

A photograph of a war-torn street. The buildings on either side are heavily damaged, with exposed concrete and missing windows. Debris is scattered on the ground. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The overall tone is somber and desolate.

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make sense of the world

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Black Panthers Don't Speak Xhosa

Stephen Chan
April 4, 2018

Black Panther makes sense for black Americans who have never stayed long in Africa, people who want a Marvel Comic of their own.

Since 1979, I have wandered and worked all over Africa. That work has been in the slums of great cities, innumerable war zones, universities, amidst spectacular natural beauty, and with wonderful people. I have worked with liberation movements and opposition leaders as well as with prime ministers and generals, and have advised African delegations negotiating with Beijing and ministers meeting the IMF.

As such, I was totally bemused by the film *Black Panther*. It was a fun film. Some adrenalin got pumping. The female warriors did good spear work — although it was Okinawan and Chinese spear work — and the Argentinian scenery was fantastic. But how do you reimagine Africa from the basis of this film? Maybe it makes sense for black Americans who have never stayed long in Africa, people who want a Marvel Comic of their own. But being black is not being African. Reimagining blackness is not reimagining Africa. A comic is a comic. *Black Panther* is wonderful, but trivial.

I have followed the argument on race politics in America between Ta-Nehisi

Coates and Cornel West. West was once a great philosopher — his work on philosophic pragmatism was astounding — but has produced no scholarly breakthrough for some time. He asserts that the fractures of society have more to them than the dispossessed being simply black. Coates was, of course, the writer of the *Black Panther* Marvel Comic, as well as an extremely thoughtful journalist. But the film of his comic makes of African blackness an undifferentiated mishmash that, all the same, underwrites precisely West's point that economics, leverage and power, strategies of cooperation and confrontation, and global structures all have something to do with race relations and, in the case of the film, international relations.

MISHMASH

Black Panther a mish-mash despite its effort to use African language. Xhosa, a widespread language in South Africa, known for its clicks, is spoken well in the film. Except that, suddenly, from time to time, a Swahili word or phrase suddenly intrudes. That's careless and lazy, like mixing a bit of Finnish with Greek and claiming it's all European.

But perhaps the Swahili is a useful pointer as, in fact, there actually aren't too many black panthers in Africa. Outside South America, where they are members of the jaguar species, panthers are black leopards that live mostly in Asia, with small populations in Ethiopia and Kenya. Kenya is one of the Eastern African countries where Swahili

is spoken, as it is in minority parts of Ethiopia. But no black panther has ever existed in South Africa where Xhosa is spoken. Ancestors who speak Xhosa and who have the powers of a panther are gobbledygook. Apart from the color, black jaguars and black leopards are very different. The panthers glimpsed in the film are jaguars — South American.

The idea of a hidden mountain kingdom in South Africa immediately resonates with the fact that Lesotho is exactly a largely unknown such kingdom. I kept scanning the Argentinian landscape hoping it was in fact Lesotho, a country of great but devastated beauty; but in Lesotho they speak Sesotho, which is not Xhosa by a long shot.

DO IT YOURSELF

Wakanda is most reminiscent of the El Dorado of the dreams of Spanish imperialists. In fact, the whole of the film resonates with the tropes of imperialism, from which Wakanda has supposedly freed itself. But the very name, Wakanda, was first used by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the inventor of Tarzan — very like a Marvel character — who hardly represented an accurate picture of Africa. The Ghost Who Walks, the Panther Who Walks — the parallels are unflattering.

But the capital of Wakanda is indeed a hidden El Dorado, not of gold, but of technology, based on the fictional mineral, vibranium. To be fair, vibranium keeps popping up in a range of Marvel Comics, but it has two chief

characteristics in Black Panther. Firstly, every single technology achieved by this African state owes to vibranium; without it they are reduced to nothing. With it, Wakanda is great — suggesting people got lucky in the foundation of their development. Secondly, the Wakandan scientists beneficiated (processed and manufactured it from its raw state) it themselves.

This is the absolute key point of the film, and it is a very good one. And it is the key point of Cornel West. Much of Africa's underdevelopment is because multi-national mining corporations extract the continent's minerals and raw materials, but then they beneficiate it and make huge profits from the manufactured product, and none of the profit from that comes back to Africa. The African state that develops the industrial capacity to achieve the manufacture of its raw materials will become much richer than the one that simply sells its assets raw.

But huge industrial combines seek to keep manufacture in the USA, in Europe, in China. Jobs and economies depend on it. When Middle Eastern countries began refining their own oil, it caused a huge outcry. That was the prerogative of Exxon Mobil and the rest of what were then called the Seven Sisters — all Western corporations. That protected black workers in the West as well.

If the take-home from Black Panther is that you've got to do it yourself, it is a wonderful take-home. But industries and

their workers will indeed suffer elsewhere. That is why neither right nor left, corporations nor trade unions, bosses nor workers want an industrialized Africa.

If, by some wonderful movie-magic chance, all the new African industries could be ecologically clean, that would be a fantasy come true. But industrialization is messy, as China has shown. And 55 separate African countries are not going to come up with a common industrial and environmental platform and policy. And, as the US withdraws from the Paris Climate Agreement, why should it? If the US doesn't care for the environment, why should Africa?

YOU HAVE TO DREAM

All these things are left unexplored in the film. Equality is going to be messy. Not in the conquest of former imperialism as advocated by Killmonger in the film, but in getting the total act together.

But the film is a fantasy. It's science fiction. I am too hard on it. You have to dream. And it has to be a dream that plugs into other dreams in the dreaming cinematic world and its associated media.

So it's no surprise that the film's Korean nightclub scene is a direct lift from *Casino Royale*, with white CIA agent Ross playing the part of black CIA agent Felix Leiter in the James Bond archetype. What I liked in *Black Panther*

is that Ross becomes the true caricature. He has to be taught everything. He becomes a comic character, an inversion in racial stereotypes of Eddie Murphy's jiving black cop; only Ross, while certainly brave, is essentially an idiot.

The Korean car chase again echoes almost every James Bond and Jason Bourne film. I kept looking for the Italian suits from *John Wicks*. But that's the subtext perhaps: Africa is the melting pot of the future. It will absorb everything we throw at it and rise into something very great but not currently recognizable. In this, imagination and reimagination are great things.

But we should perhaps imagine a little more boldly, more dramatically. Remember, before the imperial powers formally colonized Africa in 1884 at the Congress of Berlin, they had imposed two great Opium Wars on China from 1839 to 1860.

The effort to turn China into a nation of drug addicts and force international trade onto the country on European terms was as racially charged as the crimes against Africa. The Chinese called it their "century of humiliation." Did China emerge by yellowness? Would that have been enough? It imagined itself as greater and more complex than anything China had ever been before.

That, I hope, will be the imagination behind the new Africa.



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Donald Trump's Cabinet of Disruption

Mehdi Noorbaksh

April 10, 2018

Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal only serves the interests of the radical conservatives in Iran.

President Donald J. Trump has consistently engineered chaos inside the government and within the American society in order to establish norms and rules that befit his personality and limited appreciation of international and domestic politics.

Many in the American political realm betted on the "grown-ups" in his cabinet to tame him and console the public; however, he has quelled all efforts. Through it all, Trump has sought to be true to the character he campaigned on

and surrounded himself with individuals who are beholden to him. Most recently, he has appointed hawkish individuals who are to the extreme right of the American political spectrum.

John R. Bolton will become the new national security advisor to President Trump. Bolton defended the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and continues to defend it, although the president himself is one of the harshest critics of this military adventure.

Bolton has pushed for a preemptive strike against North Korea and has long been in favor of bombing Iran with the intention of changing the regime in Tehran. He is vehemently against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), informally known as the Iran nuclear deal, signed between Iran and the United States, Germany, France, England, China and Russia in 2015. The Security Council at the United Nations supported and sanctioned the agreement by a vote of 15-0. Iran has complied fully with the agreement since its inception in 2016.

The United States' chief negotiator of the agreement, Wendy Sherman, wrote: "Since going into force in 2016, that deal has blocked Tehran's path to a nuclear weapon and prevented a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. By every account, Iran is complying with the agreement, has committed to never obtaining nuclear weapons and has subjected itself to rigorous monitoring and verification."

Bolton is also an ideological partner and supporter of Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK), an Iranian opposition group and a terrorist organization that traitorously fought alongside Saddam Hussein against Iran in the Iran–Iraq war. For decades, the group had a compound in Iraq's Diyal province, which was supported and protected by Hussein. For many years, the group was on the US State Department's terrorist organizations list because it had killed many American citizens. In 2012, Bolton and others successfully lobbied for the removal of MeK's terrorist designation.

In the past, Bolton has offered extreme arguments against and has expressed excessive skepticism about various international institutions, including the United Nations. He is for a unipolar world in which the United States is militarily superior and leads the international community, and believes that the United States alone can manage international order. George Will, a well-known conservative thinker and writer, argues that Bolton perceives the United States as having the power and ability to determine which countries in the world can or cannot have nuclear weapons. The United States, according to Bolton, must rely on military might to lead and establish order.

NEW ORDER

John Bolton, as the new national security advisor, and Mike Pompeo, as the new secretary of state, are the two most hawkish figures in Trump's cabinet, as they both share similar views

on Iran and the nuclear agreement. Trump's selection of Bolton and Pompeo will surely affect the fragile relations between Iran and the United States and threaten peace and security in the Middle East. Of late, the president and his increasingly hawkish cabinet have decided to terminate JCPOA without careful consideration of its ramifications internationally or the detrimental influence on the domestic politics of Iran.

On March 26, 2018, more than 50 American retired military officers and diplomats enumerated 10 reasons for which they believe it is in the best interest of the United States to preserve the nuclear deal. Iranians have decided to keep JCPOA even if the United States will attempt to rescind it. Amid growing uncertainty about US-Iran relations, Tehran has been contemplating various responses to the United States' decision. In the worst-case scenario, Trump can abrogate the agreement and reimpose previously waived secondary sanctions.

A lesser decision would be to withdraw from the agreement but not seek to enforce any nuclear-related sanctions. In the first case, Trump would likely jeopardize United States' trans-Atlantic relationships, which consequently does not serve the interests and the international standing of the United States while at the same time making any nuclear agreements with the North Korean government much more difficult.

UNDERSTANDING IRAN

The majority of those following the issue of US-Iran relations are concerned about the potential impact on international peace-building efforts while ignoring the undoubtedly consequential impact of Trump's injudicious decision on Iranian domestic politics. The withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA will have a tremendous negative effect on Iranian domestic politics. Initially, the nuclear agreement with the West divided the reformers (eslahtalaban) and the radical conservatives (mohafezeh karan rastgara) inside Iran, and this political division has continued today. The reformers backed the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, who committed himself to pushing for a nuclear agreement with the West.

For the reformers, a nuclear agreement with the West would have allowed the country to open up gradually to the outside world and embrace democratic norms in politics. Iran's reform movement began with Mehdi Bazargan, who was the first prime minister of the provisional government after the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

This intensified as a social movement with the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Reformers stood for democracy, democratic norms in government and society, and were in favor of opening up the country to the outside world, especially the West. The reformers have also tried hard in the last four decades to stand against authoritarianism. Radical conservatives, on the other hand, were against the

establishment of JCPOA and democratic norms in politics, and they opposed opening up the country to the outside world, especially the West.

This battle between the two political sides continued and formed the nucleus and the essence of Iranian politics today. Under the pressure of the reform movement, Iran has taken precarious, but meaningful, steps in establishing a civil society (though it remains extremely fragile) and has adopted a few infant democratic institutions, including a free (but not fair) election. Radical conservatives, who have enjoyed the support of Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guard, the judiciary branch, and who possess enormous economic resources in the country, stood against democratic norms and preferred antagonism against the West.

This antagonistic attitude of the radical conservatives and Ayatollah Khamenei toward the West, and especially the United States, could be understood only in the context of the Cold War and the appetites that communism had developed for dissent and opposition to the West. The radical conservatives and Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran have tried relentlessly to impose a Cold War on Iran against the West and the United States in order to overwhelm a society that continuously fought for reform and democracy.

STOLEN DEMOCRACY

Understanding this duality in the politics of Iran is not impossible or even difficult. Nevertheless, some in the West with ideological interests have tried to ignore it. Among the millions of reformers who stood for JCPOA are Sadegh Zibakalam and Mostafa Tajzadeh. The former is a university professor and the latter was a member of Khatami's cabinet. Zibakalam has recently received a two-year jail sentence, while Tajzadeh has served five years in jail and was released last year. Similar to thousands of reformers, they paid a heavy price for being outspoken against authoritarianism in Iran and the policies that ignored the interests of the whole nation.

All reformers, among them these individuals have advocated for a nuclear agreement with the West because they considered international tension an anathema to any efforts for democratic reform and gradual change inside Iran. Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal only serves the interests of the radical conservatives in Iran and directly plays into the hands of those with authoritarian predispositions who would like to destroy any peaceful and gradual attempts toward inaugurating democratic norms inside the country.

Iranians have already experienced the United States' disregard and disrespect for the interests of the nation and democratic changes inside the country. In the early 1950s, Mohammad Mosaddeq, a nationalist and democratic leader, was democratically elected to

nationalize the oil industry and tame authoritarianism of the Pahlavi monarchy in favor of the rule of law and democratic norms in government. The Americans and the British carried out a coup in 1953, toppling Mosaddeq's government and paving the way for authoritarian domination over the government and society.

The Iranians have never forgotten the chance at democracy that was stolen from them. Donald Trump and his cabinet of disruption, especially the role that John Bolton could play in shaping American foreign policy toward Iran, will not help Iran's path toward gradual moderation and democratization.

The withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA — a deal that has the support of the international community, the majority in the United States and Europe, and the majority in Iran and all reformers — is not judicious and may help radical conservative right in Iran may push for the model that North Koreans have adopted. Iran will turn toward enrichment as the head of the Iranian nuclear program Ali Akbar Salehi has announced, meaning the West will have to deal with a nuclear Iran in the future.

An annulment of the agreement will also undoubtedly harm any attempts at international peace building and disrupt the reformist measures inside Iranian politics in immeasurable ways, once again directing the nation away from democratic values and ideals.



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Africa Opens Up Borders to Free Trade

Shigoli Shitero
April 11, 2018

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

In March, African leaders descended upon Kigali, Rwanda, the Land of a Thousand Hills' capital, to ink an agreement that is meant to smoothen the rough terrain of intra-African trade. Nearly 50 years after independence movements swept across Africa, the continent is still struggling to find its footing. The challenges are exacerbated

by both the internal makeup of the countries and a shifting geopolitical environment.

In 2014, African heads of state saw a rare invite to Washington by the Obama administration to discuss trade, investment and security. This was seen as a counterbalance to the growing Chinese influence on the continent; by 2014 China-Africa trade totaled \$200 billion, up from approximately \$100 billion during the 2008 financial crisis.

With the chaotic and confusing nature of the geopolitical challenges and the continued courting of African countries by both Beijing, through the new and ambition Belt and Road Initiative, and by the Washington security gospel, Africa finds itself in a position where it has to define its fortunes. By 2010, trade between African countries was only 11%, compared to 50% within Asia, 21% in Latin America and Caribbean, with Europe leading at 70% of internal trade. The picture is not of a continent that less than 130 years ago had no artificial boundaries and where its people traded and migrated freely.

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

As a matter of note, the two largest African economies, Nigeria and South Africa, did not participate in this historic

event. This signals the internal challenges that, despite initiatives to deepen integration and remove trade barriers, have been the hallmark of the problems facing regional economic communities.

First, on average, each African country belongs to at least two trading blocs, a phenomenon that has created confusion and challenges in implementing regional objectives. One example is Tanzania's membership in both the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC). When implementing external tariffs for the EAC, Tanzania can trade within the SADC, where it enjoys free trade status, leading to trade diversion from EAC countries.

Second, demographic composition and national stereotypes that lead to non-tariff barriers must be addressed with honesty. There has been ongoing trade wars between Kenya and Tanzania despite the EAC integration process allowing free movement of goods and people across the border.

South Africa has been in the news when xenophobic hostility toward fellow African immigrants erupted in riots. Despite the AfCFTA, the leadership must be exasperated by the challenges that it faces, meaning it needs to work toward smoothing the relations and avoiding internal conflicts for the greater good.

A classical pillar of trade theory is geographical proximity and comparative

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

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

According to the World Bank, sub-Saharan Africa exports in 2016 consisted of approximately 34% of raw materials. This ranges from natural resource to food commodities, which fuels the growing trade imbalance with the outside world.

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

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

The African continent must be the author of its own fortune rather than misfortune. This is a painful medicine that it must take, but one that will set it on a path of prosperity both as a powerhouse and an integral part at the geopolitical negotiating table. The signing the AfCFTA is a show of good faith, but the task lies in the implementation process. Member countries need to be ready to face the challenges both internal and external to bring the agreement to life.



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Syrian Civil War Escalates to International Crisis

Gary Grappo
April 12, 2018

The Syrian War, apart from its horrendous humanitarian toll, is now for all intents and purposes an international conflict.

Syria's civil war has reached a magnitude unforeseen by anyone in the conflict's seven-year course. Not in 2011, when it began. Not in 2012 when President Barack Obama drew his no-chemical-weapons red line and then failed to deliver on one year later. Not in 2015 when Russia deployed air and ground forces to bolster Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah forces defending the embattled Syrian regime. And not last year when President Donald Trump ordered a punitive attack for Syria's use of chemical weapons against the town of Khan Sheikhoun in northwestern Syria.

President Trump's derisive remarks aimed at Russian President Vladimir Putin, however unseemly and undignified for an American president, nevertheless illustrate the severity of the Syrian Civil War.

If more evidence is needed, consider that Israel's defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman, said on April 10 that if Iran follows through with its threats against the Jewish state from Syrian territory, "Syrian President Bashar Assad and his regime will be those that pay the price."

The crisis, apart from its horrendous humanitarian toll, is now for all intents and purposes an international conflict involving the superpower United States, great power Russia and several major regional powers with significant military capability — i.e., Iran, Turkey and Israel. In addition, non-state actors, including Hezbollah, Shia militias from at least three countries, al-Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State, are also militarily engaged.

This is precisely the kind of conflict the post-World War II rules-based international order sought to prevent. Now, the possibility of major power conflict raises the stakes for all parties. President Trump's taunts, Russian diplomatic threats to shoot down US missiles, and Israeli-Iranian verbal jousting serve only to inflame an already tense situation in a crisis-wracked nation and region.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS: A MEANS TO AN END FOR "BUTCHER OF DAMASCUS"

The world should first note what precipitated this latest round in the crisis. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against alleged opposition forces and civilians in the town of Douma outside Damascus is a war crime. Since the end of World War I, the international community has recognized through UN conventions and treaties that use of such weapons is both inhumane and dangerous to international order. Assad has flaunted those conventions, even

after claiming Syria's chemical weapons were removed by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons after his use of sarin gas in Ghouta in 2013, which coincidentally neighbors the town where the most recent attack occurred.

As this and last year's use of sarin gas illustrate, Assad is morally unconstrained in his effort to restore as much of Syria as possible to his control. Russia and Iran, which itself suffered under Saddam Hussein's repeated chemical attacks during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, appear remarkably, even criminally, indifferent to this major breach in international law and order and the threat it poses.

Left unpunished and accountable, Assad can be expected to employ similar tactics and weapons in the northwestern province of Idlib, where he faces more powerful and numerous opposition forces. After the Douma attacks, Idlib will remain the last redoubt of major opposition in western Syria. (The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in the country's northeast face its gravest threat from Turkey, which fears a semi-independent Kurdish state on its southern border.) As in Douma, Ghouta and Khan Sheikhoun, Assad will be unfazed by the large presence of civilian non-combatants in Idlib, many of whom have been forced to relocate there from elsewhere in Syria.

The American punitive missile attack against Syria in 2017 had no marked impact on Assad, or apparently on his

Russian and Iranian patrons. It is a useful and, in his perverse view, a necessary and effective tool of coercion and force. One is left to conclude that, regardless of how strong, any second US reprisal attack, as promised by Trump, is unlikely to deter the butcher of Damascus. He will strike again as long as he believes he can achieve his objective.

DE-ESCALATE CRISIS

But justice for Assad may have to wait. Not only is it unrealistic at the moment — unless the US targets the Syrian leader himself — but there is a more important concern at stake, regional if not international order. The US and other powers must find a way to de-escalate this crisis.

Assuming the US follows through with its promise to respond with force, its next if not simultaneous move must be to restart the moribund Geneva peace talks or begin an alternative, this time with all relevant players at the table. Diplomacy is not the American president's strong suit.

But if the horrific humanitarian toll — over a half-million killed and more than 50% of the population either internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries, Europe or beyond — is not enough for Trump and the other concerned parties, then the prospect of great power confrontation with no idea of where that would lead should convince them. Military escalation hasn't ended this conflict and won't.

A serious effort to revive Geneva may require some distasteful concessions to many.

For the Syrian people, the US and most European and Arab nations, it may mean tolerating Assad, if only for a limited period of time. For Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and the Shia militias siding with Assad, it may mean agreeing to remove all offensive forces. And for Assad, it may mean agreeing to step down after a "suitable" period of time. Foregoing justice for Assad, if only temporarily, may perhaps be the most repugnant concession of all.

The most urgent priority must be to ratchet down this conflict and then begin a genuine effort to end it. If that is not done, it will surely grow to something much worse, as it has since 2011.



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Why Moral Panics About Video Games Are Bad Politics

Liana Kerzner

April 13, 2018

Despite what the media and politicians have said, there is no evidence that shows that playing video games turn young people into killers.

What do Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump have in common? They all presided over moral panics involving games. The ongoing “debate” about video and tabletop games has twisted and turned since the 1980s. Video games have been blamed for racism, sexism, violence, delinquency and even demonic possession. Despite a complete lack of evidence to support these claims, the war on video games persists.

It’s easy enough for scientists to say that kids aren’t psychologically damaged by games, but parental fear is a powerful thing. The fear that some form of media will damage the minds of their children is often too powerful to override with facts and studies. Besides, politics has never really relied on adherence to facts. But the rationalizations for ludectrophobia — the fear of video games — evolve with the times, with the foundations starting even before video games were popular.

In 1979, a private investigator was hired by worried parents to find James Dallas

Egbert III, a 16-year-old prodigy who had disappeared from Michigan State University. Egbert had struggled with depression and drug addiction, but the investigator falsely believed that the cause of Egbert’s disappearance was the guidebook-driven role-playing game series Dungeons and Dragons. Egbert died by suicide in 1980, and activists once again blamed D&D. In 1982, another teenager, Irving Lee Pulling, also fatally shot himself. His mother, Patricia Pulling, blamed Dungeons and Dragons, going so far as to sue D&D publishers, TSR Inc., and her son’s high school principal for putting a demonic curse on her son through the game.

Patricia Pulling lost both cases, but she may have won the PR war. Despite multiple studies from sources such as the US Centers for Disease Control and Health and Welfare Canada showing no causal link between D&D and suicide, the emotional impact of seeing grieving parents on television was undeniable.

MODERN SENSIBILITIES

By modern sensibilities, the idea of psychological disturbance due to demonic possession sounds absurd. But subsequent accusations against video games have been no more based in fact. In 1992, a similar moral panic erupted over the game Mortal Kombat, which had elements of supernatural gore similar to Dungeons and Dragons with a kung fu twist. This time, no one got hurt, except the delicate sensibilities of Senator Joe Lieberman.

“We’re talking about video games that glorify violence and teach children to enjoy inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable,” Lieberman is quoted as saying, despite knowing nothing about video games. He then chaired a subcommittee on sex, violence and racism in video games, based on no facts, but plenty of vote-pandering outrage. The video game industry responded by founding the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) to self-regulate its content, but this didn’t call off the cynically political dogs for long. The war on video games was a fire in search of fuel, and on April 20, 1999, the Columbine High School Massacre provided that fuel.

In the wake of the 12 murdered students, one murdered teacher and 21 injured, parents were once again viscerally afraid for the safety of their children. Because the two perpetrators of Columbine were fans of violent video games, the media seized on video games as a scapegoat. The truth was that in the years before the Columbine massacre, the perpetrators were less violent in their outward behavior and writing when they were allowed to express their rages in video games. Only after they were cut off from that outlet did they start planning the school attack.

You wouldn’t have known this from watching the news, however. The media was more widely circulating the theories of moral crusader lawyer Jack Thompson, who was suing video game makers for liability in the deaths of three

people in the Heath High School shooting. This legal strategy was copied by the family of a Columbine victim.

Both suits failed because video games, unlike non-media products, are protected by the First Amendment. But Thompson’s claim that game developers were making “murder simulators” got traction in the media. He was arguing a concept called “operant conditioning”: behavior modification through direct positive and negative stimulus. It was, essentially, the demonic possession of the new millennium.

MURDER SIMULATORS

After the Columbine High School shooting, there was a great deal of research done that showed that playing video games doesn’t turn young people into killers. However, based on the strength of the “murder simulator” media narrative, various states banned the sale of violent video games to children. This led to the national corporate policy in gaming stores that prohibited sales of violent games to people who were going to give them to minors. This, in turn, resulted in corporate sexism: When an adult woman bought violent video games, she was more likely than a man to be grilled about whether she was buying a game for a child.

The video game industry launched a legal challenge to the ban in California, which reached the US Supreme Court in 2011. SCOTUS ruled that video games are subject to free speech protections in a rare point of 7-2 bipartisan agreement.

The court also ruled that there was no compelling evidence of a link between violent video games and negative impacts on children. But bland scientific papers and constitutional Amendment debates don't make people any less scared. In some ways, court rulings make the fear worse.

After the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, the NRA's Wayne LaPierre directly blamed video games for the murder of the 20 children and 7 adults. Vice President Joe Biden met with members of the gaming industry, assured them they weren't being singled out, then suggested a tax on violent video games. President Obama then said that Congress should fund more research into the effects that violent video games have on young minds. Not surprisingly, nothing substantial came out of Obama's call for more research. In fact, as video games have grown more popular, youth violence has plummeted.

But the fear has persisted. In 2013, Anita Sarkeesian's infamous Tropes vs Women series argued that video games help cultivate violent, sexist and racist attitudes. The difference between Jack Thompson's arguments in the 1990s and Sarkeesian's ongoing allegations against video games is that Thompson believed that video games conditioned behavior. Sarkeesian claims video games cultivate opinions. To worried parents, this is a distinction without a difference. It still might as well be demonic possession.

SOMETHING EVIL

After 17 people were murdered in the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day 2018, President Donald Trump once again summoned members of the video game industry to yet another meeting. The White House YouTube channel then released the series of violent video game excerpts.

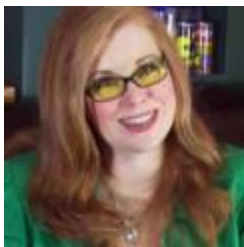
Trump's liberal opponents simultaneously disagreed that video games directly cause violence, but echoed Joe Lieberman's opinion that video games cultivate a glorified opinion of violence. They couldn't really do otherwise since they championed this view during the Obama/Biden years despite all the evidence to the contrary. So there's bipartisan consensus that there's something evil about video games, despite a complete lack of scientific evidence supporting this idea. The D&D theory of demonic possession lives on by other names.

While this fear-mongering may mobilize the religious right and worried, left-leaning PTA moms, this toxic politicking is hurting kids. The foolish idea that digital representations of guns are a more serious problem than actual, real-world guns is contributing to the delay on a meaningful debate on America's attitude toward guns. It is possible to combat the problem of gun violence without trampling US citizens' rights to bear arms, but not while the media continues to focus on the NRA-

approved narrative about the evils of video games.

There is nothing in Doom or Mortal Kombat that encourages anyone to hurt innocents. These games do, however, temporarily help players escape the deep feelings of anxiety and powerlessness that they feel in the real world. Instead of demonizing the games popular with young men, we should be using these games to get them talking to us.

Every time authority figures treat video games as evil, they lose the trust of the people who identify as gamers. Many of these people are young and vulnerable, and if they continue to pull away, it's a recipe for social disaster. Video games are too culturally dominant to continue to treat them as the work of Satan, and while doing so may gain politicians a few votes in the short term, it also exposes them as opportunists who will put a sellable story ahead of decades of facts. That isn't real leadership. That's politics at its worst.



Liana Kerzner is a video game analyst with a specialty in interactive gender performance. She has been a late night comedian, talk radio host, award-winning documentary producer, acclaimed book editor, op-ed columnist, journalist, mosaic feminist, cosplayer and pin-up model. Since she was 3 years old, she has also been a gamer. In 2016, she made analysis of

video games and issues of interest to gamers her primary focus, creating five days-a-week video content on her YouTube channel. Her first formal series, A Gamer's Guide to Feminism, created a positive dialogue surrounding women in gaming. The follow up, Lady Bits, was funded on Kickstarter in only six days, and will premiere in fall 2017.

The Murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, Six Months Later

Rebecca Vincent
April 16, 2018

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

On a Monday afternoon last October, six months ago today, journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia finished what would be her last blog post, closing with the now well-known lines: "There are crooks everywhere you look. The situation is desperate." Around half an hour later, she was killed by a car bomb that detonated as she drove away from her home in Bidnija, Malta.

Caruana Galizia was a courageous investigative journalist known for her relentless and detailed exposure of corruption, including through her blogging and her reporting on the Panama Papers. Her murder shocked the world. The blatant assassination of a journalist in broad daylight in an EU

state was simply unthinkable. But six months later, it is sadly becoming a new reality. Journalist Jan Kusiak and his partner Martina Kusnirova were murdered in Slovakia in February. Journalists in Bulgaria and Croatia have reported receiving death threats in recent months. It also emerged that nearly 200 journalists needed police protection in Italy in 2017.

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

PROGRESS OF THE INVESTIGATION

As the UK bureau director for Reporters Without Borders (RSF), I travelled to Malta in March in part to attempt to get some information about the progress of the investigation into Caruana Galizia's murder. I requested a meeting with Police Commissioner Lawrence Cutajar to discuss the investigation. Despite multiple e-mails and calls, I received nothing but a perfunctory acknowledgement from a police constable.

My request piqued some interest in the local media. I was asked about it in several interviews. The Dutch

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

However, there was plenty of other business to attend to, as a cluster of hearings in 26 separate libel lawsuits against Caruana Galizia was taking place during my trip, on March 1. In total, 34 civil libel cases continue against Caruana Galizia posthumously, as under Maltese law, it is the plaintiff's decision whether to withdraw such cases in the event of the defendant's death. At the time she was murdered, Caruana Galizia had been facing a total of 42 civil defamation lawsuits, as well as five criminal defamation lawsuits; the criminal cases were de facto closed upon Caruana Galizia's death, per Maltese law.

The 34 cases that continue have been brought by powerful figures in Malta, among them Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, his Chief of Staff Keith Schembri, Minister for Tourism Konrad Mizzi and businessman Silvio Debono — the latter of whom has filed 19

separate suits against Caruana Galizia for a single blog post of 19 sentences. The lawyer acting for Debono in these cases, William Cuschieri, is also the defense lawyer for one of the three suspects currently arraigned in connection with Caruana Galizia's murder.

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

Despite the frustrations of the courtroom experience that day, it gave me a glimpse of what Caruana Galizia was facing at the time of her murder: a constant barrage of vexatious lawsuits that served as a sword of Damocles, an ever-present threat that had already resulted in her bank account being frozen the last eight months of her life, that could have seen her jailed at any moment, and that diverted significant time from her journalistic work. This was on top of the extensive harassment and threats she had been receiving for years.

SALT ON THE WOUNDS

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

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

After the March 2 vigil, the agitators were considerate enough to wait a full two days before destroying the memorial again in the dead of night — a spiteful act seemingly aimed at rubbing salt in the wounds of Caruana Galizia's loved ones and supporters. Perhaps destroying this powerful visual time and again is also intended to remove it from the curious glances of the many tourists who walk past the central location — so

many, in fact, that some tour guides have begun to include it in their stops.

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

Just as the calls for justice continue in Malta, so do RSF's abroad. In London, we are gathering today for a vigil to honor Caruana Galizia's life and work and to call again for full justice for her murder, in parallel with similar actions taking part in cities across Europe and in the US. We are also holding an event at the House of Commons to mobilize members of Parliament in this case. It is our hope that such actions will increase pressure on the Maltese authorities — who clearly care about their international image — to ensure full justice for this horrific attack.

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

Caruana Galizia, but would also leave the door open for further attacks on journalists. A clear and resolute message must be sent that violent attacks against journalists will not be tolerated, not in Malta, not in broader Europe, not anywhere, for an attack on a journalist anywhere is an attack on journalism and, in turn, an attack on democracy itself.



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Congress Should Still Vote on Trump's Syrian Strike

Derek Cressman
April 17, 2018

Launching missiles against another country is nothing short of an act of war. The Constitution gives Congress the sole authority to declare war, not the president.

When he ordered a "surgical" bombing strike against Syria in retaliation for Bashar al-Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons against his own

people, Donald Trump violated the US Constitution. Those members of Congress who support both the Constitution and the strike should demand a vote to retroactively approve Trump's actions. Failing to do so shirks the duty enshrined in the congressional oath of office to uphold and defend the Constitution.

Launching missiles against another country is nothing short of an act of war. The Constitution gives Congress the sole authority to declare war, not the president. In response to the Vietnam War, Congress passed the War Powers Act to delineate when the president could initiate military action prior to congressional approval. That act authorizes the president to strike in response to "a national emergency created by attack upon the United States."

It appears certain that somebody used chemical weapons against innocent civilians in the Douma suburb of Damascus. The government of France has concluded that the attack was instigated by Assad because "there is no plausible other scenario." Whether or not this is correct, the chemical weapons use on innocent Syrian civilians cannot possibly be construed as an attack against the United States.

Any chemical weapons use is a war crime and a violation of the Geneva Convention that should be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court or a special Syrian war crimes tribunal. An international response could include

sanctions, diplomacy or even military strikes that could involve US forces. The US backed a United Nations resolution to create an independent investigation into the chemical weapons attack, which Russia blocked. Russia was wrong to do so, but that still does not authorize the US president to launch a military strike without congressional approval.

Congress did pass an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) after the September 11 terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda, and Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and now Trump have used that authorization to pursue Islamic State terrorists in both Iraq and Syria. Some have argued that this AUMF should be updated to specifically authorize action against ISIS, but nobody is arguing that attacking the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad is the same thing as attacking ISIS or any terrorist group. In fact, Assad is also fighting ISIS within his own country.

President Obama faced a similar situation after a chemical weapons attack in Syria in 2013. He sought congressional approval to strike Syria in retaliation and to degrade its possibility to use such weapons in the future. Donald Trump himself tweeted that Obama needed approval from Congress. By his own standards, Donald Trump violated the US Constitution when he acted without approval.

Breaching the Constitution, especially regarding a serious matter such as war, is an impeachable offense. That means

that Congress could impeach the president for this unauthorized use of force, but it doesn't mean that it must.

There is a reasonable argument that if Congress does indeed support Trump's actions, it can tacitly approve his military strike simply by failing to impeach him over it. Many members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, did voice support for striking Syria in response to chemical weapons use — both under Obama and Trump — so why bother making a fuss over a process issue?

There are two problems with Congress choosing tacit approval over holding an affirmative vote to approve or reject Trump's strike.

First, allowing any president to flout the Constitution erodes the separation of powers and normalizes authoritarian behavior. What will stop Trump, or any future president, from additional unauthorized strikes against countries such as North Korea or Iran?

Second, tacit approval allows members of Congress to avoid taking a roll-call vote and facing accountability for their actions with the voters. Many voters on both the left and right strongly oppose further US military involvement in Syria, while others feel that we had no choice but to act. It's a difficult situation and Congress may be happy to let the White House take the heat on this issue. That is precisely what is wrong with it.

Members of Congress who legitimately agree that the US needed to attack

Syria to punish its alleged use of chemical weapons should introduce a resolution that retroactively authorizes it.

Should that resolution fail, Congress could then decide whether or not to censure or impeach the president for unauthorized use of military force.

Should the resolution pass, it would send a message to future presidents that they will be held accountable for whatever actions they take. It would also let voters consider the matter when they evaluate how their member of Congress stood on the issue.



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candidate. As US PIRG's democracy program director, he was the first professional advocate in Washington, DC, to support a constitutional amendment to limit campaign spending in 1995. As director of Common Cause's Amend 2012 campaign, Cressman was the architect behind voter instruction measures in Montana, Colorado, Massachusetts, and California, where voters demanded Congress pass an amendment to overturn the Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. FEC*. Drawing inspiration from Upton Sinclair, Cressman combines writing with electoral politics in an effort to raise new ideas and drive social change.

Cuba After Castro: A New Beginning?

Kinga Brudzinska
April 18, 2018

Cuba will remain a one-party authoritarian state, with or without a Castro at the helm.

On April 19, Raúl Castro will step down as Cuba's president, ending almost six decades of his family's rule of the Caribbean island. Contrary to some expectations, however, Havana will not embark on an extensive process of political transition.

Even though the country faces a significant generational shift in power — most of the regime's 80 and 90-year-old *historicos* (Raúl is 85) are also set to retire — the chances of systemic transformation remain very low. Seasoned analysts and Cuba watchers instead see a continuation of the status quo: a non-Castro in charge, but no transition to a more liberal regime.

There are several reasons why Cuba will remain in Castro's grip for the foreseeable future. To begin, Raúl's most likely successor, Miguel Díaz-Canel, is considered the Castro brothers' star pupil. Widely regarded as a non-charismatic but experienced manager, the 58-year-old vice president has risen sharply through government departments and Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) ranks. In 2003 he became a member of the PCC's principal policymaking committee, the Politburo, followed by education minister in 2009

and vice president of the six-member Council of State in 2013.

Díaz-Canel has also held top positions in the provinces of Villa Clara and Holguín. Both are centers of Cuba's booming tourism industry and burgeoning private sector, regularly highlighted as success stories underpinning Raúl's ambitious economic reforms.

The vice president's "good relations" with the Cuban military are also significant. Despite stepping down from the presidency, Raúl will remain both first secretary of the PCC until 2021 and the unofficial chief of the armed forces.

There is no other person on the island who knows the military better than the outgoing president. Before replacing Fidel as head of state in 2008, Raúl served as defense minister from the beginning of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

Indeed, the Cuban army has played an increasingly important role in government over the past decade, with several military officers and Raúl's confidants serving as ministers. This has undoubtedly helped the army to consolidate its grip on Cuba's economy. Through its conglomerate Gaesa, it owns the vast swathes of Cuba's hotels, foreign exchange houses and ports. According to some economists, the army accounts for approximately 40-60% of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

Consequently, it remains highly unlikely that the Cuban army will put political reform ahead of profits. Put simply, it has done very well out of economic reforms, which over the past decade have facilitated self-employment activities, tax cuts for companies and increased foreign investment. The army's position is likely to be emboldened by the fact that despite improved diplomatic ties with the United States since 2014 and signing of the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union in 2017, neither resulted in a loosening of Raúl's grip on the country's political system.

According to the Freedom House Index 2017, Cuba was the least free country in Latin America and the wider Caribbean region. Internet censorship and severe restrictions on the press, freedom of expression and assembly remain part and parcel of everyday life on the island. In addition, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an independent nongovernmental organization, found that in 2016 Cuban authorities detained a record number of 9,940 individuals.

Thanks to Fidel and Raúl Castro, Cuba has been relatively successful in isolating itself from an increasingly interconnected world. However, given Venezuela's parlous economic conditions, which for years deeply subsidized oil supplies in return for doctors, teachers, sports trainers and military advisors, it will be hard for Havana to stay isolated for too long.

Cuba is also facing major economic challenges that will be hard to solve within the existing model. These include weak GDP growth despite surging tourism (0.9% in 2016, as compared to the average of 2.8% between 2013-2015), damage caused by the destructive Hurricane Irma, and a dual-currency system that masks state inefficiencies.

Raúl's successor must also consider the needs of an aging population (25% of Cubans are over 55 years old) and a Cuban youth that equates political change with greater opportunity. For its part, the government has responded by beginning to consolidate its two currencies, despite fears that it will negatively impact the economy. It's also likely that the appointment of a "young" non-Castro as Cuba's new leader will be portrayed as a breath of political fresh air. But these changes are hardly Havana taking its first steps toward a bright democratic future.

By appointing an heir instead of a reformist, Cuba is signaling to the world that it only wants to open and modernize on its own terms. Yet, there is another way. Former authoritarians remaining prominent actors in the new political set up of a country is nothing new: Myanmar, Mexico, Poland, Spain or Tunisia are just a few examples. Indeed, history shows that authoritarian successor parties are quite often freely and fairly reelected to office.

But this will not be the case of Cuba in 2018. Instead, an island located a mere

165 kilometers from the world's leading democracy will remain a one-party authoritarian state, with or without a Castro at the helm.



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She received a PhD in Political Science from the University of Warsaw and an MA in Economics from the University of Economics in Krakow. She also holds a Diploma in Latin American Studies from TEC Monterrey in Mexico. She is an expert on the Spanish-speaking world, EU foreign policy and on issues of international democracy. Prior to joining GLOBSEC, she worked at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

Indian Cinema's Own Brand of Sexism

Ankita Mukhopadhyay
April 20, 2018

When it comes to its treatment of women, India's entertainment industry needs a reality check.

"We can't cast her, she's too fat." "What am I going to do with an actress who can act but doesn't look good?"

I lapped up these statements as harmless feedback for a year and a half

in the television industry in India. As a 21-year-old, I was under the impression that women were objectified on screen to satisfy the need of a largely male audience. But a short market research trip made me realize that television reflected the current social status of women in India, and that sexism was an accepted fact both on screen and across the wider society.

In December 2014, I conducted market research for a popular daily soap opera in a village in the state of Madhya Pradesh. I was surprised to learn that only women watched soap operas. When I asked a lady what her impression was of the lead character in a certain show, she told me: "Akshara, my role model. The way she manages her household, her in-laws, her office work, while still managing to look good, is an inspiration for me. I aspire to be like her."

What I discerned from three grueling days in Madhya Pradesh was that women aspired to a certain standard of beauty and lifestyle after being influenced by daily soaps. These serials showcase the traditional role a woman is expected to play in society — that of a homemaker and a child-bearer. Women across India aspire to be like the lead character in their favorite daily soap, who has a high sense of morality, is happily married and can manage both household and office work with equal ease.

Protagonists on these shows go to sleep looking like a model and wake up

looking like one. They are decked out in gorgeous saris and heavy jewelry, and are represented along oversimplified moral lines. More often than not, the positive female character has to face opposition from a negative female antagonist who has no sense of morality, keeps multiple partners and is always trying to break up families.

FAIR AND LOVELY

The problematic portrayal of women on television extends to advertising as well. Around a decade ago, Indian TV was permeated with advertisements of Fair & Lovely — a skin-lightening cream — spurring young women across the country into changing their skin color. Skin lightening is a \$500-million industry in India, and in 2010 it was estimated to be growing at a rate of 18%. From whitening facial skin, underarms and even bleaching the vagina, Indian TV ads had all the options. It was not uncommon to see ads where a woman is rejected at a job interview or by her lover because of her skin color.

These ads represent the same regressive mentality of the soap operas that demand a slim, fair-skinned woman with a pretty face who looks radiant while managing household chores. It took the Advertising Standards Council of India over two decades to ban ads depicting dark skin as inferior to fair complexion. Unfortunately, advertisements of Fair & Lovely are still visible on Indian television, though they are less subtle in their preference of white skin over dark skin.

But Indian television has not always been this regressive. TV once portrayed powerful women like Shanti, from the eponymous show, a journalist out to avenge the rape of her mother by two powerful men, and Simran, a doctor who marries a man 10 years her junior and later becomes a single mother, in the largely popular soap opera, *Astitva* (existence). Indian soap opera producers are capable of creating sensible content, but, unfortunately, in the past few years, Indian television has regressed to the extent that now shows mostly portray women as homemakers who are ideal wives and mothers.

Television is just a prong in the wheel of misogyny and sexism that is the entertainment industry in India. While television has a wider reach, films are equally important as they influence popular culture. Storylines of Indian films have a history of harassment, eve-teasing — making unwanted sexual remarks to a woman in a public place — and stalking.

Many films feature a song and dance sequence known as an item number, in which a slim, athletic woman, usually wearing scanty clothes, is gyrating to music. Such songs are included in films to lure male crowds into theaters. Kangana Ranaut has lashed out at filmmakers for inserting sexist and obscene item numbers into films, which serve no purpose other than to objectify women.

THE WHEEL OF SEXISM

The Indian film industry, more popularly known as Bollywood, is the world's second-largest, churning out over 1,700 films annually. Over the past few years, many prominent female actors have called out sexism in the industry and have pointed out various instances when they faced discrimination. They have lamented the fact that women are only expected to look good on screen and that their opinions on scripts and direction are not welcome. Female actors are mainly expected to be the arm candy of the larger-than-life Bollywood film hero. Even with an emancipated heroine, there's always a titular male character who plays a critical part in eventually empowering her to be successful in her goals.

For the past two years, the debate around women in Bollywood has intensified, with prominent female actors such as Kangana Ranaut, Anushka Sharma and Sonam Kapoor speaking out against sexism. Sharma had pointed out an instance where the better hotel room was given to the male actor because he was the more popular star. Kapoor has always been vocal about the disparity in pay between male and female actors.

Meanwhile, Ranaut, who is known to be vocal about her views on scripts and direction, has been subjected to verbal abuse for her honesty and has earned a reputation in the media for being a "loud mouth."

The crevices run deeper when there are controversies surrounding female stars.

Apart from being objectified and criticized for being vocal, they are often subjected to boycotts by powerful families who control the film industry. In one instance, Ranaut claimed that she faced harassment after she revealed that she had had an affair with a popular film actor, Hrithik Roshan, which he denied. Roshan is the son of Rakesh Roshan, a powerful film producer.

Following her claim, Indian media filled with articles questioning Ranaut's mental state and sanity. She went on record to say that she was told by a famous female actor to not pursue the issue further as it would damage her career. The matter eventually reached a stalemate, with many people siding with Roshan's version of the story. But the extent to which Ranaut and her family were harassed and singled out brought out the ugly, sexist side of the Indian film world.

Bollywood is largely dominated by powerful film families that have engaged in filmmaking for generations. This has led to wide-ranging nepotism and lesser opportunities for new talent to make a mark and create change in the industry.

The number of women directors, producers and scriptwriters has also remained low over the years, meaning that women-centric cinema is yet to see a breakthrough. According to a 2017 report by the Geena Davis Institute, only 1 in 10 directors in Bollywood are women. While this trend has started to change, women-centric films are known to rake in less money than

commercial cinema that is powered by a male hero.

Sexism runs deeper than just the roles portrayed by women on screen. Bollywood has a culture of casting older male heroes alongside young heroines, as male stars are unwilling to retire and play older characters. Meanwhile, female actors are expected to play the role of a mother or grandmother the moment they reach 35. This has resulted in stark age differences between co-actors. According to a study, the age difference between co-stars in Bollywood has increased from two to three years to over 25 in the past decade.

CHANGE HAS TO COME

The glass ceiling is tough to break, but there are some who are trying to combat sexism and sexist portrayals of women on screen. It is now widely accepted that change has to come from within the film industry for audiences to change their taste in cinema. Actor Aamir Khan received national acclaim in 2016 for his film, *Dangal* (wrestling competition), on the real-life story of wrestlers Geeta and Babita Phogat. What made *Dangal* different from traditional cinema was the fact that the story focused on Geeta Phogat's journey, instead of giving screen space to the male lead, Aamir Khan. The film also addressed the gender disparity in villages in India and highlighted the myriad struggles women athletes face compared to their male counterparts.

Women-centric cinema has also started getting some traction, with many films such as *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* receiving accolades from critics and moviegoers alike. However, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* faced the ire of the Censor Board of India that didn't want to see the film released owing to its "lady-oriented" content, "sexual scenes, abusive words [and] audio pornography," as it showcased the sexual desires and sexual autonomy of four Muslim women in a small town in India. Following an outcry in the mainstream media for banning a film about women and infringing on women's rights, after a long battle with the censors, the feature was eventually released in July 2017 to critical acclaim.

Women-centric films are also facing hurdles in raising money. Sonam Kapoor once rightly pointed out that she was facing difficulty in raising money for her all-female film, whereas two popular male actors had received billions of rupees for their action feature.

Similarly, actors like Ranaut, who refuse to endorse beauty creams or dance in item numbers, are offered fewer roles and earn less compared to their more commercial female counterparts. Bollywood's power play is also underscored by the fact that female actors need to attain a certain level of success before they can even start expressing their opinion.

The road to equal rights for women in entertainment is still a far-fetched dream. The Harvey Weinstein scandal

opened a Pandora's box of sexual harassment cases in Hollywood and showed that women aren't safe in the entertainment industry. Bollywood is no different. Many famous directors, such as Madhur Bhandarkar, who is known for his movies on social and feminist issues, and Mahmood Farooqui have been accused of rape.

Following the Weinstein disclosures, some Indian actors told the media that speaking out in Bollywood against sexual harassment was uncommon as the victim was usually shamed and the perpetrator escaped scot-free.

The story of a struggling actor, Jiah Khan, who committed suicide after being harassed by her colleague, Sooraj Pancholi, son of Aditya Pancholi, a famous actor and producer, is a case in point. Despite evidence of Pancholi's involvement in inciting Khan to kill herself, he walked away unpunished. Aditya Pancholi has also been accused of stalking and sexual harassment by Kangana Ranaut. Pancholi and his wife have repeatedly denied Ranaut's claims.

The Indian entertainment industry is a quagmire of sexism. It runs from the very bottom to the very top, with no change in sight. While the portrayal of women is improving, female actors are yet to get the same treatment as male actors who unconditionally dominate the industry.

Bollywood has a problem with women, and it's time to address it, before a

Weinstein-like earthquake devastates the industry.



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Turkish Election Call Sparks Fresh Thinking

Nathaniel Handy
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President Erdogan's snap poll reinvigorates Turkish politics in unexpected ways.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a master at outflanking his political opponents. Despite rumors that an early general election would be called, no one expected it to be quite so last minute. On June 24, Turkey will go to the polls in a watershed vote that will — so the script goes — see Erdogan consolidate his grip on a new executive presidency in a transformed political landscape.

Once again, President Erdogan has showed himself to be a politician who goes with his gut and trusts in the enduring appeal of his persona among the bedrock of conservative support in the Anatolian heartland. He has also showed that he is a man unafraid to take the risks needed to keep winning in politics.

When the army — the old guardian of the secular order — threatened another “postmodern” coup in the face of Abdullah Gul’s appointment to the presidency in 2007, then-Prime Minister Erdogan called their bluff by letting the electorate decide in snap polls. When support for this ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) wilted in 2015, he shunned coalitions and called another poll that brought the AKP back as a majority-ruling party.

Erdogan has also been as ruthless in his alliances. Since coming to office in 2002, he has engaged in talks with Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), on settling the Kurdish issue, sidelined major allies within his own party such as Gul and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and subsequently formed an alliance with Devlet Bahceli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

Such a track record suggests a man who knows when to make his move, and yet this latest gamble has created one of the most unlikely of outcomes even before the poll has occurred: It has triggered a creative and potentially

transformative reaction from the long moribund main opposition, the Republican People’s Party (CHP).

SIGNS OF FIGHTING IN THE OPPOSITION

Much analysis of Turkish politics over the past two decades has been increasingly obsessed with the figure of President Erdogan and his effect on the nation — almost to the exclusion of all else. Whether supporters or detractors, he is held up as the wellspring for all. Yet this simple act of adulation or vilification obscures much of the reality.

The success of the AKP has been meteoric. It has galvanized not simply a pious conservative base, but a vast hinterland of voters who felt unrepresented by the traditional secular elite and who saw opportunity — economic and otherwise — in the rise of the AKP. The party also arrived at a moment when the ability of the traditional establishment to maintain power with military force, if necessary, was waning.

Yet despite its evident success, the AKP has also succeeded against a stagnant main opposition. Since 2002, the electoral share of the CHP has remained largely static at between 20 to 25%. It has a solid constituency among the secular, Kemalist populations of Thrace, the Aegean seaboard and certain metropolitan areas (as well as religious minority groups such as the Alevi), yet it has made no significant inroad into other constituencies.

The principle threat that the AKP has had to calculate in elections has been from the two smaller opposition blocs: the far-right nationalist MHP and the party backing Kurdish aspirations, currently the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). This is where AKP votes have been taken. But an unprecedented move by the CHP on April 22 to offer 15 of its members of parliament to the newly-formed Iyi Party has thrown potential new life into the contest.

PRETENDER TO THE THRONE

The Iyi Party was formed by Meral Aksener, a conservative politician from the far-right MHP who split with the party over its alliance with President Erdogan and has now gone on the offensive with her own bid for the presidency. The technicalities of electoral law meant that her party needed the parliamentary representation offered by the CHP in order to qualify for the June 24 poll.

That such support has been offered is not completely unthinkable. The notion that the CHP must create alliances with more conservative politicians has been tried before. At the presidential election of 2014, then-Prime Minister Erdogan was challenged by Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a conservative academic who stood as the joint candidate of the CHP and the MHP.

With her pious persona and strong nationalist credentials, Aksener is seen as a genuine challenger to Erdogan. It has even been suggested that she was

the reason for the decision to call snap elections on June 24, so quickly that her Iyi Party would be disqualified from standing. Yet she is not of President Erdogan's stature and, crucially, her party is nationalist but secular in orientation. Most of Erdogan's base would still be wary of her.

This is where the CHP has been truly audacious. The party that has consistently failed to offer a new vision of a way forward has been planting rumors of its ability to lend a hand in resurrecting an earlier AKP vision. The whispers are that former President Gul — a more moderate AKP founder member and one of the few politicians who could challenge President Erdogan — has been approached to stand as an alternative candidate.

ANY PORT IN A STORM

Nothing could be more ironic. Abdullah Gul — the man the CHP, with support from the military, attempted to thwart from taking the presidency partly due to the headscarf his wife wears. Such is the surreal nature of Turkish politics. Yet it is just the kind of bold thinking that could make the CHP relevant once more.

The hard truth is that with the dawn of the 21st century and the delegitimizing of the military as an arm of government in Turkey, the CHP was not ready for genuinely democratic politics. When parties from an Islamist base had gained support and power in the past, the military had simply stopped them

when it got too much for the establishment. As that threat receded, so did the ability of the traditional secular parties to get into government.

Much of the domestic turmoil in Turkey over the past five years has been the result of feuding within the conservative political landscape — whether rifts between leaders within the AKP, the collapse of the tacit alliance between the AKP and Fethullah Gulen’s Hizmet movement, or the new emergence of Aksener as a conservative rival to President Erdogan.

The fact that the CHP has even been mooted to be making a move that could shake up these equations is a startling turnaround that bodes well for Turkish politics. President Erdogan could even consider taking the credit for this reinvigoration. With his track record, you would still get very long odds on his not retaining the presidency. Yet the array of opponents he has now amassed — from the secular opposition to alienated Kurds and Gulenists and even elements of the conservative base — could make this one of the most unpredictable polls in recent Turkish history.

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