at our current rates, we'll hit by 2030 — would have a devastating, irrevocable impact on the planet's climate. CarbonBrief has put together a graphic that depicts the difference between a 1.5°C and 2.0°C increase in temperature, which Vox soberly describes as a weather forecast "from hell."

Despite growing evidence backing man-made climate change, some people continue to reject the science, and political leaders lack the will to make substantive change in curbing carbon

emissions. Leaders like US President Donald Trump have called climate change a hoax. During his annual Earth Day address in April, Trump managed to talk about environmental protection without once referring to climate change. And Donald Trump isn't alone. Governments around the world have ignored, denied or understated the impact of climate change in favor of maintaining profitable production of fossil fuels — the most egregious culprit when it comes to global warming.

Nonetheless, climate anxiety is rightfully on the rise among the general public. This past year we've seen greater public participation in grassroots movements demanding more action against climate change, particularly among youth. In March, 1.5 million students in 123 countries walked out of their classrooms to participate in a global Climate Strike in what was the largest youth-led environmental protest in history. The movement, led by 16-year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, called on political leaders to respond to climate change with greater urgency. In April, the Extinction Rebellion movement staged rallies, die-ins and acts of civil disobedience around the world to call for climate action.

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Arek Sinanian, an expert on climate change and the author of A Climate for Denial: Why Some People Still Reject Climate Change Science, about what drives climate change skepticism, and the role that individuals and governments can play in halting global warming.

Dina Yazdani: The IPCC reported last October that if we don't make significant strides in curbing global warming by 2030, we could face catastrophic climate change. So what does catastrophic climate change look like?

Arek Sinanian: Yes, I think the word "catastrophic" is a big word — it means different things to different people — and it's a very general term. As your question quite rightly asks, what does it actually mean? What catastrophic means is that it's going to have significant impact on the climate of the world. It means more frequent and severe storms that have significant impact on the populations, societies, communities, infrastructure and people.

How many people are going to be involved in such catastrophes? It's hard to say; you can't put a number on it. You can't say X number of people are going to die, or Y number of towns are going to be under water, etc. Predictions vary, and that's another reason why the report can sometimes be a bit vague, because it depends on what happens between now and 2030.

There's a lot of variables: economic growth, global economic activity, technological developments and how many new technologies we adopt in energy efficiency and renewables. So there's a lot of uncertainty. But coming back to the question, What does "catastrophic" mean? If you look at the various aspects of climate change, what sort of impact are we talking about? Let's run them through.

One is sea level rise. Now, how does sea level rise affect the world? Many towns, cities, countries are on the water, so to speak. An increase of sea level even by a few inches can have a huge impact, particularly if we then add the effects of more severe storms. A rise in sea levels will affect particularly low-lying countries. There are, for instance, Pacific islands that are literally only a few feet above sea level. The reality is that these people can't go anywhere else. The only thing they can do is either build their houses further up the hill — but often there isn't a hill — or raise their house somehow on stilts so that they remain above sea level.

On top of that, the other impact is more storms, and more severe storms. Yes, they have been happening for hundreds and thousands of years. They are likely more to be more severe. What does more severe mean? Stronger winds, stronger gusts — and all of this will affect infrastructure, power systems, roads, trains, coastal areas in particular but also in-land areas where there are weather patterns where you will have these tornadoes and hurricanes.

Just imagine instead of hurricanes happening once a year, now we're going to have twice, three times, four times, five times a year. Is that "catastrophic"? Yes, it can be. Catastrophic in a sense that by the time you recover from one hurricane, you've got another one. So that's what people mean by catastrophic.

That includes storms that might [bring] heavier rain. What does heavy rain mean? More floods, particularly in flood-prone areas in the cities and communities. Again, there have always been floods. We've learned to live with these floods. We've built systems that can somehow cope or recover from major floods. However, there are countries, communities that are not capable of coping with such events. Also, what if these floods occur more frequently and more severely? In other words, many parts of the world they measure the likelihood of flooding and say things like "one-in-100-years flood." What if these start happening one every 10 years? One every 20 years? Again, it's a matter of building resilience and being able to recover from such events. That's where the problem is.

Just like we have more frequent and severe floods, we'll also have, ironically and somewhat contradictory, more droughts. Again, more severe, longer droughts, longer periods of no rain, or very little rain, etc. Agriculture, communities and towns, cities rely heavily on water. So it will impact the production of food and sustaining cities and towns.

Then we have more severe heat waves. It has a huge impact on populations. Have we always had heat waves? Yes, we have, around the world there are high temperatures. What if these heat waves occur more regularly and more severely? In Australia, we have just had the hottest summer on record, ever — at least since records began more than 100 years ago. This has an impact on all of the people. More vulnerable people are more prone to heat waves, and it can affect other things like infrastructure and the actual asphalt.

The road base is melting because of the heat. Railway lines are buckling because of the heat. It turns out that it's not just the single maximum temperature but the prolonged maximum temperature. Instead of just say 100-120˚F peak, what if the 120˚ stayed there for two-three days? It turns out that has even a bigger impact because the system cannot recover.

So we have all of these impacts, and when people talk about "catastrophe," what if all these things happened around the world more frequently, more severely, and had a huge impact on the economy, on sustaining communities, on the health of people and ecosystems? That's what the report is referring to as "catastrophic," and that's why we need to act very quickly.

Yazdani: That really paints a pretty comprehensive picture of what we can expect if we do reach that tipping point in 2030. You've also written quite extensively on the distrust toward climate science and the psychological reasons behind why someone might reject it. When we think of climate change deniers, we often think of people who stand to lose from the adoption of clean energy — like those that work for corporations, car manufacturers, coal producers, power plants, etc., and their lobbyists. What are some other reasons why people might refuse to believe in climate change?

Sinanian: You might be referring to the book I wrote called A Climate for Denial. The reason I mention it is that I did a lot of research into this very thing because I was genuinely intrigued as to why seemingly intelligent, educated people would accept other parts of science. They go to their doctor when they're sick, they have surgery by a surgeon, who is basically a scientist. The same science goes into designing and flying an aircraft as predicting climate change or deciding how much greenhouse gasses are impacting climate change — the same science, the same rigorous methodologies. Why do these people reject the science of climate change when they in fact accept many others? Our daily lives almost depend entirely on science.

To answer your question, what I've found is that there are many factors that affect a person's

accepting or not accepting the science of climate change. It turns out that ideology is the biggest determinant: There have been many surveys and studies done by schools of psychology around many of these reputable universities around the world. So then the question arises, What is it about ideology that affects people's acceptance of science? Let me just say outright that the science on climate change is absolutely clear. There is no doubt, no question mark. The only thing we can't really put our finger on which I alluded to earlier is just how much the impact of climate change is going to be.

The way that climate scientists predict the impact of these greenhouse gasses that we're putting into the atmosphere is that they have models and rely on very sophisticated, I want to emphasize this, very, very sophisticated models that almost include hundreds of different variables, including solar flares, volcanoes, cows and people doing what we do when we eat food. It includes all of that and historic data on everything you can imagine, and then it includes economic factors, technological factors, the use of energy, etc. It's very sophisticated.

I say this because people say to me, "What about solar flares? Hmm? You didn't think of that, huh?" Of course they thought of that. Some of these deniers come to me with the most mundane, basic questions that an 8-year-old asks as if all these scientists that have spent their whole professional lives looking at this would not have thought of that.

Ideology is a big one. What does ideology have to do with accepting science? Well, my conclusion was that there are people whose ideology is such that there is a level of anti-authoritarianism in their way of looking into the world. They don't want to be told to live their lives in a certain way. It's kind of a reaction to being told that you have to use less energy, that you have to use a smaller car, you're using too much fossil fuels, etc. On top of that, there is this notion that, particularly with ultra-right-wing ideology — and I'm not having a go at anybody here, but just giving you what the research is telling me — there is a feeling that instead of being told what to do, maybe the market should decide what is best for the economy and what is best for us.

The market decides how much tomatoes cost, how much your car is worth, etc. If, for instance, we run out of oil, then oil will become more expensive and less people will use oil. You get the point. As it turns out, very reputable economists whom I mention in my book have said that, in fact, climate change is possibly and probably the biggest failure in the marketplace. A failure because the decisions we have made since the industrial revolution started, the decisions we have made in deciding what kind of economy and what kind of power system we have, and transport systems — major decisions we've made have not incorporated the environmental damage and climate change.

If you believe in the market making decisions for us, then sometimes the market does not get it right. It does not always get the price of a tomato correct. And that's when usually governments step in and provide subsidies and provide some sort of adjustment to these things to change the market.

That's ideology. But wait, there's more. It turns out that apart from ideology, theology or religion, has an impact. You might say, What does religion have to do with climate change? Well, I've been told by highly religious people, and again studies show this, if you truly believe that God, a god, is omnipotent, omniscient and is in control of this whole thing — of the existence of humans on earth, of the existence of the earth, how these things happen — then they say that God after all determines our climate and determines whether we survive or not.

I even asked a very religious person, "Wait a minute, you're saying that you're willing to leave all of this for God to decide?" And he said, "Yes, absolutely." So if we're going to be wiped off the face of this earth, he said to me, "Well, maybe this is part of God's plan." But I didn't have the heart to say to him, What if you had a really, really almost fatal disease, but a curable one. Are

you going to say, "Well, it's God's will, so I might as well die," or are you going to go to the doctor and say, Please cure me, get rid of this damn thing? So again, it doesn't make sense, but that's the way it is.

But fortunately, the current pope has responded to this very question. A very important paper, Pope Francis's Encyclical on the Environment, released about two years ago turns that argument completely upside down. What his paper basically says is, yes, God gave us this incredible gift — the gift of this earth, the gift of the beauty, our lives, on this earth — and we owe it to God to look after it for him (or for her).

So far, we have ideology, theology, the marketplace fallacy, and then it goes on and on. There's fear, and it kind of addresses what you said about people who have a vested interest. People are afraid that if we change all of this — [if] we get renewable energy, rely more on renewable energy than on fossil fuels — then somehow our lives are going to be worse off, the economy is going to suffer, etc. There's this fear of change. Humans, generally, do not like change. Nobody likes change, because change means uncertainty; we don't know what's going to come, we don't know what's ahead. We don't want to change our way of life. I want to keep my car. I want to drive it everywhere I want. I want to put my air conditioning on. I want to stay cool. I want to stay comfortable. All of that.

But here is the counterargument to that fear: What if we had our entire energy provided by renewables? What if? It's a big hypothetical, I know. Imagine that. All of our energy comes from renewable sources. Guess what? You won't even have to turn your lights off. You won't have to turn your air conditioning off. You'll be able to run your electric car until it falls apart. What I'm saying is that if we have renewable energy instead of fossil fuels, none of these fears would happen. The only problem is, how we do get there? That's the biggest issue we have.

Yazdani: You mentioned earlier the resistance to authority, God's will, market shortfalls: How can we — or political leaders, religious leaders, people who have influence, scientists — more clearly communicate the reality of climate change?

Sinanian: It's interesting that you say that, because the reason why I thought my research and book are important, is because I think communication needs to change. I'll start with the scientists. The scientists have done themselves a disservice. It turns out that for a climate denier, the last thing you should give that person is more graphs, numbers and data. It's more to do with ideology than figures, graphs and numbers. It's convincing them that the fear is unjustified, the market is not going to work and these catastrophic things will affect us.

Really, the communication ought to be more positive than that. At the end of the day, it becomes a philosophical question rather than a scientific or political one. The question is, Do we really care about future generations? It's as simple as that.

The scientists have to present the information, the data in such a way as not to talk down to people. They think they know everything. Well, between you and me, they do — they know a hell of a lot more than the average person on the street, and know a hell of a lot more than most politicians and corporate leaders. But it's how you communicate. Instead of talking down to people and saying you're ignorant and don't know a thing, the way to communicate has to be more inclusive and understanding of these fears and denialist tendencies that I talked about earlier.

At the personal level — that's you and me — what can we do about it? Other than making our own small decisions in the way we live on this planet, I think we can also make decisions when we come to vote. Most people [live] in a democracy, and in a democracy we have ways of choosing our leaders. The people we choose to represent us agree with our values, morals and ethical standards, including climate change. When I vote, there is no way that I will vote for someone who doesn't believe in climate change.

Why? Because as I said, it's going to lead to catastrophe for future generations and I will not be able to die in peace knowing that I gave power to that person.

Now, this doesn't guarantee anything of course, but even if a leader is voted in who doesn't agree with it, we can write to politicians, express our disappointments in their lack of climate change policy, because not doing something is as bad as doing something bad.

Yazdani: Earlier you mentioned that many people see climate change through a generational lens. Last month, youth from over 100 countries around the world walked out of their classrooms to participate in what they called a Climate Strike to demand leaders to respond with greater urgency to climate change and take more action. We have also seen a Green New Deal put forward in US Congress. Do you think leaders are feeling pressure from the public, particularly the youth, to do more to address climate change and make hard decisions?

Sinanian: Absolutely. I have contacts all over the world, and the response to [the student strikes] all over the world was fantastic. In a way, the strikes were the best way to tell leaders, particularly coming from the youth, because, as I said, this is an intergenerational problem. To be honest, my generation is probably not going to suffer anywhere nearly as much as future generations. The strikes were fundamentally important — and I would say fundamentally successful.

You mentioned a tipping point earlier. I think we are reaching a tipping point in climate action, because there is a change in the mood around the world. In Europe, France, Germany, have been way ahead of America and Australia on this. They're already there. There are now movements in the mood and in the feeling among politicians — and politics — around the world. The mood of the community and the action of what the young people are asking for is changing.

So how is this going to change policy? Because there are very young people that went on strike, if you're a politician, you're thinking, Those young people are going to vote in a few years' time and going to put me, or my party or my congress out of [office]. There is now this feeling around the world that we better change our colors. We better change our policies, otherwise we're going to be dinosaurs, so to speak.

Yazdani: Bringing it back to the US, last year the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that greenhouse gas emission had decreased by 2.7% from 2016 to 2017 during the first years of Donald Trump's presidency. Andrew Wheeler, the head of the EPA, claimed that "these achievements flow largely from technological breakthroughs in the private sector, not the heavy hand of government. The Trump administration has proved that federal regulations are not necessary to drive CO2 reductions." What's your reaction to this press release, and can we significantly stem greenhouse gas emissions without government regulations?

Sinanian: No. I totally disagree. I don't feel capable or justified in what I'm about to say. I have a lot of respect for the EPA. However, I cannot help but feel that that statement was a political statement rather than a technical one. I'll talk generally about agencies like EPAs around the world. They are absolutely fundamental to monitoring and measuring our emissions and what impacts policies are having on our emissions. They measure our fuel, energy usage per capita, sector, economy, city, state. The first thing about management of anything, not just science or climate, requires data and monitoring and reporting.

Now, EPAs of this world are in the best possible place to do these measurements and collation of data and then to report, because that then gives the decision-makers the tools and data they need to put the appropriate policy measures in place. Regulators such as the EPA also are

involved with the actual implementation of policies and regulations. We need regulations to stop people polluting and doing unlawful acts according to the country or state's regulatory framework. Otherwise, if we didn't have EPAs of this world, I could put cyanide down the sink or put toxic chemicals down the river. They fill a very important function not only for climate change but also for regulating and policing environmental issues, and monitoring and reporting to politicians to advise them.

Yazdani: Regulations aside, what are other steps that the government can do to help foster investment in renewable energy and discouraging the use of fossil fuels?

Sinanian: There is a fear that somehow transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy is going to be painful, costly, a nuisance, [and will] degrade our quality of life. What can they do? As it turns out, investment in renewable energy is at the highest it has ever been. The US is not a bad guy here. On the contrary, after China, the US is the second biggest investor in renewable energy. Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of respect for what's happening in the USA. A lot of this is happening because of the market. What's happened, for instance, [is that] solar panels and wind, the cost of renewables, the installation and operation, have come down. The costs have come down significantly.

Not only that, but the technology has improved. Solar power is far more efficient than it has ever been. You add that to the cost reductions as well, and it's got to the point that in many parts of the world solar energy and wind energy are challenging the cost of coal-powered electricity. In many parts of the world, coal-powered generation is by far the cheapest option. If that's our baseline and what we're aiming for, it turns out that solar and wind power is now challenging that economic argument.

What can the EPAs of this world do? They can mention that and show the success and the economic, as well as the environmental, benefits of renewables. Incidentally, economists are also saying — and have done the calculations — that not addressing climate change is going to be costlier than actually addressing it.

Yazdani: We talked about how climate change can look like at the individual level, at the national level, and what governments can do. To bring it to the global level, how effective are international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement in compelling signatory countries to meeting their emission targets? So unlike the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement is not a legally binding treaty, therefore there are enforcement mechanisms for countries' non-compliance with the agreement. Are pledges enough to ensure that warming does not surpass 2˚C above pre-industrial levels?

Sinanian: Unfortunately, no. The Paris Agreement is a compromise. It's an agreement to agree. It's like you and I agree that we're going to do something. High five, we've agreed to do something. The reality is that the global agreements have always been extremely difficult, even more difficult than the national ones. I'll tell you why. In all of these meetings that they have in the United Nations, just imagine almost 200 countries coming together to agree, as I said, to agree to change the way we live on this planet. That is an incredibly difficult thing to do. They can hardly agree to the time of day, let alone how we're going to change.

There are many problems, but the main problem is this: There are around the world the haves and the haves not. There is the industrialized countries, USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, etc., and then there are the other countries that are still developing, including China. China is still predominantly an underdeveloped country. Don't be fooled. Yes, they're making everything we wear, use and buy. You've got India coming up and many other Asian, African, South American countries that are predominantly underdeveloped. How does one provide a bridge?

India is about a billion people, [and some 31 million people] don't even have electricity yet. Here I am thinking about turning my air condition on and off. In many parts of India, they cook with little sticks of wood. So how are we going to [tell] these people, No you cannot have electricity, sorry — you could only if you have solar wind, but you can't have electricity because that's going to add to greenhouse gasses. You can't do that to people. They have as much right to come to our level of affluence and quality of life as we have established for ourselves.

You've got a huge discrepancy between the developed and underdeveloped economies. How are we going to bridge that and let them develop, because development ultimately requires energy use. If they're going to develop and require more energy, how can we make sure they do all of this without adding to greenhouse gasses? It's a huge problem. That's why global agreements have failed.

What [such agreements mandate] is for the developed countries to reduce emissions enough to allow the underdeveloped countries to come up mid-way. Kyoto did that, and I was personally involved in implementing the Kyoto Protocol for the United Nations. The way that Kyoto tried to do it was encourage cross-subsidization for developing countries to put in renewable energy and energy efficiency systems to that they could develop — transfer technology to them, teaching them how to do it better, but also at the same time to encourage them with economic assistance, to embed low carbon technologies and low carbon energy generation. It's a big problem. That's why the Paris Climate Agreement is non-binding and just an agreement. Let's meet for a few days, have lots of cups of teas and agree to do something. We don't know what it is, and even if we know what it is, we're not bound to it.

***Dina Yazdani** is a US-based correspondent at Fair Observer. **Arek Sinanian** is the author of "A Climate for Denial."

Helping India's Rural Youth Unlock Their Potential

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Ashweetha Shetty
May 31, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Ashweetha Shetty, founder of the Bodhi Tree Foundation.

In 2012, Ashweetha Shetty left a remote village in Tamil Nadu to join the Young India Fellowship, a one-year post-graduate diploma program at Ashoka University in the northern Indian state of Haryana. Shetty was the first among her family members to finish college, breaking many social barriers to reach Delhi. Like many young Indians who hail from remote areas of the country, she was sidelined as she didn't fit into the narrative of the urban, educated Indian and struggled initially because she didn't know English. A year after completing the fellowship, Shetty started the Bodhi Tree Foundation to help rural youth gain access to information so that they can leverage their education for a better life.

The inhabitants of some 600,000 villages across India have seen few benefits from the country's rapid economic growth and aggressive social spending. This has led to an immense gap in opportunities. According to a survey released by Pratham, a nonprofit organization, about 42% of rural youth between the ages of 14 and 18 were employed in January 2018, despite going to school. Among these, 79% were working in agriculture, while at the same time only 1.2% of the youth surveyed wanted to become farmers.

Although teenagers in rural areas aspire to become teachers and engineers, dismal rates of job creation have reduced opportunities for them. Soft skills such as English proficiency become a deciding factor in the job market, with most jobs being taken up by more privileged candidates who have better access to opportunities in urban India. Through the Bodhi Tree Foundation, Shetty is trying to bridge this rural-urban divide,

by building confidence and self-esteem among young people living in rural areas. Shetty's goal is to help them realize their potential so that they can explore other opportunities instead of the traditional work handed down to them from through family tradition.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Ashweetha Shetty about the work of the Bodhi Tree Foundation and her vision for the rural, underrepresented youth of India at a time when government initiatives have failed to bridge the rural-urban divide.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: Can you tell me a little more about the work Bodhi Tree does?

Ashweetha Shetty: Our foundation works with rural youth between the ages of 17 and 23. We help them build life skills and enlighten them about opportunities. We achieve all this through intervention at our village centers. We have a residential program for girls, and we also work with district administrations on initiatives, particularly those which concern the children of sanitation workers. Most of the rural youth we help are usually first generation college goers. Bodhi Tree helps them to think about their future. These young kids have many inferiority complexes, and there is an information gap. We are trying to bridge that through our organization.

Mukhopadhyay: What are the life skills that you're trying to build?

Shetty: We do self-development, self-awareness workshops, and provide exposure to opportunities — we help the children to discover what they want to do in life and understand their strengths and weaknesses. We enable them to develop themselves through public speaking and other skills. We also conduct workshops on resumé writing to help them achieve their goal.

Mukhopadhyay: How do you tackle social barriers such as gender discrimination and caste in your daily work?

Shetty: I initially struggled with many issues, such as caste and social stigma. I particularly faced this when I worked with children of sanitation workers. We don't have a formula to tackle this, but we help our children to focus on love, empathy and collaboration through our workshops. Our classes are also diverse so that students appreciate diversity.

Many of these young children have crossed several barriers to get to where they are, and they are very strong. But they are nervous if they are put in a room and asked to do something. There are many inferiority complexes, and spoken English is a barrier for them. I grew up in a village — for me, the biggest challenge to overcome was learning English.

Mukhopadhyay: Do you feel that rural youth has more opportunities today than before?

Shetty: There has been change in terms of accessing education — right now, all of our children are first generation college goers. But rural education is not doing anything for us as career opportunities are still not accessible for most people. I studied in a remote rural college, I traveled hours every day to receive education, but it was only when I went to Delhi that I understood what a real education meant. In terms of education, we do have colleges and schools in rural areas, but in terms of job opportunities there are still barriers for rural youth.

Mukhopadhyay: How do you create awareness about your workshops? How do you convince people that this is useful for them?

Shetty: Initially it was difficult as people weren't aware of us. Over the years, we have partnered with some colleges, villages and the district administration. That helped to build our credibility. But people have also said no to us. There have been instances where people said, "What's the point of this? My child will get married in a few years anyway." Bodhi Tree doesn't just teach people about following a career — its more about life skills and learning to speak up for oneself. After attending our workshops, some of our kids have pushed marriage by a year

in order to seek a job. This kind of an impact is important for us.

Mukhopadhyay: What are your initiatives for children of sanitation workers? And what is the age of these children?

Shetty: We develop the self-esteem of the children of sanitation workers though a project called New Wings. The children are first generation college goers and usually in the age group of 17 to 21. The New Wings initiative is to stop these children from going back to those jobs again by giving them opportunities through education. To break that cycle, to bring them into the mainstream, you need to make them believe that they are as normal as any of us. We do a lot of activities around developing self-esteem and goal-setting.

Mukhopadhyay: Why are you focusing on college students and not school students?

Shetty: I think Bodhi Tree is an extension of my life experiences. I grew up in a village, and when I suddenly landed in Delhi, I realized that people like me were underrepresented there. You struggle so hard to go to college, and after three years you don't know what to do. It is disastrous situation, because you don't know the purpose or power of education. We work with college students as we feel that this is the age in which you really form your values. We work with youth at this age so that they can choose love over violence, compassion over disturbances.

Mukhopadhyay: Your life story is very inspiring. How did you build a sense of motivation in yourself and realize that you could do something with your education?

Shetty: There were many disturbances around me when I was growing up. But I was motivated by the fact that I really wanted to go outside my village and see how people have choices and what freedom looks like. I applied for anything I got, and I was lucky to get into the Young India Fellowship, as it changed my life.

When you experience freedom and choice, you feel like telling people about it. You want others to feel it as well. I think that's a reason I came back to my village after completing my education in Delhi. I want others to experience freedom and [having] choices as well.

Mukhopadhyay: What challenges do you face while working with girls from rural areas?

Shetty: A big issue is conditioning. These girls are conditioned to believe that marriage is their life's ultimate goal. On many occasions, a girl stops coming for a workshop as her parents don't allow her anymore. You see a lot of potential in a girl, but she ends up doing something that is not fulfilling her potential. It's frustrating, as you want to tell these girls that they can do more with their life, but there are unfortunately not many role models for them. Girls are also conditioned to not take risks.

Mukhopadhyay: How do you identify the most critical issues in a village?

Shetty: We work in two villages that have different challenges. In the first village we have girls, in the second village we don't have a single girl at our workshop. That's because girls are not allowed to sit with boys. Parents don't want to send their girls to the center as they don't want them to interact with boys. We are currently thinking about methods to tackle this, such as creating a center solely for girls. There is also the issue of caste. Our center is in an area for lower-caste people, and upper-caste people don't want to send their children there. Every village center has different dynamics.

Mukhopadhyay: How do you address and build awareness about issues like caste?

Shetty: The children who come to the center don't care that much about caste. It's the parents who care. For example, girls are not allowed to attend sessions at our center because parents feel that their girl will fall in love with a lower-caste boy. The parents will openly say this to us. In our current center, the children belong to the upper

caste, and when you address them, you realize that they are violent. We are now working with them on developing compassion and empathy. But this is a challenge, as the older generation still wields the power in the village, and the young generation can't do much even if it changes its mindset.

Mukhopadhyay: How is Bodhi Tree different from the Skill India initiative of Narendra Modi's government?

Shetty: Bodhi Tree is completely different from skill building organizations. We don't want to build a skill in someone and send the message that it's the only thing they can do. Skill building programs have no progression, no scope for dreaming. I feel it robs opportunities from the children. Children should have access to government jobs, schemes, internships — they should have knowledge and know what to do with it. I think that's the difference between us and skill building initiatives.

Maybe our model is not working that well because we are not focused on one skill, but I think this is a conscious choice we have made where we don't tell people about what skills they can inculcate. Rather, we tell them what kind of dreams you should have, we make people realize their potential. For us, the immediate impact is more like standing up for yourself and going to college.

Mukhopadhyay: Is there any significant success story of Bodhi Tree?

Shetty: Recently one of our girls went to Ashoka University. With two months of training, she learned English and cleared the standardized test. These kinds of stories really inspire me to continue doing my work.

***Ankita Mukhopadhyay** is a New Delhi-based correspondent at Fair Observer. **Ashweetha Shetty** is the founder of Bodhi Tree Foundation, a Tamil Nadu-based nonprofit.

Rosy Image of US Equality Glosses Over Systemic Racism

Kourosh Ziabari & Tsedale M. Melaku
June 21, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Tsedale Melaku, a critical race and gender scholar at the City University of New York.

The United States thrives on being a multicultural and diverse society that guarantees individual freedoms and rights to all its citizens. However, even though the brutal institution of slavery and the era of racial segregation are a thing of the past, there are indications that systemic racism hasn't gone away and still haunts American society.

In 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, which was tasked by President Lyndon B. Johnson to probe the causes of the 1967 race riots and come up with recommendations for the future, concluded that the United States was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." Almost half a century after those protests and despite the progress made, America is still a land of inequalities. According to Pew Research, 92% of African Americans think that "whites benefit at least a fair amount from advantages that blacks do not have," and 68% say that whites "benefit a great deal."

People of color in the United States face serious difficulties in securing education, employment, health care and quality housing. They have long been grappling with discrimination and profiling by law enforcement. It goes without saying that the criminal justice system is also substantially biased against people of color, and African Americans in particular. This is evidenced by figures showing that despite making up only 13% of the general population, African Americans constitute 40% of the prison population in the United States.

Many thought that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency would be a turning point for race relations. But talking points about a post-racial America were hushed by a wave of police brutality across the country that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement and sparked violent protests in cities like Baltimore and Ferguson reminiscent of the civil rights era. Today, under Obama's successor President Donald Trump, America is hardly a color-blind, tolerant society. Hate crimes have been on the rise since Trump's coming to power. White supremacists have been emboldened, and anti-immigrant rhetoric has become more widespread.

Dr. Tsedale Melaku is a sociologist, critical race and gender scholar, and post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean at the City University of New York. Her latest book, You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism, was published earlier this year.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Tsedale Melaku about race relations in America today, the Black Live Matter movement and the stereotypes that still engulf the question of race.

Kourosh Ziabari: Some scholars I've talked to are of the opinion that it's not easy being black in 21st-century America, and that racism is an obstacle to the black Americans' access to quality education, health care, housing and job opportunities. Do you agree?

Tsedale Melaku: The pervasiveness of structural racism is clearly evident in the multitude of studies that indicate the wealth gap between white and black households play a critical role in how American families are able to obtain employment, housing, quality health care, education and economic upward mobility. Just looking at the poverty rate in varying neighborhoods demonstrates significant racial disparities between black and white children.

For example, the average middle-income black child resides in a neighborhood with a higher poverty rate as compared to a low-income white child. This significantly affects the life chances of black children. Another example of where hardship can be evidenced is through the recent article by sociologists Melvin E. Thomas, Richard Moye, Loren Henderson and Hayward Derrick Horton. In this study, they examine the combined effects of race, class and residential segregation on housing values for blacks versus whites resulting from the 2008 and 2009 Great Recession.

In addition to these factors and many more, I think the political climate we are in has not made it easy for people of color as a whole, but black people in particular, to live their everyday lives without the constant threat of structural, symbolic or physical violence that may be visited upon them through unfair policies and practices in place that continue to block access to necessary resources. So yes, I do agree that being black in America is still not easy, and will not get any easier until we address systemic issues of racism, sexism and classism.

Ziabari: How is it possible to debunk the myths and stereotypes that generate gendered racism and create barriers to African American women's employment and professional development? What is the role of the media in perpetuating or downplaying these stereotypes?

Melaku: First, we need to acknowledge that these stereotypes and myths are part of a broader narrative created to keep marginalized groups in subordinate positions. Understanding that a white racial frame — an extensive viewpoint including racial stereotypes, assumptions, narratives and interpretations embedded within the minds of whites that people of color can also adopt — views whites as superior and the racially oppressed as inferior. This frame is used to justify continued white privilege and dominance.

My book, "You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism," based on extensive interviews with black women lawyers, highlights how race and gender create

barriers to their recruitment, professional development and advancement to partnerships in elite corporate law firms. Through in-depth analysis I discuss how their experiences center around systemic gendered racism embedded within institutions. The book covers topics including appearance; white narratives of affirmative action; the differences and similarities with white women and black men; exclusion from social and professional networking opportunities — the "Boys' Club" — and the lack of mentors, sponsors and substantive training. I work to highlight the often-hidden mechanisms elite law firms utilize to perpetuate and maintain a dominant white male system. Black women's social identity creates unique daily racial and gendered microaggressions, which also manifest in their professional, social and economic development.

This is key when thinking about the ways in which black women, and other women of color, face significant challenges conforming to and maintaining a dominant Eurocentric aesthetic in the workplace, as well as how this white racial framing impacts the perceived ability, competence and subsequent recruitment, training, development and promotion of this demographic.

The image of a lawyer does not invoke the image of a black woman because media representations of professional people tend to be white, and mostly male. Only recently have we begun to see images of black women in powerful lawyer positions in the media thanks to Shonda Rhimes, like Olivia Pope or Annalise Keating, but there continues to be a disconnect between media representations and actual perceptions of black women's reality.

Ziabari: In recent years, there were several instances of US police using violence against and mistreating African American men and, in cases like that of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and E. J. Bradford, killing them. Do you think the law enforcement system in the United States is particularly biased against black citizens?

Melaku: The police shooting of any person should concern all people, and we need to ensure that the people who are in a position to protect and serve are doing just that. Countless studies have shown that there is significant bias in law enforcement that makes people of color, and black men in particular, vulnerable. For example, the work of Gaurav Jashnani, Priscilla Bustamante and Brett G. Stoudt examines how order maintenance policing approach — also linked to "broken windows" policing — incorporated by urban law enforcement has a disproportionate impact on the experiences of low-income people of color.

The lived experience of people of color is centered in this research to evidence how stops, ticketing and arrests by urban law enforcement negatively affect communities of color, leading to unwanted criminal identities that continue to pathologize black and brown people and push them out of public space. I strongly urge that we continue to have a dialogue with law enforcement agencies, lawmakers and government officials about the seemingly unaddressed violence, policies and practices that are visited upon marginalized groups, and black people in particular.

Ziabari: Has the Black Lives Matter movement been able to fulfill its goals, including bringing anti-black racism to the attention of politicians and combating racial inequality, profiling and police brutality? What's your assessment of what this movement has gained in the years since its founding?

Melaku: The Black Lives Matter movement is a broad-based social movement that works toward campaigning against systemic racism that disadvantages black people actively pursuing human rights through a variety of ways, including advocacy, activism, education and consciousness raising, among others. The movement attempts to publicize often unrecognized challenges black people encounter, ranging from poverty, racial profiling, gender violence, mass incarceration

and various other forms of racial inequality in the US.

More research is needed to understand the importance of the movement in highlighting the disparities black men and women face in America. While this is outside my field of expertise, existing academic work is being done to understand the successes and opportunity arising from the Black Lives Matter movement. Scholars such as Dr. Barbara Ransby, Dr. Frederick C. Harris, Dr. David Pate and Dr. Waldo E. Johnson, Jr., work to engage real conversations about the Black Lives Matter movement and the long historical reasoning behind the disparities reflected in the black experience and what could be done to make changes.

Ziabari: Are you concerned about the spillover of anti-black attitudes from the United States to other countries? In October 2016, a United Nations working group issued a warning about systemic anti-black racism in the criminal justice of Canada. What's your take on that?

Melaku: Without question there will always be concern about the political response of the United States and what that means for its citizens at home and abroad, as well as people of color in other countries. As a powerful and influential leader in the world, it is our responsibility to ensure that we are always working toward equality and justice for all people. We need to hold true to the principles that we espouse. Black and brown people across the US and beyond protest due to the persistent frustration and anger over pervasive institutional and individual discriminatory practices they face on a daily basis which is fueled by growing anti-black sentiments.

Ziabari: How do you think the artists, media personalities, journalists and academicians can contribute to addressing racism and eradicating different forms of discrimination against people of color?

Melaku: I think all of us need to engage in more critical discussions about the implications of our actions and particularly the ways in which systemic racism penetrates all institutions, creating unjust and unequal outcomes for people of color. In addition, there has to be the recognition that this is work that should not only fall on the shoulders of people of color, but all people, because this is a human rights issue. Further, people who are in positions of power should use their influence in order to move the needle further toward reaching more substantive changes in the lives of people who are disproportionately affected by systemic racism and its impact on their social, professional, educational and economic life chances.

Ziabari: A recent Government Accountability Office report found that black students in K-12 schools in the United States are far more likely to be disciplined for different types of maltreatment than those of other races. Does this indicate that racial inequality in the United States starts in the schools?

Melaku: This is a great question that many scholars have taken up within their research in various ways. Take the work of Dr. Carla Shedd for example. She published a very important book, Unequal City: Race, Schools, and Perceptions of Justice, that provides an incredibly in-depth analysis of how class stratification, racial residential segregation and disinvestment in public goods such as education, social support, etc., in Chicago have deleterious effects on the life chances of adolescents. Dr. Shedd particularly highlights how schools either emphasize or improve the varying social inequalities that shape the lives of students from marginalized backgrounds.

In contrast, my research focuses on schools as paths to mobility instead of pipelines to prison. Racial inequality does not begin, nor does it end, in schools. The black women I study earn positions in top law firms because of their academic successes, but racial and gendered inequality persists even in those contexts, which

speaks directly to the systemic nature of racist and sexist practices embedded within varying forms of institutions.

Ziabari: According to a NBC News/SurveyMonkey poll, two-thirds of Americans believe racism remains a "major problem" in society. Only 3% of respondents said they believe racism doesn't exist in the United States. To what extent does racism affect social relationships in America today?

Melaku: It is important for us to look at history, and the history of race and ethnicity in particular, when attempting to understand the current cultural, social, political and economic climate in the United States. We are a nation of immigrants, built on indigenous people's land and stolen people's labor, with a distinctive history of controlling migration according to racial and ethnic framing and preferences. In recognizing this history, we must come to accept that the optimistic and often rosy image of US equality and freedom glosses over continuing discriminatory practices embedded and widespread in institutions, from housing, employment, education, political and economic structures.

Social relationships are driven by the ways in which race, gender, class and other important identities intersect, combine or overlap to either privilege those in positions of power or oppress those viewed as inferior. As evidenced in my research, the way social identity affects the experiences of women and people of color is indicative of the fact that we still have a long way to go. This dynamic significantly impacts social relationships in America today, as [it has] in the past.

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Trust Your Children If You Want Them To Be Successful

Ankita Mukhopadhyay, Harmeet Singh Walia & Esther Wojcicki
July 24, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Esther Wojcicki, author of "How to Raise Successful People" and the mother of three incredibly successful women.

Esther Wojcicki is widely known as the mastermind behind Palo Alto High School's successful media arts program, which has produced alumni like the actor James Franco. A fact hidden from the public eye is that Wojcicki is also a successful mother of three incredible women: Anne Wojcicki, founder of 23&Me, a genetics startup; Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube; and Janet Wojcicki, a professor of social anthropology.

It is not uncommon for people to wonder how Esther Wojcicki managed to raise all three children to be incredibly successful in their respective fields. What did she do differently that other parents didn't? In a world with a 24-hour information cycle competition has increased immensely, and parents everywhere are looking for answers to parent their children successfully. Esther's secret ingredient to raise successful people is simple: Trust your child.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Wojcicki about her new book, "How to Raise Successful People," and how parents can build trust with their children to help them become happier people.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: What is the objective of "How to Raise Successful People"?

Esther Wojcicki: I want to change the way parents teach their children about success. The world now has a culture where everybody is afraid that their child is not going to succeed. This fear pushes parents to put tremendous pressure on their children to follow traditional

careers such as medicine, law or tech. The world needs people who are willing to take a risk. The ability to build risk-taking in people starts at an early age, and the responsibility to do that lies with parents. The responsibility eventually moves over to schools and then the workplace. The objective of my book is to help create a society that has people who are innovative, creative and passionate.

Mukhopadhyay: What triggered your decision to write this book?

Wojcicki: There were several reasons. The first reason is that there was a lot of interest in my program from across the world and some questions kept popping up that I needed to answer. Other questions frequently posed to me were, How did you bring up your daughters? How did you produce three daughters who are all really successful and innovative?

Another reason that triggered my decision to write the book is the rise of an epidemic called "helicopter parenting" or "safetyism." Today's parents have gone overboard with everything that is safe. An example of this is the recent news of some parents paying somebody to cheat on the SAT test to get their children into college. These parents were willing to pay thousands of dollars to get their children into college. In many cases, the kids didn't even know that their parents were doing these terrible things.

The parents did this to "protect" their child because the kids were trained since an early age to be protected and rarely did anything on their own. At universities like Stanford we now have a situation where some parents move to the city to be close to their children. When are we going to stop this? All these reasons made me realize that this was the right time to write this book.

Mukhopadhyay: How did you motivate your daughters to succeed in a patriarchal society?

Wojcicki: I always made it clear to my daughters that it didn't matter whether they were male or female — they had the same opportunities. They grew up with this idea. When they hit the real world, they realized that it wasn't true, as there are different opportunities for males and females. But I told them to not let any harassment get in their way or divert them. They had to keep their eye on the goal irrespective of any problem. Susan, my oldest daughter, once worked in India, where she was the only female person in the team of India Today, and she didn't face any problems in India.

My goal for my daughters was to motivate them to make the world a better place and they grew up with this idea. I also practiced what I preached. I was always out in the community trying to do things so the community could be better. My children witnessed my effort in bringing affirmative action to the community. Children model after you, whether you like it or not. They do what they see you do. A lot of parents need to remember that, especially in this digital age where parents ban their kids from having phones, and yet they're themselves sitting there at the dinner table with the phone. The first thing parents should remember is that they shouldn't do something if they want their child to do the same.

Harmeet Singh Walia: In your book, there are several examples of how Janet (the middle child) was very competitive. But when Janet actually chose a career, she didn't choose what was the most difficult to get into — she chose her passion. How did you make sure that she balanced competitiveness with her pursuit of passion?

Wojcicki: I encouraged all my daughters to work on something that they cared about a lot. They were not competitive with each other in choosing a career. I think they all just picked their own career based on their interest. None of them had any idea what they would do with their subject when they majored in it. They were just following their own instincts and their interest. What worked for them was that there was no pressure from either me or my husband. Parents need to free children from parental expectations to help them find their footing in life.

Parents need to realize that because of all the pressure they're putting on that kid they are creating a world where the children are depressed and not safe. Parenting has to change if you want to have happy children and create successful "people."

Mukhopadhyay: In your book, you mention how parents nowadays are afraid to even let their kids play outside, whereas this wasn't the case in your time. Why do you think parental trust has deteriorated over the last few generations?

Wojcicki: This deterioration of trust has happened in the last 15-20 years. A major reason for the fall in trust is news and social media, which always showcases the bad things in the world. Since we see a lot of bad things, we tend to become overprotective. But I don't think this accounts for the whole picture. Another factor is that all of us now have more resources than we ever did before. I didn't have any toys growing up. The main thing I did was climb a tree for fun. Parents nowadays tend to think, I have more resources to make my child safer and also happier, so I'm going to do that. This has led to a world that is just afraid of everything.

Walia: You talk a lot about your troubled childhood in your book. How did you manage to not let that affect your parenting skills?

Wojcicki: I had a difficult childhood, where my family always prioritized my brothers over me. They didn't want me to go to college or do anything except be a mother. Basically, I was another pair of hands for them as a child. We all tend to parent in the way we were parented, as that's something that just happens unconsciously, which is why it is very hard to change. But if you're aware of this, you can definitely change it. One has to talk to their children and not let their past come in the way.

My book talks about a TRICK model to deal with this. It reminds parents that trust, respect and collaboration are much more effective than punishing or expelling children. Actions like punishment make children angry, and then they do the same thing again. But when you to talk to children and have a discussion with them, it's very effective. As a matter of fact, most kids appreciate it to such a degree that they stay friends with you for life.

One thing parents from troubled backgrounds need to definitely avoid is hitting their children. Making children suffer for their wrongs can make them become aggressive, angry and miserable. If you hit your children, especially girls, they will stick in a marriage where they feel it is normal to be abused, often because they're used to that type of treatment. They will think it's just a continuation of the life they normally lead.

Mukhopadhyay: How do parents build trust with their children who are naughty?

Wojcicki: I would say, build trust a little bit at a time. Kids who are naughty are usually rebelling against something or they are naughty because the communication channel between kids and parents isn't that great.

Parents need to realize that children really want to please their parents. What you can do is develop little things the child does right and build on those things. The child will want to do more things that are pleasing the parents as they're looking for approval all the time. Trust them to do those things and then reward them.

Walia: In the developing world, and even in the West, the onus of parenting still falls largely on the mother. How does one encourage fathers to take responsibility for the upbringing and safety of children?

Wojcicki: The role of a father is integral to good upbringing of a child. A lot of times, unconsciously, fathers think they are not as important as the mother, so they don't take up a big role at home. If you don't play a role in the life of a child, then the child doesn't want to spend as much time with you. A lot of responsibility lies on the wives to make men feel more included. This can happen if the roles are on a conscious level. Fathers can start taking a

small amount of responsibility and then increase it slowly depending on how it goes. The father's role can grow as the child grows because then he or she doesn't need the mother as much once she or he's crossed the threshold of infancy. But mindsets need to change first for this to happen.

Mukhopadhyay: One of the most common ailments among many young people today is depression. The biggest complaint among many children and teenagers is that their parents don't understand and support them. How can parents tackle and understand depression and mental health?

Wojcicki: Depression is a major problem here in the US, and it's a growing problem worldwide too. It's all a result of pressure which is heaped on the child from the family. That's part of the goal of this book, to show parents that they have to stop putting all this pressure on these kids. Because, maybe, they're going to get into the top schools, but they're going to be miserable for life. You want your child to be happy. It's better to be happy and middle-class than very wealthy and miserable.

One should not correlate happiness with material wealth. You aren't happy just because you own a Rolls Royce. You are happy because you have good relationships and you feel in control of your life. Parents need to realize that because of all the pressure they're putting on that kid they are creating a world where the children are depressed and not safe. Parenting has to change if you want to have happy children and create successful "people." That's again another goal of my book.

Mukhopadhyay: There are many books out there on parenting. How is your book different?

Wojcicki: Most parenting books concentrate on one thing, such as sleep problems, discipline problems or toilet training problems. These are books on specific aspects of childrearing. "How to Raise Successful People" is a philosophy for not just child rearing, but schools and relationships. It is not just a parenting book — it's book on human interaction and how to live the most satisfying, productive and effective life possible.

*__Ankita Mukhopadhyay__ is a New Delhi-based correspondent at Fair Observer and **Harmeet Singh Walia** is a senior policy analyst at a Washington, DC-based international data and media company. **Esther Wojcicki** is an internationally-known journalism teacher and the founder of the Palo Alto High School Media Arts Program

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Malawi Can Be Aid Independent If Communities Are Empowered

Kourosh Ziabari & Joyce Banda
August 22, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Joyce Banda, the former president of Malawi.

Malawi is one of the most impoverished nations on the planet. It is experiencing what officials describe as a "population explosion" in a society with inadequate resources. As of 2018, Malawi is the third poorest country in the world with a GDP per capita of only $342, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Over 90,000 people in the landlocked African country live with HIV/AIDS, which accounts for one in 10 adults. HIV/AIDS is one of the main reasons why Malawian children become vulnerable or orphaned. The country is in dire need of advanced medical services and facilities and trained physicians, and there is only one doctor for every 50,000 individuals.

Climate change and global warming represent serious challenges for Malawians. According to the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, the unbridled cutting down of trees — to be used for charcoal as a replacement for electricity — is

contributing to climate change significantly. It is reported that most Malawian households suffer from frequent power blackouts lasting between three and six hours a day. Rapid deforestation and widespread soil erosion have made Malawi's agriculture-based economy defenseless against the impacts of climate change.

Discrimination against women is rampant in Malawi. Young girls and women often do not have equal opportunities in education and employment as their male counterparts. However, this is not the only difficulty that the women of Malawi face. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment have plagued Malawian society. In May 2019, the government, the UN and the European Union announced a new multiyear program called the Spotlight Initiative, focused on "eliminating violence against women and girls, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and harmful practices."

Despite all the challenges Malawi is grappling with, the country in southeastern Africa is hopeful of a better future. This is thanks to the promising decline of its inflation rate; the gradual growth of GDP; reserves of uranium, tea, coffee and tobacco that constitute the backbone of its economy; and the resumption of support by financial donors.

Joyce Banda served as Malawi's fourth president — and its first female leader — from 2012 to 2014. Prior to this, she was vice president and the minister of foreign affairs. Banda is the founder and leader of the People's Party and a member of Club de Madrid. She is an entrepreneur, philanthropist and motivational speaker who was named Africa's most powerful woman by Forbes in 2013 and 2014.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to former President Banda about the challenges and opportunities ahead for Malawi and the African nation's prospects for development.

Kourosh Ziabari: Violence against women is rampant in Africa. Female genital mutilation is prevalent in 28 African countries, according to 28 Too Many, ranging from 5% in Uganda to over 90% in Somalia. Another form of violence against women in the continent is rape, especially as a "weapon of war" in countries with unstable political climates. African societies tend to treat families with sons more favorably than families with daughters. Can you give us a picture of the situation in Malawi? As a female leader, how do you think violence and discrimination against African women can be tackled?

Joyce Banda: Indeed, female genital mutilation is happening in 26 countries. While FGM doesn't exist in Malawi, we have our forms of harmful traditions that promote violence against girls. One was highly publicized on the BBC when Eric Niva was caught having sex with girls, convincing the community that he was recruiting them to "cleanse" them. In reality, he was a rapist who was infecting girls with disease.

To tackle violence against African women, we should focus on and promote the efforts African women are making to get rid of harmful traditions across the continent. There are many champions pushing to fix our problems and getting a lot done.

As a female leader, my view is that we need to mobilize African women leaders and champions, as well as our male allies, who will fight for the protection of women and girls. The African Women Leaders Network, an initiative of the African Union and UN Women, of which I serve as a founding member and steering committee member, is one example of an initiative working to mobilize leaders.

Ziabari: In 2017, reports from Malawi's Ministry of Gender revealed that 53% of married women face domestic violence at the hands of their husbands. The national police spokesman also confirmed that cases of domestic violence are reported to law enforcement across the country on a daily basis. Is there any legislation against domestic violence in Malawi? Do you see any

improvement in the situation for women in your country?

Banda: In terms of legislation in Malawi, there is a law that protects women against property grabbing and allows them rights to the land they own, which often happens when their husband dies and family members try to claim the land for themselves. When I was the gender minister in 2006, I championed the passing of the domestic violence bill through our parliament. Through that bill, the women of Malawi have a tool at their disposal to fight domestic violence, even allowing them to evict their abusive husbands. Furthermore, two years ago, Malawi passed a law that prohibits girls from getting married before age 18.

However, even though we have legislation, the challenge we have as a nation is the political will to help Malawian women to take advantage of the tools at their disposal. Yes, there are laws to protect girls from early marriage, but if the family cannot afford to send her to secondary schools, marriage is one of the only options for her as the family may have difficulty affording to house and feed her. Culture, tradition and poverty play a large role, thus it is critical to not only pass laws but also to domesticate them, police their implementation and focus on poverty reduction.

Ziabari: USAID data from 2016 shows that 16.7% percent of children under 18 in Malawi are orphans and vulnerable children, or OVC. Why are there so many unprotected children in Malawi? Do you think the government has been successful in offering educational, social and moral support to these children?

Banda: In Malawi, one of the main causes of children becoming orphaned or vulnerable is AIDS. But even before AIDS, the challenge is that there were so many kids without access to early childhood education. That being the case, when they lost parents, their situation got worse.

What research shows is the kids who get access to early childhood development [ECD] do better later on. I am a patron of Think Equal, a UK-based organization that seeks to fight against violence against women by tackling the root issues, such as ensuring respect between boys and girls. They recruit schools across the world to provide ECD and rights education to boys and girls from age 3. When countries can't provide adequate ECD, they can't benefit from this. It will take political will from government to invest in ECD.

Civil society plays a big role in bringing solutions for the orphans and vulnerable children problem. In my case, the Joyce Banda Foundation International [JBFI], founded in 1997, runs 30 orphan care centers across Malawi for 50,000 orphans, providing early childhood education using the Montessori method. Furthermore, 47% of Malawians are stunted, so we know that ECD must be coupled with a focus on nutrition. At JBFI, we are able to provide a nutritious meal at our centers every day thanks to a partnership we have built with Nu Skin.

Ziabari: As minister for gender and community services, you worked hard to design the National Platform for Action on Orphans and Vulnerable Children and also the Zero Tolerance Campaign Against Child Abuse. What have the outcomes and achievements of your initiatives been?

Banda: These initiatives were active almost 15 years ago, and at that point, Malawi was on the tier two watchlist for human trafficking. When I was alerted of this, I decided to analyze the whole sector of vulnerable girls and children and take steps to fight abuses to children in my country. Child trafficking takes many forms, and to address them, we sat down and drew the plan of action.

As part of the campaign, I set up children's corners at grassroots with UNICEF, deploying two trained child protection agents equipped with bicycles in 193 constituencies. They reported abusers to police and brought children together. Awareness that was created by this campaign truly paved the way to passing the 2006 Domestic Violence bill, as we had already done our due

diligence on OVCs and were then able to focus on the entire household.

Ziabari: Let's move away from women and children issues. Data from the CIA shows that Malawi is in the top 10 countries with the highest rate of HIV/AIDS. How has the government been dealing with this issue? Is the population sufficiently educated about HIV treatment and prevention?

Banda: The Global AIDS Commission invested a lot in civic education in Malawi and we had made a tremendous improvement. We made tremendous improvement through PEPFAR — about half a million Malawians got on treatment. Additionally, the Option B initiative was successful, where for the first time we tested pregnant women and started treatment right away so their babies weren't born infected.

Ziabari: Malawi is one of the top 10 major exporters of tobacco in the world and, arguably, the most tobacco-dependent nation. There are credible reports that the international demand for tobacco is declining. Does the country have plans to diversify its economy at a time where agriculture accounts for about one-third of GDP and tobacco accounts for half of its export revenues?

Banda: Crop diversification program started when I was head of state, identifying legumes as an area to focus on for export potential. The first crop was 2012-13. Malawi is certainly looking to diversify crops but also looking at mining as another alternative to growing tobacco.

Malawi has the fourth largest deposits of rare earth to make TV screens, gas, 2 billion barrels of oil, rubies, gold, titanium, bauxite and more. As a result of the discovery of all these resources, there is illegal mining, so political will is needed to protect Malawi's wealth.

Ziabari: Poverty in Malawi has been at critical levels for many years. There are about 12 million Malawians who live below the international poverty line. While in office, were you able to work toward improving the situation? What's your take on the performance of your successors in addressing poverty in the country?

Banda: My strategy during office was four-pronged for poverty reduction: food production, education, health and family planning for the rural poor. One of the biggest tragedies in African politics is that the one who takes over rarely takes over the old projects and initiatives, preferring to start over again. In my case, I was focusing on rural people, paying attention to households at the grassroots because 85% of Malawians are rural-based, and in that group is where they are living in abject poverty. The good news is we know why these people are poor and we know what to do, so all we need is good leadership to focus on communities and uplift our people.

I discovered that by using local and traditional leadership, the custodians of tradition and culture, government can be more effective in reducing poverty, improving health outcomes and eliminating harmful traditions. By working alongside chiefs, I was able to reduce maternal deaths from 675 to 400 out of 100,000 births, a reduction of 30%. Using that philosophy, we were able to build model villages to demonstrate that with their own hands and using builders from their communities, they can build better homes. When people get opportunities to grow enough food to eat, sell and export, when they are assisted with better health and education, and when families can generate income through the woman, countries become economically empowered.

Furthermore, to reduce poverty, we must also look at population growth and the alarming rate in Malawi. Because our population growth is at 3.3% annually, there is no way our poverty will be reduced significantly because of the number of children. Chicken and egg- poor families view children as wealth, so until that changes, children will continue to be born.

Ziabari: High population growth, rapid deforestation and widespread soil erosion have made Malawi and its agriculture-oriented economy highly vulnerable to climate change and its negative consequences. Earlier this year, floods in Malawi killed dozens, displaced some 200,000 people and half of the country's 28 districts were affected. What has the government done to combat climate change? Did you particularly deal with this issue in your administration?

Banda: The more people we have, the more our land is cleared for living, including cutting down trees for firewood to produce energy. Solutions to that is for rural electrification with solar power, so that when people begin to use it they will reduce cutting trees. In my administration, I launched the energy-saving stove with Mary Robinson from Ireland, amongst other works to promote safe population growth and good governance.

But the population growth is also significant and poverty exacerbates climate change. Government must look at all these challenges: population growth, good governance and providing alternative energy to stop the population from cutting down trees and polluting the environment.

Ziabari: There have been significant democratic movements and transformations across Africa in the recent decade. Despotic rulers in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and, most recently, Sudan were removed from power. What do these developments indicate? Why is Africa undergoing these rapid shifts?

Banda: If I have to be candid, most of these governments that changed during the Arab Spring are being influenced by the West. So, I don't want to pretend they are homegrown. Half the time, the interference is done by the West, and we end up with cases like Libya. While the West portrayed Muammar Gaddafi as a villain, Africans are still mourning him. People all over the world need to let Africa come up with its own model of democracy — that is what will work. Outside forces pushing for change leave us with conflict and catastrophic results that we are then forced to fix ourselves.

Ziabari: What is your vision for the future of Malawi? Do you think the country will reduce its dependence on foreign assistance and be able to overcome the economic, social, political and developmental challenges it currently faces?

Banda: Malawi must stop being dependent on aid, and this can be easily done. In 2006, the director of public prosecution, Fahd Assan, who later served as minister of justice in my administration, informed me that 30% of Malawi's resources are wasted through theft and corruption. What I said when I became president was that it is a shame and cannot be accepted, especially since Malawi depends on foreign aid for 40% of its budgetary requirements. If we saved the 30% wasted through corruption, Malawi would only need to look for 10%.

In a country where natural resources are intact, all we need is to get organized and carefully implement the mining code, which was done by my government. If we start responsibly extracting our mineral resources, controlling population growth, empowering communities to transform their own lives and making sure all that tamper with our resources are stopped, Malawi can be aid independent in 10 years.

*__Kourosh Ziabari__ is an award-winning Iranian journalist and correspondent at Fair Observer. **Joyce Banda** is the former president of the Republic of Malawi (2012 to 2014), the first female to hold this position. An entrepreneur, activist, philanthropist and global champion for women and girls, Banda was named one of the world's most powerful black women by Forbes in 2013 and 2014, and one of the most 100 influential people in the world by both TIME and Forbes.

Talking Islamophobia With Tahir Abbas

Dina Yazdani & Tahir Abbas
September 23, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Tahir Abbas, author of "Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle."

Driven by the rise of the far right and white nationalist movements, Islamophobia is on a rising tide, with widespread discrimination and record-high attacks on Muslims across the Western world. Norway recently avoided a tragedy when three Muslim men prevented a 21- year-old gunman from carrying out an attack on worshipers in an Oslo mosque. The failed attack mirrored New Zealand's Christchurch shootings earlier this year, that left a total of 51 Muslims dead. In both instances, these young, white men were inspired by right-wing rhetoric against Islam and fear of white replacement. While these attacks were carried out by individuals, they reflect global patterns of rising Islamophobia, particularly in the West.

In Britain, recent polls show that 31% of the population believes Islam poses a threat to the British way of life, with 18% holding extremely negative views of Muslims. A 2017 study undertaken in 27 European nations illustrates how Islamophobia has become one of the most "commonplace expressions of racist prejudice," with countries like Germany experiencing a threefold increase in attacks on Muslims from 2015-16, following the arrival of over 1 million migrants at the height of the refugee crisis. This year alone, there have been over 500 attacks on Muslims in the US, with assaults estimated to have surpassed post-9/11 levels back in 2017.

Islamophobia has become a prevalent talking point for political leaders, used to garner public support, distract from other pressing issues and perpetuate an us-versus-them narrative for political gain. Conservative political leaders have played a major role in inciting anti-Muslim sentiment by exaggerating threats of homegrown terrorism and often painting Islam as incompatible with Western values. Even when political leaders do not appear to be deliberately targeting Muslims, they often fail to represent minorities' interests or respond to their needs. This apathy can further entrench structural barriers that minorities, including Muslims, face, not to mention impacts on their access to equal opportunities.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Tahir Abbas, assistant professor at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at the University of Leiden and a visiting senior fellow at the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Abbas has written widely on Islamophobia, including most recently on how Britain's Conservative Party benefits from exploiting it. His latest book, "Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle," released on September 23, explores how Islamophobia and radicalization intersect and reinforce each other.

Dina Yazdani: Please set the stage for us: How would you define Islamophobia?

Tahir Abbas: In very simple terms, it's the idea of the fear or dread of Islam and Muslims. It's a broad definition that was largely put forward by the Runnymede Trust in 1996, which attempted to try and capture the meaning and the impact of Islamophobia at a time when the Bosnian crisis was going on, at a time when geopolitics was shifting away from the old East-West problematics. I think it's that, and there are interrelated concepts within that space. We have issues of direct observable problems of structural racism and discrimination — violence toward women who wear the headscarf, mosque attacks — to issues around cultural distancing — stereotyping, orientalism — which has a much wider societal impact, not just in terms of outcomes on institutions, like when it comes to hiring practices, which suggests Islamophobia in structural terms, but we also see casual racism

toward Muslims as a whole, which is much more of a cultural phenomenon.

Yazdani: Where has its front stage been?

Abbas: Well, a lot of it is coming out of the "global north" experience, predominantly, starting out in Western Europe with the experience of postwar migration acting as a backdrop to that reality. And then, more recently, across the pond from North Africa, where we see Muslim groups who were relatively integrated and assimilated into American society pre-9/11 finding themselves facing similar issues around discrimination and victimization — disproportionately in terms of the criminal justice system, vilification of the press, demonization in the press by groups presenting a them-versus-us dichotomy.

Yazdani: In a 2018 article for the Middle East Eye, you described there was "mounting evidence" of "organized Islamophobia" in both Europe and the US, and that "the lived realities of brown and black people in some of the poorest parts of the country is ongoing evidence of policies that have not only excluded minorities but also demonised them." What policies are fueling this anti-Muslim sentiment and reinforcing these divisions across the Western world?

Abbas: These policies are an implication rather than a direct result, in the sense that when we think about housing policies, we think about it as social policies allocation. So, for example, migrant groups coming into the UK in the 1990s to the 2000s from Iraq, Afghanistan and more recently from Somalia, Syria, etc., are located into areas that are experiencing downward pressures, areas that face decline and that have an existing majority population that is feeling left behind and alienated. So when they see these Muslim groups moving into their areas, seemingly protected by the state, they feel resentful and sometimes mobilized around this.

When we see some of these activities across Britain and Europe, we see that it's often these poor parts with Muslim groups where there are more profound patterns of resistance around that. So at one level it's a question of social housing allocation, and on another level it has to do with housing and markets, and the inability of Muslim groups to find themselves in the position to move out of poorer areas due to various gatekeeping issues within the private housing sector.

There is also exclusionary behavior at the level of the state, and even the [market] — this notion of "white flight," which is crude. But it tells us something about when certain areas have minorities, Muslims moving into them has a knock-on effect of reducing average household prices and increasing the rate of concentration of those new groups. Often, people who come to those areas wanting to share a particular lived experience has resulted in existing issues of isolation and alienation, such as Muslim groups who grew up in poorer areas, whose children qualify for universities and get professional qualifications, who don't immediately move into purely affluent, white neighborhoods even if they could because they want to retain certain links with their communities of origin — including, places of worship, etc. So there is often a tradeoff. It's also a result of fear and a result of discrimination, because upwardly mobilizing Muslims going into affluent white areas faces hostility and racism of a different kind.

Yazdani: Building on that knock-on effect, what effect have policies promoting multiculturalism or, on the other hand, integration, had on Islamophobia?

Abbas: Integration is the idea of the state providing certain opportunities, spaces for minorities because they have signed a contract of sorts that acknowledges their citizenship and status in society legally, but also culturally, socially, politically. It's the idea of a social contract. In exchange, the minorities provide a sense of engagement, participation — they pay taxes, they turn up to vote. In return, the state says it recognizes that they may want places of worship, mosques, Islamic centers — and that we

are tolerant and open-minded enough to provide that, because it's only right, and also because we afforded the same kind of privileges to other minority groups over the years.

Although, for example, when it comes to Muslim education, state-sponsored Muslim education [in Britain] didn't kick into place until 1997, although there have been Jewish schools with state school funding since 1944, although it's a much smaller community. Integration requires a sense of acceptance — and a sense of acceptance on the part of minority communities that they have a role and a sense of responsibility as citizens. There has been increasing pressures on the idea of differences, which might be seen as acceptable in a diverse society; the idea that diversity itself has been placed under pressure because there's been a real resistance to multiculturalism, particularly in light of events like 9/11 and 7/7 [London bombings], where it was felt that some of these differences are spaces in which extremism flourishes and where there is a menace for national security to think about.

It's a misunderstanding. It's extremism, and also a lack of enthusiasm about the idea of diversity among particular institutions and individuals in elite society.

Yazdani: What are the most egregious examples of organized Islamophobia over the past few years? Where has it been manifested?

Abbas: A lot of it has been online, and it has quite a degree of mobilization online, in terms of pushing out Islamophobia sentiments — including notions of fake news, exaggerated news, distorted news — which perpetuate the almost daily view that Muslims are a problem or a threat, a fifth column. The tropes of Islamophobia are that [Muslims] are disproportionately feeding off the welfare state, and all of these concerns around extremism and terrorism which never really go away and keep bubbling up. So the online space is a major space in which the sentiments of Islamophobia are generated, repackaged, reformulated and recommunicated.

Some of that is orchestrated, well-organized and well-funded, as has been reported by many in terms of the far right. The role of various groups, which exist to fund anti-Muslim sentiment online, is to push Islamophobic sentiment for their own political means, some of which leans into far-right thinking.

Yazdani: Following that far-right thinking, what role have policymakers, lawmakers and politicians played in fueling this anti-Muslim sentiment?

Abbas: We have this area of populism, authoritarianism and elitism that sort of characterizes a lot of the "global north." We've got the global economic crash of 2008 as a recent backdrop here, huge wealth, inequalities as a result of the disproportionate impact of austerity on poorer groups — we've seen all of these effects on Britain, [highlighted] in the UN special rapporteur report, etc. This has been an ideological program, not one derived from sound economic thinking even.

Economic inequalities, in these times, have resulted in political polarization. The center is hollowed out, and it's the peripheral voices of the far right and far left, Islamists and all the other extremist groups that have an amplified voice in this political space, while the center ground — in this extreme sort of attempt to capture the center — has been diffused to such an extent that there's nothing that holds it together anymore. That's why we've got these extreme voices coming into the center, via these figures that provoke these populist sentiment, like [Donald] Trump, [Viktor] Orbán, [Narendra] Modi, [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan — and to an extent also Brexit — that are symptoms of this hollowing out of this political center.

Yazdani: In 2005, France experienced widespread riots by French Muslims, mostly living in the banlieues, on the outskirts of major cities. This was an eruption of injustice perceived by these French Muslims who felt, despite identifying as French and being

French citizens, disenfranchised and marginalized in France. Looking back at this example, and similar moments of backlash by the Muslim communities witnessed in more recent history but perhaps on a smaller scale, how do second generation Muslims experience Islamophobia and experience their ethnic and cultural identity differently when compared to more recent immigrants?

Abbas: The second generation have got a foot in both camps. They were born in a new country, often to parents born in another country. Being born in a new country, they learn the language of the new country, and go through the education in the new country. They are expected to go through these hoops in a way that everybody else is under the same conditions and under the same expectations. For example, in a meritocratic liberal society, if you work hard and achieve quality education, you will be rewarded with returns to your human capital investments.

However, patterns of discrimination do not abate when we think of the impact of change from the first to the second generation. The first generation were heavily discriminated against, from the jobs they got from the outset, in terms of their mobility or lack thereof, that led to them being trapped in those poor areas. The second generation are born in a new country, and they have the expectations of the people in their peer groups more generally, but they are not getting the chances. They're feeling the same kind of frustrations [as the first generation], and often it's a lot worse. So those pressures are doubly felt — they feel that they carry the discrimination and racism of their parents before them.

These huge patterns of discrimination felt from the second generation meant that men and women go through the educational system, but do not experience the kind of relative performance you would expect them to. There are some studies done on this [suggesting] that maybe you can put this down to the lag of experience from the first generation. So there are going to be language gaps, there are going to be certain social capital gaps, like who you know rather than what you know that helps in certain professions, like law and media. This lack of capital explains a great deal of the lag. These are non-discriminatory factors. But that's a real ruse, because we have to understand that there are various stages of discrimination that are accumulative.

What starts as not being able to get the job you want having done the degree you achieved, having gone through the local school systems, means that there are patterns of discrimination that stay with you from the very beginning. We know from recent studies and observations around who has power, status in society, that it's the self-selected, privately educated and, in the case of England, folks from a narrow set of schools and universities — two in the case of the UK. And while minorities do feed into that process, there are disproportionate effects that need to be taken into consideration.

Yes, there are people who move up the social ladder and achieve a certain level of success beyond expectations to be had at the start, but there is a great deal of people who lag behind and have all the talent, all the skills and all the capacities which aren't realized because of system patterns and institutional dynamics around discrimination and racism that affect all groups of color. In today's world, there's a layer of Muslims within all groups who are also a feature in that.

Yazdani: Earlier you mentioned radicalization. On that topic, many believe that what drives Islamophobia is the fear that Islam promotes violence and makes Muslims more prone to being radicalized than adherents of other religions. They point to the rise of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their offshoots, and attacks by Muslim terrorists around the world. What are the driving factors behind radicalization among Muslims, especially Muslim youth, and how do anti-Muslim sentiments feed into that?

Abbas: There are lots of schools of thought on what drives radicalization. We have

essentially a spectrum of push and pull factors. The push factors are structural problems: unemployment, disadvantages, poverty, alienation, marginalization, inequality — and the pull factor is ideology. It takes an angry young man to reach out to online forums or literature to find arguments that somehow support their grievances, sense of injustice, perceptions on racism and the reality of racism in their society, whether it's to their friends, parents, or to themselves or local communities.

In wanting to redress all of that, they find it a totalizing, unique, all-capturing closed set in violence and extremism, combined with a sense of adventure, thrill and masculinity, a sense of belongingness. This "groupdom" that comes with those movements, especially in the Middle East and with the rise, and now fall, of the Islamic State, which acts as a pull.

Depending on whom you listen to and what their arguments are, many would say that it's all about ideology, because there are poor, marginalized, alienated, unemployed Muslim men who don't become terrorists. In fact, the mass majority don't, and there are middle class, upward mobile and privately educated Muslim men who commit terrorism. This isn't the norm. Far more research is pointing out to a combination of structural conditions and ideological factors.

From my research into this field over the last 10 to 15 years, of talking to people who have been radicalized and have gone off to carry out missions abroad, locked away for crimes — or locked away in Guantanamo on crimes that were unfounded — there is a sense of grievance, a sense of anger. A sense of "You're not recognizing my potential as a human being, as a man and as a woman. I'm angry, and bereaved, and have no real way of really addressing this unless I do something about it myself. I cannot look to even my own existence or my local faith community setup. The imams don't understand where I'm coming from, and their narrow interpretations do not support my worldview or aspirations."

So they take an even narrower perspective on Islam and the lure of adventure, thrill and totalizing solutions become the routes through which they enter into violence extremism. So this is the broad playing field around the radicalization process — and it can be a process. People can move from one end to the other, can move back, in an out of different stages throughout all of this.

There's not a linearity in the process as a whole. A linearity in this field can lead to all sorts of accusations that it takes a moment for a Muslim to become an extremist, because of the potential that is always within. There's a lot of discourse within the counterterrorism field that conservative Muslims are steps away from becoming violent extremists. And so deradicalization and preventing violent extremism has inadvertently, or deliberately, traversed into the wider field of what it is to be a Muslim in the "global north" and in the "global south," where in fact Muslims are killing other Muslims in far greater numbers than we would imagine elsewhere.

So, there are these push factors and pull factors, depending on how you see it — because, again, ideology feeds into the research process. The think tank and policy world, everyone has an agenda here. Academics are supposed to cut through all of this, but the work that we do in academia on this is quite diverse. But it's difficult to talk to former terrorists, talk to family members, difficult to access police records, court cases and files, so we have to do a sentimental, sectional analysis after the event — surveys, things like that.

Yazdani: You've argued that, contrary to public perception, Islamism is not just a term to describe fundamentalism, but that it can also be a progressive idea. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Abbas: Yes. So when you've got Islamism branded about as somehow a given concept in relation to the idea that it's naturally tending toward violence, then you've got an ideological

problem that contaminates the study of Muslims and extremism. Islamism in broad and simple terms means the idea of using Islam, engaging with Islam through a political lens.

Now, if you're a citizen in Europe and you see Islam as a force for justice, charity, community development, sharing with others in local area settings — but also in terms of building ideas and working together toward [resolving] the issues; and if you see that role as one of being a good Muslim, then your ideals are not shaped by violence or extremism, but by the idea of being a good Muslim through the lens of thinking about focusing on humanity and the needs of humans who are different, are unequal, have existing problems; when your religious principles teach you that it's an aspiration to want to better a lot of humanity by working together and knowing each other through this process.

These kinds of spiritual, political, cultural outlooks can also be defined under the rubric Islamism might use, but they're wholesale neglected. In a recent book of ours, we talk about how Muslims are actively engaging with their societies and citizens in their new countries, using a Muslim framing and Islamic intellectual awareness they have often determined themselves through their own individual interpretations and are acting as good citizens in every sense of the word, and as good Muslims in every sense of the word. That, for me, is progressive Islamism.

Yazdani: As Muslims, whether we wear the hijab or not, pray or not, whether we're black or white, or anything in between, I think it'd be hard to find one of us who had not experienced some level of Islamophobia. Taking your professorial hat off, what advice would you give to Muslims experiencing Islamophobia?

Abbas: I would say that it is a tough time in the world today. We have to recognize that for what it is. It's not some kind of simplistic light vs. dark, good vs. evil end of times, Venetian view on the world — there are a lot of complexities and subtleties, and we have to understand it as well as we can. We have to understand that things are going to be tough, and we have to fix things. But we also have to realize that there's a great deal of mobilization around resistance, not just among Muslims, but among the left-leaning individuals, institutions, all over the world. And I think it's important to build those alliances, bridge those alliances and forge movements that traverse immediate differences, because we're all in this together in many ways.

Islamophobia has a way of destabilizing all sorts of social relations. We have to try and stick our necks out a little bit, knowing that even in doing so, we're going to face potential blocks along the way.

*__Dina Yazdani__ is a US-based correspondent at Fair Observer. **Tahir Abbas** is an assistant professor at the Institute of Security and Global Studies at Leiden University in The Hague.

Climate Financing Can Help Developing Countries Reject Fossil Fuels

Vishal Manve & Harjeet Singh
September 26, 2019

In this guest edition of The Interview, Vishal Manve talks to Harjeet Singh, the global lead on climate change at ActionAid.

As Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN created ripples worldwide, millions of youngsters took to the streets, protesting against climate injustice and the failure to reduce carbon emissions. Aside from Thunberg, many other youth activists, including Xiye Bastida and Autumn Peltier, demonstrated ahead of the UN Climate Action Summit on September 23.

As reported by The Guardian, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has concluded that extreme sea levels, often occurring once a century, will now strike

annually on many coasts by 2050, despite efforts to curb carbon emissions. The IPCC recommends that the international community urgently cuts fossil fuel emissions. Otherwise, an eventual sea-level rise by more than four meters would redraw geographical boundaries and affect billions of people.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Vishal Manve talks to Harjeet Singh, the global lead on climate change at ActionAid, about the impact of the recent climate strikes and the urgency to phase out coal-fired power plants.

Vishal Manve: Climate strikes have occurred around the world in 150 countries. Can you explain the significance of such a youth-led movement in addressing the climate emergency?

Harjeet Singh: After decades of ignoring climate warnings, the world is finally waking up to the reality of the climate crisis. Young people have played a key role in that awakening. After realizing that the world's adults have not been taking the issue seriously enough, that they are likely to face a future of climate catastrophe, youth have taken to striking, organizing and marching to get the world to protect their future. In 2018, Greta Thunberg said: "You say that you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future." Finally, the adults are listening. But the narrative that climate change will harm children's future is still a perspective of the "privileged north."

In the "global south," climate change is not something that is coming in the future. For many young people in the "global south," the climate crisis is already here. Young people in rural communities see the struggles their parents face when growing food [amid a lack of] rainfall, floods and rising sea levels, and they see little future for themselves. Climate change is driving youth migration to urban areas, and urban youth unemployment is growing as a result.

As the current generation of young people grows up, their future is frighteningly uncertain. Young people in the "global south" are already dealing with the impacts of climate change. But their energy, drive, innovation and solidarity are also the best chance we have to avert the climate crisis.

Manve: From Berlin to New York and New Delhi, hundreds of thousands of protesters were recently on the streets. Do you think politicians and governments will urgently act on the climate crisis, and do you expect policy-based action?

Singh: Young people have taken the matter into their own hands. They will keep marching ahead, showing the way. At the UN Climate Summit, young people exposed the shameless lack of leadership from heads of state, who looked the other way for decades as the climate crisis escalated and the planet burned.

But the global climate strikes have raised awareness and expectations of what real climate action looks like. Leaders will find that the public will no longer be duped by tiny steps spun as huge milestones. If they want to stay on as leaders, they will need to be courageous and not cowardly. The global marches are creating the conditions for real and meaningful policy shifts.

Manve: A warming planet is hurting millions and rising oceans are a grave threat. A recent UN report says over 40% of coastal regions will face the risk of flooding by 2100. What do you think communities and leaders should do to address these crucial issues?

Singh: Rich countries must take a lead in dramatically reducing their emissions so that we don't breach the crucial 1.5-degree threshold, after which the impacts would be devastating. Poor communities living in low-lying coastal areas and along riverbanks need urgent support in climate-proofing their homes, farms and livelihoods.

But the people whose homes and land are at the risk of being washed away or swallowed up will need to relocate to safer locations in a planned manner. Their governments must proactively enable this planned relocation in a

participatory and just way, which will require financial and technological support from the international community.

Manve: India is a signatory to the climate accords but is investing in coal-fired plants and receiving investment in oil refineries. Do you think India needs to seriously phase out its coal dependency for energy sufficiency?

Singh: India has an obligation to improve the quality of life for its citizens and scale up access to energy. But the country continues to rely on locally available coal, which brings huge environmental and human costs. We have reached a stage when the cost per unit of renewable energy is cheaper than energy sourced from coal. Rich countries should support India with the upfront costs of setting up renewable energy projects, as part of their international obligation. This will help India reject dirty fossil fuel-based energy and transition toward renewables at a much faster pace.

Manve: The big four, including China, India and the US, are responsible for major global emissions. While the US shut down its last coal-fired plant, India still is building them. How long before an emerging economy like India chooses renewable sources of energy?

Singh: India has made ambitious commitments to dramatically increase the share of non-fossil fuel-based energy, but it is yet to make a plan for phasing out its reliance on coal completely. On one hand, it needs to show courage, while on the other, the role of the international financial community to invest from a longer-term perspective in renewable energy projects is vital.

Manve: What key factors are stymying emerging economies from choosing sustainable methods of energy utility and switching to noncarbon sources of energy?

Singh: What's the solution? The emerging economies have a challenge of taking people out of poverty by creating jobs, alongside adopting greener sources of energy and helping people cope with climate impacts. They have limited resources that they cannot divert toward greener technologies, away from development needs such as education and health care.

The renewable energy infrastructure requires upfront investments that developing countries like India cannot mobilize on their own. The role of developed countries is crucial in providing finance and enabling the transition to faster adoption of greener technologies in developing countries like India.

Manve: The global fund to fight climate change is still far off the mark. Do you think developed nations need to do more to help other countries catch up?

Singh: The obligation of rich countries to provide climate finance to poorer countries suffering from climate impacts is a huge but poorly understood dimension of climate action. Vulnerable countries are already spending their scarce resources on recovering from the disaster that they have not caused or they are trying to improve preparedness for future climate events. They have little money left over for development, let alone transitioning to greener pathways.

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary for rich countries to step up and respond to the call for much more climate finance. Rich countries started the climate fire. It is their responsibility to put it out.

Manve: Recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced banning single-use plastic in an advisory manner. Following this, a few conglomerates announced their own measures. Do you think this will have an impact on how India produces and disposes of off its waste as landfills pile up with mountains of trash?

Singh: It's definitely a step in the right direction. However, these measures will not be enough to change the conversation and be a springboard for the necessary policy action that is required to make a change at a larger scale. The

government must come up with a clear policy framework and implementation architecture to enable the change. It should also clamp down on companies, particularly from the e-commerce sector, that are generating huge quantities of non-biodegradable packaging material that adds to the waste.

Manve: How crucial is climate justice and reparations to the entire global movement of tackling or addressing climate change?

Singh: Climate justice cannot be achieved without the transfer of resources from the "global north" to developing countries as the former are responsible for causing the climate crisis. Communities who are vulnerable and had no role in causing the problem are now being affected by rising seas and extreme weather events. Vulnerable communities need financial support to safeguard their livelihoods and climate-proof their farming and homes.

Developing countries are fighting for a reliable international system that can ensure the flow of finance that will let them rebuild their economies and help people recover from the impacts of climate change. We will not be able to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees without scaled-up mitigation action in developing countries. The transition to a green economy in developing countries cannot be achieved without adequate financial support from rich nations.

*__Vishal Manve__ is an Indian journalist based in Mumbai. **Harjeet Singh** is the global lead on climate change for ActionAid.

Western Dominance Is a Historical Aberration

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Kishore Mahbubani
October 23, 2019

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Kishore Mahbubani, former ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations and president of the UN Security Council.

The TED website describes Kishore Mahbubani, a career diplomat from Singapore, as someone who "re-envisions global power dynamics through the lens of rising Asian economies." This description is not just apt for Mahbubani but also for his new book, "Has the West Lost It?" The title may appear controversial to a reader unfamiliar with world politics and history, but is a treatise for the future. In less than 100 pages, the author carefully puts together reasons for the Western world's demise and suggests a three-pronged solution for a better world, where the gap between East and West is bridged to a large extent.

In his career spanning over 40 years, Mahbubani has dedicated his academic scholarship to the growing geopolitical and economic influence of Asia. His books are a break from the traditional Western narrative of Asian societies, where overarching political problems are a roadblock to economic and social development.

In "Has the West Lost It?" Mahbubani dispels myths around Asian countries such as Malaysia, Bangladesh and Pakistan, which have achieved tremendous growth in the last 30 years. On the other hand, the Western world has failed to take care of its working class, which has been forced to the fringes. Mahbubani argues that the rise of countries like China and India mean that the West is no longer the most dominant force in world politics, and that it now has to learn to share, even abandon, its position and adapt to a world it can no longer dominate.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Mahbubani about his latest book, the need for the West to listen to the East, and the strategy the Western world should adopt to maintain its global relevance.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: In many of your recent speeches, interviews and books, you have focused on the West vs. East debate. Why

do you choose to focus your work on this dynamic?

Kishore Mahbubani: The West has been dominant for 200 years in world history, which is a historical aberration. In the 19th century, Europe dominated the world, in the 20th century, the US dominated the world. Many in the US and Europe assume that this is the natural state of affairs and want their dominance to continue into the 21st century. However, I refer to Western dominance as a major historical aberration, because from year 1 to 1820, the two largest economies of the world were China and India. The US and Europe only took off in the last 200 years.

All aberrations come to a natural end. The rise of Asia is natural and was bound to happen someday. Today, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, the number one economy in the world is China, number two is US, number three is India, and number four is Japan. Out of the top four, the clear winner is Asia. Even though economic power is now shifting to Asia, the West is reluctant to accept this shift. The West continues to intervene in many unnecessary conflicts. These unnecessary interventions have drained spirits and resources and demoralized Western societies. To prevent the West from losing it, the West needs to adopt a 3M strategy: minimalist, multilateralist and Machiavellian.

Minimalism is a call to do less rather than more. The West has wasted a lot of resources fighting unnecessary wars, especially in the Middle East and the Islamic world. The Islamic world will be better off if the West doesn't intervene. A key example of a region that benefited from minimalism is South East Asia. This region used to be called the "Balkans of Asia" owing to Western intervention. In fact, two of the biggest wars following World War II were fought in South East Asia — the Vietnam War and the Sino-Vietnamese War. Now the region is at peace because Western intervention is at its minimum.

Multilateralism means strengthening the global multilateral institutions that the West has created, particularly the UN family of institutions, which were a gift from the West to the world. My friend Kofi Annan once said that the world is shrinking and becoming a small global village. But it is shocking to see that the West, particularly the US, is consistently undermining this. In my book, "Has the West Lost It," I argue that it is against Western interests to undermine the world order. The West, at the end of the day, presents a minority in the global village, as 88% of the world's population is outside the West. It is unwise for 12% of the world's population to try and dominate the world on its own.

The third prong of a new Western strategy must be a Machiavellian approach. Former US President Bill Clinton gave a speech at Yale in 2003 in which he said that if the US has to be the world's number one country, it can keep doing what it's doing, and it can keep being unilateral. But if the US can conceive of a world where it's no longer number one, and China is the number one economy, then it is surely in the US' best interests to strengthen multilateral institutions than constrain the next big country, which is China. So, if [the West] wants to be Machiavellian and constrain China, it must strengthen multilateral institutions.

Mukhopadhyay: In your latest book, you argue that the lack of democracy in much of Asia will not hinder its rise. Asia's economic growth and collective belief in efficient governance will enable the East to overtake the West. What about the risk of non-democratic and non-accountable institutions holding Asia back in the long run?

Mahbubani: In my view, in the long run, all countries will eventually become democratic. I don't visualize a possibility that China will never become a democracy. The West is mistaken in wanting to make the world democratic overnight. The lesson of history is that countries have faced a disastrous situation when they tried to become democratic overnight. A good example is the former Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union

collapsed, Russia became a democracy overnight. The Russian economy imploded, life expectancy in Russia went down, infant mortality went up. A lot of people suffered because of this sudden advent of democracy.

It's always better to move to democracy slowly and gradually. China is doing the right thing in transforming society slowly. Even though China is not a democracy, the amount of personal freedom Chinese people enjoy has grown significantly. When I first went to China in 1980, Chinese people couldn't choose what to wear, where to live, where to work, where to study, where to travel — the list of restrictions goes on. Today, the Chinese people can choose where to live, what to wear, where to work, and over a 100 million people freely travel overseas. There's been an explosion of personal freedoms even under the Communist Party of China. China is transforming itself gradually and successfully — and China should be allowed to do so, instead of disrupting the process.

Mukhopadhyay: You spent many years working in the Singaporean government as a diplomat and were Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations. The UN is one of the West's most powerful creations since World War II, but arguably it might also be its weakest link. What reforms must the West bring to institutions like the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to retain its pole position in the world order?

Mahbubani: I frequently speak about the East and West dynamic because the West has been trying to control the world for too long. I think this a strategic mistake. For example, you referred to the World Bank and the IMF in your question. Why is it that the World Bank, founded over 70 years ago, still insists that it must be led by an American, and why does the IMF insist that it should be led by a European — disqualifying 80% of the world's population? Are they saying that there are no good Indians or Chinese who can run the World Bank? I think Raghuram Rajan, of India, will make a great head of the IMF. Ex-Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh or Montek Singh Ahluwalia could run the World Bank.

It's crazy that you have this condition, which is, in some ways, racist. Basically, it means that if you don't belong to the Western nations, you can't run these institutions. The time has come for the West to stop insisting that these institutions be controlled by the West. They should learn to be more democratic and offer the remaining 88% of the world an opportunity to manage these institutions. By the rest of the world, I don't mean just China. China doesn't make up the majority of Asia. Of the 3.5 to 3.6 billion Asians, China makes up only 1.4 billion. The rest of Asia can also have a say in managing these global institutions.

Mukhopadhyay: So, having Western powers dominate integral institutions like the UN Security Council (UNSC) really hinders world progress?

Mahbubani: Definitely, and it's absurd! Singapore served for two years in the UNSC when I was an ambassador to the UN. I know the UNSC very well. In theory, it has 15 members — five permanent and 10 elected members. But this dynamic also shows you how distorted the UNSC has become. It is not controlled by the elected members, it is controlled by the five permanent members — the US, UK, China, Russia and France. And you can't remove them because they can veto their own removal.

It is absurd that the only criteria for a permanent representation in the UNSC is that you must have won World War II in 1945. Over 74 years have gone by since 1945, so why do we still see the domination of these five countries in the UNSC? I don't object to the veto. I believe that the UNSC should have the veto, but it should not belong to yesterday's powers — it should belong to tomorrow's powers.

For example, the United Kingdom, which is slowly becoming the disunited Kingdom, should give up its permanent membership to India,

because India has a bigger claim to the seat given that its economy is bigger than that of UK's. India's population of 1.3 billion is about 20 times larger than that of the UK. It's absurd that the UK has given up its colonial rights in many ways but it still wants to preserve its permanent seat in the UNSC. A change is necessary.

I proposed a 7-7-7 formula for reform of the UNSC in my book, "The Great Convergence." I also refer to this formula in "Has the West Lost It?" I have proposed that the new seven permanent members of the UNSC should be the US, Russia, China, India, Brazil and Nigeria (the latter three are the most populous states in the world), and one seat should be reserved for Europe, because it mainly operates as one economy. Therefore, the UNSC will not be dominated by the West anymore.

I have also proposed seven semi-permanent members, because when a country becomes a permanent member of the UNSC, its neighbor can object. For example, when Brazil wants to become a member, Argentina can object. If Nigeria wants to become a permanent member, South Africa can object. In the case of India, Pakistan blocks the claim. I propose a new scheme by which countries like Pakistan will become semi-permanent members of the Security Council, and they would have a permanent seat every eight years. Then there will be seven elected members from smaller states. This 7-7-7 formula will make the Security Council more representative of the 7.5 billion people of the world and not primarily the 12% who live in the West.

Mukhopadhyay: The Western media focus a lot on the political problems in Asian countries such as China, India and Pakistan. Recently, the UN Security Council discussed the revocation of Article 370, which granted special autonomous status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. What are the biggest political challenges for China and India in the long run?

Mahbubani: As I mentioned earlier, in PPP terms, the number one economy in the world is China, number three is India. By 2050, number one will be China, number two will be India, and number three will be the US. India is about to enter a geopolitical sweet spot. India will now be courted actively by both the US and China. In my book, I suggest that it's time for India to be Machiavellian and to work out where its interests lie. Imagine a see-saw. On the see-saw, you have US and China sitting on opposite sides. The best place for India is to stand in the middle. If India puts its foot on the see-saw, it will affect the balance. For India to achieve this middle position, it needs to have equally good relations with both countries. India is capable of doing that, and if it does so, it will enhance its geopolitical usefulness, and its geopolitical weight will be far greater than that of Pakistan.

I love the Anglo-Saxon media and I think the Financial Times and The Economist are great newspapers. Nonetheless, they still reflect an Anglo-Saxon point of view. The Anglo-Saxon population of the world is confined to five countries: US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. If you add up the total numbers of Anglo-Saxon population in the world, it's about 425 million. That's just 5% of the world's population. But this 5% dominates the global airwaves, and they usually give you all the bad news about India and Pakistan. They will never give you the good news.

In my new book, I talk about the success stories such as the startling fall in global poverty rates. A lot of the poverty reduction has taken place in Asia. Even countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, which have a bad image in the Western media, have improved their economies significantly. They have achieved over 5% growth in 20 years! It's shocking to see how these countries have improved. In the case of Malaysia, the improvement is quite stunning: Its poverty rate went down to 1.7% in 2012 from 51.2% in 1958.

Mukhopadhyay: In June 2018, Joseph Nye criticized your book in the Financial Times for making an "easy target" of the West, while giving China a "free ride." You have repeatedly chosen to defend China and highlight the advantages of Xi Jinping's "rational good governance." Why did you call Xi Jinping an exemplar of good governance?

Mahbubani: Joseph Nye is an American social scientist and he believes in data. The data tells me that the only developed country where the average income of the bottom 50% has gone down over the last 30 years is the US. The country where the average income of the bottom 50% has gone up the fastest is China. You must judge good governance not in terms of good ideology, but in terms of results and its impact on the bottom 50%.

Clearly, I am not giving Xi Jinping a "free ride" — I am just providing the data. The data shows that the US has neglected its bottom 50%, and China has improved the well-being of its bottom 50% faster and more comprehensively than any other country. That's what good governance is about. If you go by any indicator — poverty reduction, life expectancy, infant mortality — the data will show you that life expectancy is going down in the US. In China it's the opposite. My next book, which I hope to produce next year, gives data on how the American elites have failed their working-class population. That's why the US has elected an irrational leader, while China is lucky to have a rational leader like Xi Jinping.

Trump is attacked very much in the West for everything he does. In this case, however, I think that Trump should be given the Nobel Peace Prize for talking to Kim Jong-un.

Amartya Sen once said that if you are going to have proper development, you need the invisible hand of the free market and the visible hand of free governance. What has gone wrong in the US is that you have the invisible hand, but not the visible hand. You can find a lot of data that will show you that the US today is no longer a democracy — it's a plutocracy, where all the wealthy make the decisions. By contrast, in both India and China, the government continues to play a significant role in the governing. That's why the bottom 50% in India has experienced a significant improvement in the standard of living.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong suffers from the American problem where the bottom 50% of the population has not seen an improvement in their standard of living because it has become a plutocracy like the US. Good governance isn't a fight about which country is a democracy and which isn't. It is about which societies are taking care of the bottom 50% of the population.

Mukhopadhyay: Europe is undergoing a period of economic stagnation. Italy is on the brink of a major debt crisis, Greece has forced other European countries to question the existence of the eurozone. Post-Brexit, the UK's economy is shrinking, and even the German economy is teetering on the brink of recession. How will the European slowdown affect the global economy? Will Asia suffer or will Europe's loss be Asia's gain?

Mahbubani: Both Europe and the US have to make strategic adjustments with the world to become more competitive. When India and China developed, they put in millions of workers into the global free-market system. Joseph Schumpeter calls this "creative destruction," which is inevitable when you put new workers into the market, and other workers lose their jobs.

Europeans can still do well, but the European governments must help their people learn new skills, different from those China and India are strong in. European governments have failed to provide skills training, and this failure to take care of the working classes is the reason why the US now has a leader like Donald Trump, and in Europe populist parties are taking power. The Europeans can adjust and work with Asia, and that can be a great future for the world. I want the West to do well — I don't want the West to fail. My book is intended to be a gift to the West and not a condemnation.

Mukhopadhyay: By imposing its version of democracy in places like Iraq, the West has caused much conflict. Does the West need to stop intervening, or should it make human rights, not geopolitics, the basis of its foreign policy?

Mahbubani: Before intervention, there's one thing we need to address — bombing. The West needs to stop dropping bombs. China hasn't fought a major war in 40 years, it has not fired a bullet across its border in 30 years. In contrast, even under the rule of Barack Obama, who was a peaceful American leader, in the last year of his presidency, the US dropped over 26,000 bombs on seven countries. We have to stop dropping bombs. Look at Libya. France went into Libya, the US went into Libya, and now that the country is broken, they have left.

I would like to cite a quote in my book, by an Indian diplomat, Shyam Saran, on Western intervention: "In most cases, the post-intervention situation has been rendered worse, the violence more lethal, and the suffering of the people who were supposed to be protected much more severe than before. Iraq is an earlier instance, Libya and Syria are the more recent ones. A similar story is playing itself out in Ukraine. In each case, no careful thought was given to the possible consequences of the intervention."

All I am saying is, Why waste money and resources to kill people and make countries worse off?

Mukhopadhyay: However, US involvement in North Korea was a positive move to curb nuclear weaponry. How can the West continue to involve itself constructively in world affairs, particularly in countries like North Korea?

Mahbubani: Here I am going to say something surprising. Trump is attacked very much in the West for everything he does. In this case, however, I think that Trump should be given the Nobel Peace Prize for talking to Kim Jong-un. And he did the right thing in doing so, because he employed diplomacy. It's a pity that Obama didn't go to Iran, and Clinton didn't go to Cuba to talk to Castro. I think Donald Trump is braver than his predecessors in talking to an enemy.

Even though Trump did the right thing, he was surrounded by advisers like John Bolton, who, instead of negotiating a deal with North Korea, wanted to strong-arm the country into acceding to all US demands, without offering anything in return. Now that Trump has sacked Bolton, I hope that he goes back to North Korea. I am convinced that the North Koreans are rational people. If you give them a win-win deal and reduce sanctions, they will begin to work with the rest of the world and begin to scale back on their nuclear weapons.

Mukhopadhyay: How can the West change its misunderstanding of the East?

Mahbubani: The West needs to stop being arrogant and start listening to the East. I have published seven books and realized that there is a great paradox about the US: It has the world's most open society, but it has a closed mind. The Americans don't like to listen to foreign voices. There's a kind of a bubble that American intellectuals are caught in, in which they don't listen to foreign voices. I write sharply to break through this bubble so that they listen to foreign voices.

If the US and Europe can learn to listen to the world and break through their bubble, they will learn to listen to foreign voices. I will give you an example. When Europe and India were negotiating a free trade agreement, Europe told India that you must respect the European human rights provisions. Shashi Tharoor, a member of Parliament in India, gave a brilliant response and said: "I am convinced that if Europe were to insist on imposing conditionality of such a sort on the FTA, then India would refuse to cooperate. You can't forget history, you can't forget that for 200 years others have led India's business and politics, and it is much more important for us to insist on our own rights than to strike an FTA. As simple as that."

Therefore, it's time for the West to stop being arrogant toward the East and start listening.

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David Petraeus: It Doesn't Pay to Bet Against Modern China

Naveed Ahsan & David Petraeus
December 19, 2019

In this guest edition of The Interview, Naveed Ahsan talks to David Petraeus, former head of the CIA and the chairman of the KKR Global Institute.

The US and China are the two biggest economies in the world. Over the decades, the two countries have been opponents, friends, frenemies and rivals. The US joined the European powers in the exploitation of China, opposed the spread of communism and fought Mao Zedong's young nation in Korea. This icy relationship thawed with Henry Kissinger's diplomacy and Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China.

After Deng Xiaoping started modernizing China's economy in the 1980s, economic relations between Washington and Beijing deepened. After Deng's 1992 "southern tour," which reconfirmed China's commitment to economic liberalization and free-market reform, the economy took off exponentially. It has now become the workshop of the world. In recent years, this has created unease in the US, where the working class suffered as manufacturing moved abroad. Under President Donald Trump, relations soured, leading to the imposition of US tariffs on more than $360 billion worth of Chinese goods, and more than $110 billion of US products by China in retaliation. Now, there is talk of a new Cold War.

The trade war between the US and China presents major risks to the global economy. A study by the UN Conference on Trade and Development found that the continuing trade war by the two biggest economies, "has resulted in a sharp decline in bilateral trade, higher prices for consumers and trade diversion effects." The study revealed that US tariffs have caused a $35-billion loss to Chinese exports in the US market. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the trade war will cause almost a percentage point loss in global growth this year.

There is also the added question about which of the two economic models is likely to prevail. With its cheap gas, immigrants from around the world, top universities, spending on research and entrepreneurial energy, many take the view that the US will come back strongly. Others say that the Chinese have the social cohesion, long-term planning, determination and a work ethic to mount a decent, if not successful, challenge.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Naveed Ahsan talks to David Petraeus — a decorated general, former head of the CIA and the chairman of the KKR Global Institute — about the US economy, American strategic priorities and US-China relations.

Naveed Ahsan: With "America First," is the US going back to the protectionist policies of the pre-World War I era?

David Petraeus: Now let me qualify my answer a bit because there is a debate in the US — and in some other countries as well — about the benefits of international trade agreements, the value of alliances and the importance of the US continuing to lead the so-called rules-based international order. Those who believe in each of these — and I am among them — clearly have to make a more effective case than has been put forward in recent years that the benefits of each outweigh the downsides and costs that inevitably accompany trade agreements, alliance membership and global leadership.

Additionally, there has to be an acknowledgment that there are losers, as well as

winners, from trade and other agreements, and that there need to be policies and resources that take better care of those disadvantaged by new trade agreements than has often been the case in the past.

Ahsan: With low gas costs, cutting-edge research, smart manufacturing, etc., is the US economy poised for another growth spurt?

Petraeus: That may be the case in some sectors, but is unlikely in aggregate. The US is, of course, in the later stages of the longest economic recovery in our history. But growth in the US has begun to slow; we have seen yield curve inversion; and growth in the eurozone and much of the developed world, as well as that in China, India and many emerging market countries, has slowed as well — in some cases approaching a technical recession.

In response, central banks around the world, including in the US, are now reducing interest rates and pursuing monetary easing as well, and some governments are also engaged in fiscal stimulus policies. Each of those actions is intended to mitigate the risk of a recession. Continued consumer spending in the US, which accounts for the vast majority of US GDP, is sustaining growth in the US at present, and some fundamentals are encouraging — low inflation despite the lowest unemployment in some 50 years, low energy costs, recent modest increases in real wage rates and still reasonably solid earnings.

But I would not anticipate a US growth spurt in aggregate, at least not until we weather the inevitable downturn that lies ahead — though no one can predict the timing or severity of the downturn, to be sure.

Certainly, some productivity enhancements being pursued will help the US economy. However, if the US wants to see a real boost to long-term growth, we will need to invest heavily in overdue infrastructure improvements that enhance productivity, achieve comprehensive immigration reform — providing, in particular, a legal pathway for unskilled workers for our agriculture, construction, and hospitality sectors; allowing more highly skilled workers for various tech sector needs; and resolving the status of the "Dreamers" and those immigrants here without adequate legal documentation.

[We need to] improve public education for the bottom 30% or so of our population, increase resources provided for research and development, and establish greater incentives and regulatory frameworks to encourage investment in new technologies, such as 5G infrastructure and communications, renewable energy sources, smart grid, etc.

Ahsan: With the rebound of American manufacturing, is the Chinese economy headed for a Japan-style showdown?

Petraeus: There are many challenges looming for manufacturing in China: displacement of some manufacturing to countries with lower labor costs and because of US tariffs; return from China of some manufacturing to the US (where more of the work is done by machines, robots and automation); loss of some manufacturing jobs inside China to robots and machines (no country will be affected more by the "rise of the robots" than will China, as its workforce in manufacturing is undoubtedly the largest in the world); and loss of some tech manufacturing because of growing concerns about supply chain risks associated with — and US restrictions on — some tech items built in China.

Those challenges — and the inevitable reduction in growth rates in China, even as growth does continue, as well as a variety of other factors — will require very skillful responses by Chinese leaders. But Chinese leadership has guided the country to achieve more in the four decades since Deng Xiaoping welcomed the world to China than any country in history has achieved in 40 years. So, just as Warren Buffett observes from time to time that "It has never paid to bet against America," perhaps we might offer something of the same about modern China.

Ahsan: What must Washington and Beijing do to avoid the Thucydides' Trap?

Petraeus: This is one of the central questions of the day — and likely will continue to be so for the decades ahead. From a US perspective, the US-China relationship has to be far and away the top priority of America's foreign policy. And we need to develop a truly coherent and comprehensive approach that employs all possible American tools, together with those of our allies and partners around the world, and asks what the effect on the US-China relationship will be of every foreign policy initiative.

Beyond that, it is very clear that the US and China need to engage in sustained strategic dialogue so that each side understands the national interests of the other and so that differences can be resolved diplomatically before they get out of hand — especially given that, unlike pre-World War II situations, we are now in the nuclear age. The goal obviously should be a mutually beneficial relationship, and the key will be determining which of China's aspirations are sufficiently legitimate that they should be accommodated, and which are not, and thus warrant firm pushback by the US and its partners.

Ahsan: What are the top three strategic priorities for the US?

Petraeus: Reflecting on the 2017 National Security Strategy, drafted under the direction of a long-time military colleague, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, the four priorities identified for the US are: protection of the US homeland, including the American people and our way of life; promotion of American prosperity; preservation of peace (through strength); and the advance of American influence around the world.

Ahsan: What are the top three geopolitical threats to the global economy?

Petraeus: There are numerous threats at present, but it seems to me that the top three are: first, the economic actions that have accompanied the resurgence of great power rivalries — especially, as previously highlighted, those associated with the extraordinary rise of China; second, increased challenges to the trading regimes and elements of the rules-based international order that, despite various shortcomings, has stood the world in reasonably good stead since the end of World War II; and third, populism, security issues, corruption, large-scale criminal activity and other dynamics that are undermining in many countries the elements of governance, rule of law and security that are generally required for substantial investment by foreign sources.

*Naveed Ahsan is the former North America editor of Fair Observer. David Petraeus is former head of the CIA.