

Fair Observer

Monthly



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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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

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The Economy Flames Anger in Iran

Dina Yazdani

January 9, 2018

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

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

Lack of economic opportunities, growing inflation, corruption, a widening gap between the people and the elites seem have pushed Iranians over the edge. They are bolder, more fearless and have shown tremendous resilience in the face of a growing crackdown by authorities. The 2009 Green Movement protests erupted in response to the fraudulent elections that pitted reformist Iranians against the hardline government were largely confined to the capital Tehran and made up of the

middle class. This latest round of demonstrations is different: Protests erupted among low-income Iranians in the religious centers of the country like Mashad and Qom that align more closely with conservative hardliners than leftist reformists.

RED LINES

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

Iranians understand that declining living standards are not the fault of the president alone. While some of the country’s economic woes can be attributed to Rouhani’s policies, many have been institutionalized within the system of government and long precede his presidency. This past summer during a radio interview, the son of a reformist leader Mohammad Reza Aref credited his business success to “good genes” from his parents, sparking public outcry and reopening a debate on nepotism in Iran. Iranians took to Twitter to mock the

children of elites, or aghazadeh — Persian for “noble-born.” One tweet particularly captured the sentiment of Iranians well: “What is aghazadeh? A person who’s had nothing to do with success in his life and was only at the right place, at the right time.”

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

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

One report claims that embezzlement and corruption cost Iran almost \$18

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

“MY LIFE FOR IRAN!”

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

While at first Khomeini hoped to inspire resistance to Western influence, exporting the values of the revolution eventually narrowed down to the Muslim world. Iran has expanded its influence in the Middle East by helping fund Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the Shia-led government in Iraq and Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. While “exporting the revolution” has been a powerful instrument to curry nationalism among Iranians, the latest demonstration has shown that Iranians are quickly losing their support for its expansionist foreign policy, especially

as it comes at their expense. Iran's extensive proxy network comes at a heavy price, and Iranians are tired of footing the bill. Among the many slogans chanted throughout the nationwide protests include "No Gaza, no Lebanon, no Syria — my life for Iran!"

Tehran's funding of proxy groups abroad has also consolidated the status of the Revolutionary Guards, which is responsible for training these groups, as an economic powerhouse in Iran. The IRGC has taken advantage of its indispensable role in executing the country's foreign policy by expanding its control over the Iranian economy. It is not uncommon for those with ties with the IRGC to be awarded non-bid government contracts, and for competitors to be disqualified on arbitrary grounds. The economic footprint of the IRGC has been a hurdle for privatization efforts, making it hard for entrepreneurs and ordinary businessmen to compete. By continuing to invest money in an ambitious foreign policy while neglecting the economic plight of their own people, the government is emboldening the IRGC and, consequently, undermining the economy.

WIDENING GAP

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

throughout the country while the capital has remained uncharacteristically quiet.

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

From 2007 to 2015, the average household budget has fallen 15%, meaning that Iranians have become 15% poorer. However, the average budget of an urban household in Tehran has increased around that same time period. According to BBC Persian, the gap between Tehran and virtually everyone else in the country has nearly doubled over the past few years. Economic corruption and the

misappropriation of funds have played a role in pooling a disproportionate chunk of government money into the capital, the home of economic and political elites, hardliner and reformist alike. Iran beyond Tehran has grown restless from this economic inequality, and Rouhani's recent budget announcement confirmed that it will only get worse.

BROKEN PROMISE

Compounding the litany of economic grievances is the disappointment with the nuclear deal signed in 2015. After years of crippling sanctions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) offered hope that Iran could finally join the global economy, which would attract foreign investment, spur economic growth, lower inflation and, most importantly, create jobs.

However, the nuclear deal has failed to live up to its promises as the US under President Donald Trump continues to renege on its commitment to sanctions relief. After threatening to rip up the deal during his presidential campaign, Trump has lobbied even more sanctions against Iran as president.

Trump's hostility toward Iran has made many foreign companies, not to mention American ones who fear decertification, reluctant to do business with Iran. Iran's highly educated population, advanced technology and vast resources make it a highly desirable market. However, America's aggressive stance carries a risk for private companies. Those that have managed to navigate around the

sanctions language in the US and elsewhere have resorted to signing memorandums of understanding instead of actual contracts, leaving the Iranian signatories vulnerable and uncertain.

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

In line with Iran's history of dissent, all protests eventually turn political. What began as a protest against rising inflation and declining employment has exploded into a nationwide demonstration of dissent against the government as a whole. What is unclear is what role reformists will play in the protests.

Even though the economy affects rural, low-income Iranians more than middle-class Tehranis, unemployment is high throughout the country, especially among young people who make up at least half of the population. The pro-democracy activists who made up the Green Movement have the same grievances against the government and

are also disappointed in Rouhani — not just for his annual budget proposal but for failing to live up to his political and economic promises he campaigned on.

Rouhani's control over the government is limited, however, and change can't come from his office alone. Chants on the streets are directed toward the government that includes Rouhani, the supreme leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Republic as a whole. While curbing Trump's threats of decertifying the nuclear deal and reversing new sanctions may be beyond Tehran's sphere of influence, it can start by not neglecting "the other Iran" and adopting reforms that promote economic equality.

Addressing economic corruption is just a starting point and will, without doubt, bring more positive outcomes than a military crackdown that will only incite more Iranians to take to the streets.



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The Other Ethnic Crisis in Myanmar

Daniel Sullivan

January 10, 2018

Displacement and human rights abuses in northern Myanmar underscore the need for international pressure on Myanmar's military.

With more than 650,000 people fleeing their homes, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority by the Myanmar military has reached unprecedented proportions. But patterns of serious human rights abuses and restrictions on humanitarian aid at the hands of the military are neither unprecedented nor limited to the Rohingya.

This fact not only reinforces the need for international pressure on Myanmar, but also highlights the urgent need to address an unsustainable situation that, if ignored, could lead to a rapidly deteriorating human rights and humanitarian crisis in another part of the country.

Some 100,000 mostly Christian people continue to live in displacement camps in northern Myanmar, increasingly cut off from life-saving aid.

Even as a new round of national peace talks approaches, fighting between the Myanmar military and groups that have not signed a national ceasefire agreement, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), has ratcheted up. As recently as Christmas

Eve, Myanmar military shells fell near a displacement camp in Kachin State. Most of the 100,000 people in Kachin and northern Shan States have been displaced since 2011 when a 17-year ceasefire between the military and the KIA, one of Myanmar's strongest ethnic armed groups, ended. Many have been displaced multiple times.

In January 2017, for example, Myanmar military shells fell near a displacement camp causing thousands to flee across the border into China before being pushed back and making their way to a new camp high in the Kachin hills. Another thousand are estimated to have been displaced just since the end of December 2017.

ACCESS DENIED

Nearly half of the displaced population in northern Myanmar is living in areas beyond government control, mainly in the hands of the KIA and along the border with China. As Refugees International found in a recent — rare for an outside group — visit to these areas, this vulnerable population faces an increasingly precarious situation.

Since May 2016, the government of Myanmar has forbidden any international aid delivery and denied virtually all access for the United Nations and international humanitarian groups. Local groups are still able to deliver aid but at a much higher cost and without the expertise and capacity that international humanitarians can provide.

At the same time, international donors have decreased the overall amount of aid to those national groups.

The result, as found in Refugees International interviews with displaced persons in Kachin State, has been an increased sense of desperation expressed by displaced persons and borne out by increased reports of disease, higher dropout rates among students in schools set up for displaced persons, and increased numbers seeking livelihood opportunities in China, where they face growing risks of trafficking and exploitation.

In short, the dangerous mix of less international aid, more restrictions and waning global attention to displacement (going on seven years) has created both a humanitarian and protection crisis.

Conditions have even been worsening for displaced persons living in government-controlled areas. While not facing the near blanket restriction on international aid and services like those in areas beyond government control, these displaced persons face a dramatic increase in restrictions in the form of onerous bureaucratic requirements and delayed travel authorizations.

As the UN humanitarian agency's November 2017 update reported, "Over the last year, there has been a dramatic deterioration in the amount of access granted by the Government for humanitarian workers in Kachin and Shan states."

Nor has the pattern of increased restrictions been limited to international humanitarians. Local humanitarians and media are also facing greater difficulties and intimidation. In 2017, two Kachin Baptist pastors were arrested for showing international journalists where a Myanmar military shell had landed on a Catholic church.

This links to a broader national trend of a crackdown on media. In December 2017, two local Burmese journalists working for Reuters were arrested for allegedly illegally obtaining documents related to abuses against the Rohingya.

The government of Myanmar also continues to insist that it will not grant access to the fact-finding mission established by the UN Human Rights Council, and it recently barred the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights from any further visits.

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

The trajectory of recent events, from arrests of journalists to resumed shelling even near displacement camps, suggests the government and military are not prepared to take steps toward peace and respect for human rights whether in Rakhine or Kachin and northern Shan States. In the absence of internal policy change, the need for international pressure will only become more necessary and urgent.

The holding of emergency sessions at the UN Human Rights Council and UN Security Council and the US sanctioning

of Maung Maung Soe — the general previously overseeing the ethnic cleansing campaign in Rakhine State — are welcome steps. But more must be done, including further targeted sanctions, suspension of military to military cooperation and imposition of a multilateral arms embargo.

The ethnic cleansing of two-thirds of the Rohingya community previously living in Myanmar already begged all of these steps and more concerted international pressure. The ongoing plight of other minorities in Myanmar should not only reinforce the need for that pressure, but also remind us of broader risks of insecurity and even greater civilian suffering.



Daniel Sullivan is the senior advocate for human rights at Refugees International (RI). He joined RI in April 2016 as a senior

advocate focusing on Myanmar, Central America and other areas affected by mass displacement. Sullivan spent the previous five years with United to End Genocide (formerly Save Darfur), first as a senior policy analyst and then as director of policy and government relations, leading strategic planning, report writing and development of policy recommendations on Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and prevention of genocide and mass atrocities. He has over a decade of human rights and foreign policy experience.

Can Rouhani Play His Cards Right?

Ian McCredie

January 12, 2018

Hassan Rouhani is a shrewd politician, and he has spotted the opportunity to harness the recent discontent for his cause.

The recent unrest in Iran is yet another illustration that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and his agents of oppression, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its subsidiary Basij force, have lost all remaining claims to legitimacy. The generation that fomented the 1979 Iranian Revolution and now led by one of its last senior survivors, Ayatollah Khamenei, is at the edge of extinction. His authority evaporated years ago. The final strands of any right to power were severed by the rigging of the 2009 elections and the brutal suppression of the protests that followed.

Indeed, many years before 2009, the senior clerics of Shia confession had severed their connections with the theocracy in power in Tehran and retired to Qom or Najaf to focus on the spiritual life rather than politics. Ayatollah Khamenei knows full well that he rules with neither popular consent nor religious authority, but by force.

Khamenei, and his unelected branch of the government, have two opponents: the majority of the people, who want freedom and reform, and the elected government led by President Hassan

Rouhani, who wants the same thing. This is a powerful combination. Rouhani is a shrewd politician, and he has spotted the opportunity to harness the recent discontent for his cause. He has already spoken publicly about the need to respond to the voice of the people. But he also knows that there are great dangers. If the protest movement were to get out of control, then Rouhani himself might be swept away in the chaos that would follow.

Iran is a volatile place: Some 60% or 48 million out of 80 million people are under 30, and youth unemployment is nearing 30%. They are angry about lack of jobs and opportunities. The security forces are well aware that they do not have the resources to police the situation if a real revolt took hold.

Rouhani has made some progress in reforming the economy, but not quickly enough to satisfy the aspirations of the population. Nor has he yet been able to deliver on the raised expectations after the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions. Rouhani has a delicate balancing act to respond to the popular movement but not fan flames that could consume him.

The key issue to watch is how Rouhani handles the situation. The unrest in Iran is a sign that the economy is under strain and the people want reform, but it in no way resembles the insurrection of the original revolution or the protests against the rigging of the 2009 election. It is a pale imitation of the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring or even the current turmoil in Tunisia.

The overexcitement in Washington that some rioting in Iran is somehow a harbinger of regime change is just an indication of how poorly the Trump administration understands the situation. Although it is premature to predict a change in mood, some of the protests have directly challenged the unelected power of Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC.

Khamenei is suffering from cancer and may not have long to live. Rouhani has a keen interest in ensuring that Khamenei's successor is at least an ally. More desirable alternatives would be that the role of supreme leader lapses or passes to Rouhani himself who would then combine the posts of president, head of state and commander in chief. In this position Rouhani would control the bonyads — the nongovernmental charities that own about 20% of the Iranian economy and crucially provide the supreme leader with the funds to pay for and control the IRGC.

If Rouhani plays his cards well, then Iran could emerge with a moderate reformist and coherent government intent on rejoining the international community and curbing the adventurism of the IRGC. We could see a repairing of relations with the Saudis and Emiratis, and even detente with Israel. These aims are clearly the aspirations of the youth of Iran. Predicting the future is an uncertain science, but the interests of the West and the region would be best served by not encouraging the wholesale overthrow of the whole regime by not interfering. The lessons of

Iraq and Syria should be reason enough to tread carefully.



Ian McCredie is a former senior British foreign service official. Most recently, he was Head of Corporate Security for Shell

International. He now focuses on helping companies navigate the complexities and manage the risk of frontier markets. He is a mathematics graduate and speaks Farsi, French and Danish.

What If Oprah Does Run?

Matthew Kolasa

January 12, 2018

The fungibility of power, converting fame and gravitas into a nomination and 270 electoral votes, remains an open question.

The latest tremor in what has become the earthquake of American presidential politics comes in the form of billionaire media titan Oprah Winfrey's rumored exploration of a 2020 White House bid. Her Golden Globes speech — hardly a traditional launchpad for a career in politics — was a call to arms for the oppressed, particularly women. It had a unifying tone reminiscent of a young Barack Obama in 2004, when he gave the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. This was the speech that “made” him.

Online, this most hyped up and politically significant acceptance speech in recent memory is the top viral video of the moment. The “Time’s Up” theme of the gala referred to the campaign against sexual assault that has swept the nation, but it may just as easily have been a time’s-up call against Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency.

Shortly after the speech, commentators from across the political spectrum disagreed on whether an Oprah Winfrey run would unite the left or sow further chaos in a Democratic Party still reeling from Trump’s surprise victory. One thing no one disputes is Winfrey’s ability to win.

If she chooses to run, Oprah Winfrey will enter the fray with a combination of strengths and weaknesses unique in presidential politics. Chief among her advantages is her ability to connect with an audience. Decades of experience as a journalist, author and public speaker give her a powerful weapon in any race against an incumbent whose greatest strength is plainspoken communication with voters and a ring of unpolished authenticity and confidence. Oprah is one of the few people in America able to beat Donald at his own media game.

Another strength is her success and position in society. As founder of a media empire that includes a popular magazine and a television channel, Winfrey enjoys a ready-made public relations machine at her disposal. Her profession, as well as her previous support of Barack Obama’s presidential

campaigns, give her access to a network of friends and contacts at the highest levels of Washington politics while at the same time maintaining sufficient distance to avoid being tarnished by insider “swamp” politics voters resoundingly rejected in 2016.

Candidate Winfrey would also have weaknesses. The political neophyte has neither professional-level expertise in any particular policy area nor any knowledge of Beltway politics and the labyrinthine legislative process. Voters may think a wealthy TV star entering the political arena a mere case of Democrats playing copycat and lacking originality.

The fungibility of power, converting fame and gravitas into a nomination and 270 electoral votes, remains an open question. It is too early to tell if her obvious base on the left, or moderates who voted for Trump, would be enough to add up to a win.

Last, and perhaps most challenging, is the competition. The Democratic Party may suffer a thin bench in Congress and in governors’ mansions, but it has its potential contenders.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, despite his age (he would, at 76, be America’s oldest new president, beating current record holder Trump by six years), is popular, experienced and a proven political veteran. Senator Elizabeth Warren, the energetic Harvard law professor who proposed and led the organization of the Consumer Protection

Bureau, ignites excitement among her base and would stand an eloquent and wonky contrast to a president famously short on policy specifics.

Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown hails from a key swing state and can appeal to the working class voters who won Trump Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. Other senators and governors like Cory Booker of New Jersey, Kirsten Gillibrand and Andrew Cuomo of New York, Kamala Harris and Gerry Brown of California, and Chris Murphy of Connecticut come from coastal, increasingly left-leaning states but nonetheless would get serious attention. Winfrey is among the first, but one of many.

The résumé the would-be candidate from Illinois brings to a presidential bid will prove far less important than the narrative she could weave. Oprah Winfrey is, if nothing else, a master storyteller, her skills honed on film sets, in documentaries, her magazine and thousands of interviews with princes and paupers alike. The story of a destitute girl from Kosciusko, Mississippi, who wore potato sacks for dresses and rose up to become a philanthropist and a global household name embodies the American dream and provides a ready alternative to the brash heir to the Trump real estate empire.

No matter the decision, Oprah Winfrey has yet to announce anything, and the Democrats are still mulling their chances. An expected major win for Democrats in 2018 midterm elections

and a stalled domestic agenda for the president may leave an opening for a strong opponent to unseat Trump. Still, anything can happen between now and 2020.



Matthew Kolasa is an attorney and journalist. He received his law license after completing his JD in International Law and MA in International Relations at Boston University, as well as an MSt in Art History at the University of Oxford and BA in History and Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Pennsylvania. He was an editor at Fair Observer from 2010 to 2011. He has traveled to 30 countries and is fluent in French and Polish.

US-Turkey Relations: Friction Is the New Normal

Nathaniel Handy
January 15, 2018

Don't expect major improvements in the old alliance any time soon, but don't expect it to vanish either.

The scepter of Turkey's reorientation from its traditional pro-US foreign policy has been the subject of fevered speculation in Western policy circles for many years now. The latest series of spats between the administrations of Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdogan — two men not inclined to

dodge a confrontation — appears to lend added weight to such concerns. Is the fear justified?

There is no question that relations between the long-time allies are strained. In recent months, there's been a dispute in which the US suspended most visa services in Turkey in response to the arrest of a Turkish citizen employed by the US consulate; repeated disgruntlement on the part of Turkey about US support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, including the recent summoning of the US Charge d'Affaires in Ankara, Philip Kosnett; and now a tit-for-tat advisory against travel to the respective countries.

These recent rumblings can be viewed within the context of a broader move away from unconditional support for the US on the part of Turkey. This has its roots in the shift in political control from the traditional liberal-secular elite to an emergent conservative-religious elite. One of the first telling outward signs was the Turkish parliament's refusal to allow US use of the Incirlik air base in southeast Turkey in the Iraq War of 2003.

UNDIPLOMATIC DIPLOMACY

The decision by Turkey to advise its citizens against travel to the US must be seen within the context of diplomatic — or not so diplomatic — posturing rather than as a response to actual threat. The Turkish advisory immediately follows a US travel advisory to American citizens that cited Turkey as an “increased

security risk” due to “terrorism and arbitrary detentions.”

These happen to be exactly the same reasons given by the Turkish government in issuing its own advisory against travel to the US. This is tit-for-tat diplomacy that bears a striking resemblance to similar episodes in recent US-Russia relations, in which actions by one side led to the threat of reciprocal action from the other.

However, though Turkey would like the diplomatic spat to be viewed in the same light as American-Russian entanglements, it is significantly different. The reality is that US-Turkey relations are deeply asymmetric. The US is the global superpower and Turkey is an ally. If the US issues an advisory against its citizens traveling to Turkey, it has real consequences for the Turkish tourism sector.

Unlike the US, Turkey is not a rich country. It is an emerging economy with reasonable growth, but many regions have significant reliance on tourism. This reliance was observed in the Russian ban on its citizens visiting Turkey in 2015. That hit Turkey hard and eventually led to a rapprochement. The US is further away geographically, but it still has an effect.

In contrast, a Turkish advisory is much more about diplomatic positioning. It has negligible effect on the US or its economy. Though President Erdogan would not like to see it this way, its prime function is simply to send a

message to the Trump administration. The trouble is, when you are the weak partner in an asymmetric relationship, such actions can end up simply looking like petulance rather than a serious threat.

Many will say that these actions hold in them the threat of Turkey abandoning its long-time allies to the West. The question to consider, though, is abandonment in order to pursue what? The idea of a drift to the East has involved theories of a reorientation of Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, toward China and even toward Vladimir Putin's Russia, which is a major supplier of Turkey's energy needs. None of these are yet convincing alternatives.

ZERO-SUM POLITICS

The counterrevolution that followed the Arab Uprisings has destroyed Turkish aims at an integrated Middle East. The Syrian Civil War has pitted Turkey against both Iran and Russia, even leading to the downing of a Russian jet and the ensuing diplomatic crisis. Perhaps the only steady partner has been China, yet it is still no substitute for the alliance with the US and NATO.

Despite President Erdogan's evident antipathy toward much of what the US represents, his government knows it must remain within its orbit for now. There simply isn't a safe alternative. The world is increasingly ruled by inflexible strongmen who see politics as a zero sum game, just as Trump and Erdogan do. None of those leaders — in Russia,

in the Middle East or elsewhere — are reliable enough for Turkey to put its faith in.

The posturing that now characterizes US-Turkey relations will increasingly become the norm, as Ankara seeks to gain the maximum leverage for itself in an ever more multipolar world. Yet, while the US may not reestablish itself as the close, intimate ally it was in the 20th century, Turkey will also be careful not to sever ties completely, nor seek a new overbearing ally in an unstable Asian neighborhood.



Nathaniel Handy is a writer and academic with over 10 years of experience in international print and broadcast media. He is the author of the chapter “Turkey’s Evolving Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq since the Arab Spring” in *Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring* (Isiksal & Goksel, Springer, 2018); the article “Turkey’s Shifting Relations with its Middle East Neighbors During the Davutoglu Era: History, Power and Policy” (*Bilgi Dergisi Journal*, 2011); and he presented a paper at the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) annual conference in 2014 on Turkish relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. He holds an MA in Middle East Studies from the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter.

This Is My “Shithole” Country, Mr. President

Nahed Eltantawy
January 16, 2018

The US is the greatest country in the world because of the millions of Americans, many of whom moved there from various “shitholes.”

I confess. I come from a “shithole.” I come from a “shithole” country in North Africa, and I couldn’t be prouder.

My “shithole” country is where I was born and raised. It is where I learned about family, love and compassion for others. My “shithole” country taught me how to respect others and not judge a person by the color of skin or the thickness of wallet.

My “shithole” country taught me that it is wrong to eat food when there are others out there starving. My “shithole” country taught me that I can’t enjoy the warmth of my fireplace when there are people freezing out in the streets, desperate for a blanket.

My “shithole” country is where I learned to love thy neighbor, even if that neighbor comes from a “shithole.” My “shithole” country is where I learned that when millions of people stand together, they can do the impossible, like bring down a dictator.

It is my “shithole” country and its lovely people that taught me to smile and joke, even in the worst of times, as in living in a “shithole.”

It is a “shithole” that wasn’t always a “shithole.” Many years ago, this “shithole” contributed a lot to this world, from mathematics to medicine to architecture. It is a “shithole” that gave birth to many great scientists, writers, artists and politicians, including four Nobel Prize laureates.

But over time, and thanks to many factors, including white supremacists invading and colonializing this “shithole,” it slowly turned into the “shithole” it is today.

True, my “shithole” country has its flaws. It is not the richest of countries. It is not the truest democracy. It is not the most just to its people, with millions suffering from poverty and injustice. Yet, with all its flaws and problems, it is still my “shithole,” and I love it.

It is my “shithole” country that instilled in me the drive to work hard and be dedicated.

So, when I moved to the US from my “shithole,” I loved my new country with all my heart, and I worked hard to prove that, even though I come from a “shithole,” I deserve to be here.

Yes, my new home is a great home. It is a country that prides itself on democracy and on its victory against years of slavery and racism. It is a country that is known as the greatest country in the world.

But is it really the greatest country in the world when its president thinks it’s OK to

call other countries “shitholes,” and when he contributes to and instigates the very same racism and intolerance that we pride ourselves on ending?

The US is the greatest country in the world because of the millions of Americans, many of whom moved here from various “shitholes,” who contribute to the melting pot of cultures, values and backgrounds that make America great.

I am proud of my “shithole” and will continue to be grateful to it and to its people for what they have taught me over the years.



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“Shithole” Countries? The Media’s Portrayal of Africa Reconsidered

Virgil Hawkins

January 16, 2018

It’s time to take a hard look at the role of the news media in creating and perpetuating a horribly simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of Africa.

US President Donald Trump’s alleged remarks questioning why the US should take in immigrants from what he apparently called “shithole countries” — those comprising Africa, along with Haiti and El Salvador — have been met with indignation around the world and sparked a discussion on issues of race and racism, and on the deficiencies of the current US head of state.

But perhaps it is also high time for a discussion on the role of the media in creating such negative images in people’s minds regarding immigrants from Africa and the continent from which they come.

Africa is the world’s second-largest continent, one covered in a wide range of landscapes, from grassy highlands, jungles, savannahs and deserts, to vast lakes and rivers, snow-topped mountains, lush valleys and canyons. It is also the second-most populous continent, being home to more than 1.2 billion people living in a variety of urban, semi-rural and rural settings. The continent is divided politically into at least 55 states, and a great many more

ethnic and linguistic groups. It is indeed true that much of the continent suffers from poverty, but there is also a large middle class and pockets of opulence. There is agriculture, and there is industry. Africa is host to a number of deadly armed conflicts, but violence is largely confined within limited regions, and many of its countries have not experienced armed conflict since their independence more than half a century ago. To call Africa diverse is a vast understatement.

People from the continent occupy all walks of life — they are farmers, builders, office workers, computer programmers, fashion designers, doctors. Regardless of their circumstances, people from Africa, just like people from any continent and just like Donald Trump, tend to devote their energies to the pursuit of a better life for themselves and their families.

The fact that it seems at all necessary to have to make a point of spelling out the diversity of the continent and the basic nature of human existence speaks volumes about the degree to which the entire continent of Africa and its billion inhabitants seem to be all too often reduced to a single crude stereotype or, in this case, into a single derogatory adjective.

But considering how “Africa” is portrayed in the news media — the prime (if not only) source of information for much of the outside world about the continent — it should perhaps come as little surprise that Africa does tend to be

perceived in such a stereotypical manner.

COVERED AND UNCOVERED

The first thing to notice about how Africa is portrayed by the media is that it generally is not. Studies of major internationally focused Western (US, UK, French) news outlets (newspapers and TV) have found that Africa tends to account for roughly 6% to 9% of the total amount of international news; in Japanese news, this drops to two to 3%. Even if we generously assume that 20% of the news is focused on international events (it rarely rises above 15%), that still means that at best, less than 2% of coverage in a Western newspaper will be about Africa. That does not leave a lot of room to portray Africa in all its diversity.

It surely comes as no surprise to anyone that what little coverage of Africa there is, it tends to be of the negative variety. News in general displays a tendency for negativity, as the truism “If it bleeds, it leads” would suggest.

Journalists have long spoken of a coups-and-earthquakes approach to covering the world outside (to quote the title of a book by Mort Rosenblum). But the tendency appears to be more pronounced regarding news of the African continent.

A study of US television news found more than 60% of news of Africa focused on conflicts, terrorism, disasters, disease and other tragedies.

A study of Japanese newspapers found 70% of coverage of Africa to be negative — more negative than that of any other continent. Even within news about conflicts, the more positive aspect of peacemaking is less likely to be covered for conflicts in Africa than it is for conflicts in the Middle East.

This is not to say that African conflicts are actively pursued by the media. African conflicts are in fact woefully underrepresented by the news media compared to other continents and regions. And as Kenneth Dowler rightly points out, it may well be that the “If it bleeds, it leads” notion holds true for the media, but “it really depends on who is bleeding.” Conflicts occurring in Europe or the Middle East inevitably attract vastly greater amounts coverage than African conflicts do. In a similar vein, a Western victim of a kidnapping or killing by an armed group in Africa is far more likely to be covered than an African victim.

This cannot simply be written off as a case of media based at “home” focusing on “our” people from the perspective of nationality. One cannot help but come to the conclusion that race (and/or socioeconomic status) is also playing a role in the determination of newsworthiness. In a situation in which no US citizens are involved, for example, a French citizen kidnapped in North Africa will attract US media coverage where a kidnapped Ethiopian citizen will not.

A ONE-WAY VIEW

The coverage of Africa remains largely fixated on the problems the continent faces, but it also has very selective views about what these problems have to do with the rest of the world. As Binyavanga Wainaina cleverly illustrates, there are plenty of stereotypes for journalists to choose from beyond the “dark Africa” frame, not least the “savior” angle. News stories of poverty and humanitarian tragedies in Africa are full of benevolent Westerners coming to the aid of their victims with medicine, food and blankets (and perhaps an occasional “humanitarian” bombing campaign). They can be seen building houses and schools, and taking on the role of educator and carer. All too often, they are the lead role in the story, while the passive and seemingly helpless African victims of poverty, conflict or disaster, remain voiceless, nameless and often faceless.

Given this focus on the negative aspects of Africa in the news coverage, the absence of the positive aspects as well as the failure to highlight the endeavors and innovation made by, and resilience of, people in Africa in overcoming the challenges they face, it should come as little surprise that immigrants from these places come to be seen as the tired, poor and huddled masses, incapable of contributing to society and destined to become little more than a burden upon it.

Also, importantly, news coverage misses a whole host of issues associated with Africa’s problems, not

least their causes. Precious little is said, for example, of the massive amounts of money lost through tax evasion and other forms of illicit financial flows leaving Africa via tax havens, all too often at the hands of foreign corporations. Similarly, the news media rarely talks about unfair trade or the trade rules and pressures that sustain it, or how the rich and powerful countries benefiting from this state of affairs work to maintain it. Bill Clinton admitted his role as US president in wiping out the rice industry of Haiti, one of the key non-African targets of Trump's infamous remarks. The mechanisms for this remain largely in place, and similar patterns can be observed throughout Africa.

ARE YOU RACIST?

This is not to simply blame the outside world for all the woes of the African continent. Domestic corruption stands at alarming levels in many African countries, and illicit financial flows are heists perpetrated by a host of actors, both domestic and foreign. But the fact is that when all the flows of trade, aid, investment, debt, tax evasion and remittances are tallied up, on balance, more money is leaving Africa than entering it. That is, Africa is in effect contributing more to the development of the rest of the world than it is benefiting from it.

The significance of Trump's alleged remarks seems to be considered primarily in the context of definitively answering the question posed by a

reporter in the aftermath of the uproar: "Mr. President, are you racist?" The whole incident will likely fall from view with the next statement or action that President Trump can manage to shock us with, either this week or the next. But let us not forget to take a hard look at the role of the news media in creating and perpetuating a horribly simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of Africa that allows such mindsets to develop and multiply.



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Government Shutdown and Partisanship in America

Gary Grappo

January 23, 2018

It's happened again: For lack of a budget, the US government has been forced to shut down.

Government shutdowns have become an unfortunate by-product of American democracy. This one, which began at

midnight, January 20 — ironically the one year anniversary of President Trump's inauguration — is the fifth such shutdown dating back to 1990. Previous closures typically lasted a day or perhaps a weekend, when the impact on the public is less. But closures between December 1995 and January 1996, and again in October 2013, lasted 21 and 15 days, respectively.

Closures occur when the US Congress, which controls the budget process, is unable to agree on funding priorities, typically because of specific issues that may often have nothing to do with spending.

In this latest case, as in almost all prior ones, partisanship on certain issues led to the suspension. Republicans want to see spending toward President Donald Trump's promised border wall with Mexico, despite his campaign insistence that "Mexico would pay for it." Democrats and, in fact, most border security experts, agree that an actual wall would prove too expensive and ineffective in stopping illegal immigration.

Democrats, on the other hand, insist that any spending bill address some 800,000 undocumented people, known as "dreamers," who were brought to the US as minors by their parents or guardians who entered illegally, mostly from Mexico and Central America. Being underaged and having had no say in the decision, they should be granted some sort of waiver for permanent legal status, Democrats argue.

A significant majority of Americans agrees. President Obama signed an executive order known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, in June 2012, to allow these dreamers to remain in the country with some legal status after Congress failed to take action. President Trump rescinded the order in September of last year.

A BROKEN PROCESS

Government closures are the most visible signs of the broken nature of the budget process in the United States. The world's oldest democracy cannot achieve something that nearly every other nation in the world manages every year — pass a budget on time.

In fact, in the four decades since the current system for budgeting and spending tax dollars has been in effect, Congress has managed to pass all its required appropriations measures on time only four times. Most of the time, it has resorted to something called a continuing resolution to keep the government open without a full budget, essentially a stopgap measure that allows basic functions like payroll, retirement, welfare payments and other essential functions to continue, but no new projects or spending to be undertaken. US government employees are well familiar with "the CR" and have come to loathe it.

Importantly, under closures and continuing resolutions, all of America's national security operations, e.g., its armed forces, security and safety

functions from the FBI and Federal Aviation Administration to the Transportation Security Administration inspectors at airports and other vital tasks continue. Employees may not be paid, however, until the budget, or at least a CR, is agreed.

The fact is that both issues, border security and immigration, deserve a full and comprehensive debate among America's citizens and in the media, but especially within the Congress. Following such debates and discussions, Congress should then take up both issues, whether separately or jointly, but not linked to the debate over funding the entirety of the US government. That much is evident to almost all Americans, but apparently not to their representatives in Congress.

PARTISANSHIP

Partisanship in the country has produced a hyper-partisanship within the government, effectively paralyzing the functions of normal governance. It may almost be defined as a tribalism that causes such extreme separation between opposing points of view that any compromise, or even the willingness to listen to the other side, is foreclosed.

Americans are practically as divided on these issues and others as their representatives. With the proliferation of unchecked social media, diminishment of respectable and responsible coverage and heavily partisan public discourse, such as that at Fox News

and MSNBC, citizens need only tune into points of view with which they already agree and which predictably demean, distort and misinform about the other.

That may be the core of America's problem. If Americans are so steeped in their newfound political tribalism that they are unwilling to listen to the other side and work to seek compromise, then it shouldn't be difficult to understand this Congress: Their elected representatives are a reflection of themselves.

In Congress, where the nation's business is done and differences resolved, when the two sides cannot even agree to take up issues in free and open debate in committees and on the floor of the Congress, the system is broken.

Brinkmanship, as in holding up the government budget, has become the standard go-to means of addressing problems. This is no solution at all. As of this writing, that appears to be the direction the Congress is headed even as a short-term fix of the current impasse appears to have been agreed upon.

It may be time for Americans to look at themselves in the mirror and then at their fellow citizens. They may want to start by asking themselves what makes it so hard to listen and then asking "the other" to explain his or her beliefs, and do so without looking for a counterargument. Just listen. It might also help if all Americans sought more

information about points of view at odds with their own. Perhaps reflecting on how the country did, or didn't, cope with political estrangement in its past — on issues such as slavery, secession, taxation, social security, war and civil rights — might also serve as a guide to today's problem-solving.

It is too easy to blame today's partisanship on Donald Trump. But he didn't start it, although he's apparently quite adept at exploiting it for his own partisan purposes. President Trump isn't the cause but rather a manifestation of the nation's growing intolerance of complexity, diversity and pluralism. Its marvelous system of democracy allows for dealing with such matters. Americans will have to want it, and want to give it a chance.



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Will Colombia's Next President Overcome the Challenges of Peace?

Glenn Ojeda Vega

January 30, 2018

Whoever becomes Colombia's next president will face significant challenges, including the monumental job of guiding a divided population into a new era of peace.

Colombia's presidential elections, set to take place in the summer of 2018, the country's first since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement in Havana, will be a test of Colombians' acceptance of both the peace process and of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group's transition into politics.

Although the Colombian people have longed for an era of peace, the process that finally ended five decades of conflict significantly polarized the country, both socially and politically.

On January 29, President Juan Manuel Santos suspended peace talks with the left-wing National Liberation Army rebels following recent bombings that left seven policemen dead and injured 47 civilians. If Colombia wishes to maintain social and political stability, the next president will have to tread carefully between a passionate electoral base opposed to the peace agreement and a population that seeks healing through reconciliation.

The 2018 elections will be the first to include the newly baptized Common Alternative Revolutionary Force, formed from the demobilized FARC. Former FARC commander Rodrigo Londoño's candidacy for president will also be the first time in over 50 years that Colombians will engage with FARC actors in a political, rather than insurgent, capacity.

Colombians have mixed feelings about the peace agreement negotiated by President Santos, and they initially rejected the Havana accord in a popular referendum in 2016. This was as much a testament to how out of touch Santos is with the Colombian public as to popular concerns with the peace agreement itself. As a result, there is little public support for candidates who actively favor the Havana agreement, now so closely associated with the unpopular Santos. Unsurprisingly, no candidate wants the peacemaker's endorsement.

While a number of Colombians view the Havana accord as much needed closure of a tragic and violent chapter in the country's history, many still retain a profound disdain for, and suspicion of, former FARC members, even with the group's transition into democratic politics.

President Santos' political opposition has successfully exploited this social tension by playing up the public's fear that the country will be taken over by Fidel Castro's brand of communism now that former Marxist guerrillas have

entered the political arena. Just a handful of FARC party representatives in the national congress, key right-wing political figures argue, could lead the country down a path similar to Venezuela's.

This dynamic has paved the way for former Vice President Germán Vargas Lleras to emerge as the strongest presidential candidate. Running as an independent, Vargas Lleras is seen as an opposition figure who will stand up to the specter of communism that is menacing Colombia.

This is a serious challenge for former president and Democratic Center Party head Alvaro Uribe, who led the successful "No" campaign against the Havana agreement. After months of anticipation, Uribe and the Democratic Center finally announced on December 10, 2017, that Senator Ivan Duque would be the party's presidential candidate. However, despite the strength of Uribe's endorsement, Duque is widely regarded as too young, and the party's base views him as soft on many key issues.

This leaves the field wide open for Vargas Lleras, who will likely become the default candidate for Colombia's wide center-right base and attract the support of Uribe's constituents during the second round of presidential voting. With the remaining center-left and left-wing parties too numerous, divided and unpopular, it is difficult to see Vargas Lleras facing a serious left-wing challenger.

Whoever becomes Colombia's next president will face significant challenges, including the monumental job of guiding a divided population into a new era of peace. In many ways, Vargas Lleras is not the president Colombia needs, but he seems to be the president most Colombians want: a straight-talker, grandson of a former president and, most importantly, highly critical of the FARC.

But the risk of Vargas Lleras' no-nonsense approach is that the country's social and political polarization will become so entrenched, former FARC guerillas will be pushed out of mainstream politics and back into the jungle, restarting another cycle of violence.

To avoid this, Colombia — both the political elite and the general population — must accept and formalize political space for these former guerrilla soldiers. Whether they do so will decide the future of the country's fragile peace.



Glenn Ojeda Vega was the 2017 Latin America fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy. He is also an emerging markets

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Government Shutdown Is a Symptom of a Broken System

Atul Singh

January 31, 2018

Deep divisions and nonstop elections have destroyed any sense of common purpose or long-term thinking in the US.

Earlier this month, US President Donald Trump celebrated his first year in office with a shutdown. The federal government closed for business at 12.01 am on January 20 and reopened on the evening of January 22 after the Senate passed a bill to fund it till February 8. Both Republicans and Democrats blamed each other for the shutdown.

It is important to note that Republicans form majorities in both chambers of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Never before has a shutdown occurred when the same party controls both chambers of Congress. It turns out that Republicans needed Democrats to pass a spending bill because of dissension in their ranks. Four senators of the Grand Old Party (GOP) refused to toe the party line, and Democrats joined them to close down the federal government.

Government shutdowns do not mean that military, intelligence or police operations stop. It means that nonessential federal workers are furloughed, which means they are sent on compulsory leave and not paid.

Among other things, working at national parks or monuments, processing passport or visa applications, and maintaining government websites are deemed nonessential. In 2013, the 16-day shutdown cost a mere \$2 billion.

CHASMS DEEP AND WIDE

At the heart of the most recent shutdown were disagreements over young immigrants, children's health care and military spending. These divisions run deep as the charged 2016 election campaign amply demonstrated.

In September 2017, Trump announced that he would end Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on March 5 unless Congress acted to extend it. DACA protects more than 700,000 undocumented immigrants who entered the US as children. Obama's measure gives these immigrants, known as "Dreamers," temporary legal status. Democrats aim to protect DACA and to allow Dreamers to remain in the US. Many Republicans want to kick them out.

Trump and most of his fellow Republicans want to boost defense spending significantly. They also want more money for tough new border controls, including the proposed US-Mexico wall. Fiscally conservative Republicans opposed increased spending and oppose Trump & Co. Democrats are willing to cut a deal with the Republicans as long as the increase in defense spending is matched by an

equal boost in domestic spending. They also want the Republicans to extend DACA and let Dreamers stay in the US. Such have been the divisions that Congress has not been able to agree upon a long-term budget deal. Instead, lawmakers have been passing stopgap spending bills known as continuing resolutions, ensuring that the land of the free and the home of the brave stays in a perpetual state of crisis.

Not only has Congress been unable to agree upon a budget deal, but it has also failed to reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The GOP leaders tried to entice the Democrats to vote for a stopgap spending bill by attaching a six-year reauthorization for CHIP to it. The Democrats refused to abandon Dreamers and damned the Republican reauthorization of CHIP as "a bowl of doggy doo, putting a cherry on top, and calling it a chocolate sundae."

THE NINTH SHUTDOWN SINCE 1980

The US is the only superpower on planet Earth with Harvard, Stanford, Facebook, Google, Apple, Amazon, McKinsey and Goldman Sachs flying its pennants high in markets worldwide. Yet this mighty power not infrequently fails to pay for its government on time. In the 21st century, shutdown politics have become par for the course for the land of the Augusta National Golf Club.

Part of the reason for shutdown politics is the long-cherished Republican belief in small government. Since Ronald

Reagan promised to get “government off the backs off the people,” Republicans have sought to slash regulations, cut taxes and limit the role of government. A shutdown ensures government does less and is not that unattractive a proposition for the GOP. The Democrats, who believe in a bigger role for the government, have so far shied away from pulling the trigger and causing shutdowns. This time, though, they emulated their Republican counterparts if only just for a weekend.

Under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, the shutdowns lasted longer and the battle lines were clearer. Each time, Democrats and Republicans battled over the size and cost of government. Simply put, the former wanted to spend more and do more, while the latter wanted the opposite. In 2013, the Republicans aimed to deny money to the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, and shut down the federal government for 16 days to sink Obama’s signature legislation.

This time, there were many actors and more motives involved. Both Republicans and Democrats are divided. The Bush family and the establishment Republicans have been defenestrated by loony gun-toting fanatics like Ted Cruz. Many argue that Trump, the owner of glitzy beauty pageants and garish buildings, has led a hostile takeover of the Republican Party. In turn, the Democrats are divided between the Obama boys, the Clinton cronies and the Sanders socialists. As this author argued in July 2016, “the

two-party system is facing a profound crisis.”

Even as the party system flounders, Trump, the master of the art of the deal, is turning out to be more deal breaker than deal maker. Reportedly, he flip flops incessantly, backs out of commitments impulsively and refuses to take much interest in details. Consequently, he has presided over the ninth shutdown despite his party controlling both chambers of Congress.

A VERY AMERICAN HARAKIRI

During the shutdown, each party blamed the other. After the shutdown ended, everyone claimed victory. In the words of Anthony Zurcher of the BBC, everybody is both right and wrong.

This is the year when the midterms are due. This means that congressmen will go to the polls again to win the right to be back at the House of Representatives. The dust has barely settled on the bruising elections of 2016, and the US is already preparing for another argy-bargy at the polls that promises to cost an arm and a leg apart from exacerbating existing deep divisions.

The US now has what Gregor Peter Schmitz calls a mercenary political culture. Every two years, candidates have to raise money and run for office. Ferocious primaries ensure that candidates who evoke visceral emotions and represent well-heeled interests have an advantage. American

democracy now encourages demagoguery full of sound and fury. In an election year, the blame game becomes intense and rally-the-base maneuvers inevitable if candidates and parties want to get the vote out.

When the Cold War was in full sway, shutdowns were a rarity. Americans demonstrated both long-term thinking and common purpose on various issues. In 1947, Arthur Vandenberg, a Republican senator, declared that “partisan politics [must stop] at the water’s edge” and supported the foreign policy of Harry Truman, a Democrat in the White House. Today, such is the division in the US that many suspect the president — who belongs to the party of god, guns and low taxes — to be a Russian stooge.

The shutdown was a mere blip, but it could be an omen of things to come. The Republicans are deeply divided and have been unable to pass a budget. The Democrats are equally divided but are trying to keep their flock together by picking a fight with Trump and other Republicans. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a rather prestigious German newspaper, grimly argues that what we are seeing in the US “for a few years now is the self-destruction of one of the world’s oldest democracies.”

Trust in politicians in general and in Washington in particular is running low. Inequality continues to rise and Trump’s tax cuts will worsen this phenomenon. The country’s education system is in crisis with its atrociously expensive top

schools turning into mere watering holes en route to venerated corporations such as McKinsey, Google or Goldman Sachs. Even as the National Security Agency continues to spy on its citizens and the Central Intelligence Agency bumps off so-called terrorists in shadowy drone strikes, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google know increasingly more about their consumers and profit from exploiting their personal information.

Worryingly, an unprecedented concentration of power is occurring in the US. Arguably, in some ways this concentration of power exceeds that of the Gilded Age of the 1860s or the boom years of the roaring 1920s. Instead of fomenting debate and discussion, this phenomenon has resulted in rage and radicalization. Politicians are appealing to their core constituencies who expect them to block any measure they cannot countenance. In an earlier era, these politicians could have compromised for the greater good of the nation and their constituencies might have forgiven them.

Today, Americans cannot agree upon what is good for the nation. Their political representatives fight for their constituencies fanatically and refuse to compromise even to form a budget or raise the debt ceiling. In this risky game of who blinks first, the solvency of the mightiest country in the world has come into question. Unsurprisingly, the venerable *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has proclaimed America to be “politically bankrupt.” Thankfully for the country, its

president has plenty of experience with bankruptcy.



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