

# Fair Observer

Monthly



February 2019

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# Fair Observer Monthly



February 2019

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# CONTENTS

<b>About Fair Observer</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Share Your Perspective</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Why Do We Forgive Liam Neeson?</b> Ellis Cashmore	<b>7</b>
<b>Is the Time Up for Nicolás Maduro?</b> Leonardo Vivas	<b>9</b>
<b>The Military Writes the Rules in Thailand's Election</b> Natchapol Praditpetchara	<b>15</b>
<b>Have Chavistas Backed Themselves into a Corner?</b> Glenn Ojeda Vega & German Peinado Delgado	<b>19</b>
<b>Davos Has Turned Duplicitous and Diabolical</b> Atul Singh	<b>24</b>
<b>Why a Car Bomb in Northern Ireland Should Worry Colombia</b> Jamie Shenk	<b>27</b>
<b>Was the Iranian Revolution Historically Inevitable?</b> Ghoncheh Tazmini	<b>29</b>
<b>Donald Trump Is the Real National Emergency</b> S. Suresh	<b>32</b>
<b>Shamima Begum: A Jihadi Bride's Plea to Return</b> Ellis Cashmore	<b>35</b>
<b>The Coming Chinese World Order</b> Daniel Wagner	<b>38</b>

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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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## Why Do We Forgive Liam Neeson?

Ellis Cashmore

February 5, 2019

*We simply don't have enough time, energy or incentive to investigate the thoughts and behavior of people we admire.*

I'm not sure why I still remember this so clearly, but I do. In the late 1970s, while a student in Toronto, one of my professors, Gregory Baum, announced to a social theory class that he loved the art of Richard Wagner, but felt slightly embarrassed to admit it. Baum was born to a Jewish mother and a Protestant father in Berlin in 1923 and went to Canada as a refugee after a brief stay in England. He was a Jew, but later converted to Catholicism.

Richard Wagner was, of course, the great German composer who synthesized music, verse, drama and myth, and whose work has for long troubled principled listeners, Jewish or otherwise. Can we listen to Wagner's music with integrity? Did the Nazis pervert Wagner's music, or did Hitler's adulation merely expose its inherent perversions?

And in what circumstances can Wagner be performed for the delectation of Jews, even those who have converted? In other words, can we be fans of Wagner with a clear conscience?

I confess: I'd never thought of any of this before Baum's admission. But I've been

thinking about it ever since. When we appreciate the performance of an entertainer, artist or athlete, we typically disengage the product from the producer in a way that absolves ourselves from responsibility – responsibility, that is, for accepting the whole package. Baum presumably enjoyed Parsifal and the Ring cycles without tormenting himself. And presumably fans of action revenge thrillers will enjoy Taken and the upcoming film Cold Pursuit without agonizing over whether they are complicit in racism.

I'm referring, of course, to Liam Neeson's recent interview with the Independent, ostensibly to promote his new film, but which has backfired grotesquely after he confessed that he once sought vengeance for the rape of someone close to him by wielding a cosh (a bar used as a weapon) that he intended to use on some — any — “black bastard.” In the offending interview, the actor gestured quotation marks around the phrase as if he were attributing it to someone else.

Neeson is at pains to explain that his way of thinking today is not the same as it was at the time – and he was vague about when the alleged incident took place. But, of course, his many fans are appalled by the acknowledgement that he ever felt and thought this way at all.

It suggests more than a simple “primal” need for vengeance (as he put it): Neeson's retaliation was, it seems,

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motivated by only one feature – the blackness of the assailant.

In a sense, the revelation did the trick: The story has now encircled the world, and the movie will probably do great box office. Or will it? Already there are murmurs of a boycott, and Neeson's credibility is being questioned. If he felt like this once, what changed his way of thinking? He hasn't specified.

Psychologists are, in my opinion, unhelpful in most affairs that have any kind of relevance to social life. But, every so often, they come up with a theory that actually makes good sense and clarifies what is, at first sight, an incongruity.

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explained how we harmonize two or more episodes in our minds by rationalization, this being the process through which we justify attitudes and behaviors with reasons that appear logical, even if they're not appropriate.

So, to use a Festinger-like example, if a millennial cult believes the world will end at a certain date, and it doesn't, the believers will interpret the original prophecy in a way that suggests they calculated the date inaccurately, or they neglected a sign that foretold of a postponement of the apocalypse.

Or, if fans of Tom Cruise, who love his boyish good looks and his films, are uncomfortable with his unusual beliefs and his sometimes eccentric behavior (he is a Scientologist), then they

probably rationalize the seeming incongruity by believing Cruise gets a terrible mauling from the media, which distorts much of what he says and does and presents a misleading image of him.

Here's a confession of my own: I'm a boxing fan and, in common with most fight aficionados, rate Floyd Mayweather as one of the finest pound-for-pound athletes. I'm also aware that Mayweather has a history of abusing women. He consistently deflects accusations, answering, "Only God can judge me." I don't buy this. I think I'm perfectly capable of judging him, as are millions of other sports fans. And yet, Mayweather continues to attract plaudits.

We simply don't have enough time, energy or incentive to investigate the thoughts and behavior of people we admire. Today we think we know those people quite well. They share their attitudes and practices with us via social media, creating a false sense of intimacy.

There's no way of knowing whether the likes of Taylor Swift, Kim Kardashian or Justin Bieber tell us the truth when they post on Twitter or Instagram. We probably suspect they don't. All the same, one of the central premises of celebrity culture in the 21st century is that we know the celebs we like.

So when one of them says or does something at odds with our expectations – as Neeson has done – we resort to a Festinger-like rationalization and reorder



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our cognitive apparatus accordingly or just drop them.

I'm not naïve enough to imagine everyone I admire, whether they're playing football at Villa Park or performing Coriolanus at Stratford-upon-Avon, has the same values, opinions and dispositions as me. Far from it; I assume they don't.

But does that – or should it – stop me from appreciating the product of their labors? Of course not. If we took this approach, there would be no art, nor sport, nor any of the other recreations that enrich our lives.

We have no need to forgive the people we respect. We allow them fallibility, just like we allow everyone else who matters fallibility. Gone are the days when the stars we idolized were untouchable, inaccessible god-like beings.

Today, we accept that the objects of our attention are flawed mortals. Every so often their flaws will become apparent, and we're reminded how much like us they really are.

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

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## Is the Time Up for Nicolás Maduro?

Leonardo Vivas  
February 6, 2019

*After a few years preaching in the wilderness, Venezuela's democratic forces found a new energy with Juan Guaidó.*

Until January this year, Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's strongman, seemed to have overcome all the obstacles in his battle for political survival. Appointed by Hugo Chávez — the founder of 21st-century socialism in Latin America and well known for his inexhaustible charisma — Maduro had to fight on several fronts at the same time.

First, he had to establish his authority within the Chavista ranks. Second, he had to preserve all the political capital inherited from the Chavez years, which included a lengthy consumption boom resulting from high oil prices and a decade of high levels of investment in health care, subsidized food and low-cost housing. Finally, he had to curb the growing challenge of an emboldened opposition that envisioned an easier track once its main rival was out of the picture.

No matter if he was by many counts a mediocre leader, Maduro proved himself masterful during the infighting that came about in the aftermath of Chávez's death in 2013.

Within a few years, Maduro had defeated Rafael Ramirez, the head of

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the oil industry and cousin of Carlos the Jackal (the infamous terrorist active in the 1970s and 1980s); crushed the civilian ministers of the classic left whose main leverage was their intellect and honesty, no matter how distorted their policies; and neutralized Diosdado Cabello, second in command and member of the military conspirators who staged the 1992 coup that brought Chávez into the limelight.

But Maduro was not able to maintain the political capital passed on from Chávez because he also inherited a time bomb. In the run-up years to the 2012 presidential election, the effort was so intense that the economic model based on high oil prices that Chávez had concocted — including extreme levels of external financing and internal debt — depleted the economy, breaking the typical mechanisms of an oil-based economy to avoid both high inflation and unemployment.

Within a couple of years what seemed an oddity — an oil country plunging into hyperinflation — became unstoppable. In 2013, only weeks after defeating the opposition by a minimum (and highly contested) margin, Maduro rejected a stabilization plan proposed by Ramirez, who was dismissed and sent to New York as a representative to the UN.

After that, all attempts at producing economic change were marked by insisting on the rigid model that had already failed.

## **HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

From then on, Venezuela was in free fall. Unable to reign in government expenditure and experiencing a lack of foreign exchange earnings, especially as oil prices began to drop in the midst of heavy debt payments to hungry creditors, the only way to tamper the use of hard currency was to control imports. The result was the immediate shortage of food and medicines, which could not be produced domestically due to a systematic destruction of private production (both agriculture and industry) under Chávez.

The latter had been the result of an orgy of nationalizations following the socialist dream of prioritizing state production. What ensued was the gravest crisis of access to essential goods in the country's memory. After 2016, the shortages led to what amounted to a humanitarian crisis: Venezuelans lost an average of 11 kilos (24 pounds) in weight, and old and new diseases loomed large. Even malaria, eradicated in 1961, became pervasive.

Soon, this translated into a migration crisis, with vast numbers of Venezuelans leaving the country in desperation, often walking to places like Ecuador and Peru. The UN Refugee Agency estimates the number of recent migrants at around 3 million, with an accumulated number of around 4 million in the last decade.

At this point, in order to grant control over a country running into chaos, Maduro turned to the military. For years, the army had followed — in Hugo

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Chávez, a career military officer — one of their own, even later allowing the strong involvement of the Cubans in Venezuelan affairs, especially during Chávez's battle with cancer. Now, with the country on the brink of collapse, the military became the key player, accumulating more and more internal power within the cabinet and running state companies.

In the end, even the crown jewel, the state-controlled oil and gas company, PDVSA, was given to the military to run, making the composition of the regime more of a military-civilian alliance than its early civilian-military duo under Chávez. Worse still, this close-knit alliance became a bedrock of corruption as the military and some factions within the Chavista leadership had been using (and abusing) all means possible to extract personal and corporate benefits. Working in cahoots with newly-created financial groups that took advantage of the huge distortions of a quasi-closed system, those in power created conditions in which the economy could not function.

Even narcotics trafficking began to show its teeth in the workings of the state, as Venezuela became one of the main routes of cocaine from Colombia on the way to Europe and even (partially) Mexico.

The Chavismo establishment was so involved in the trafficking that even two “narconephews” of the first lady, Cilia Flores, were sentenced in 2017 by a

New York court for attempting to bring cocaine to the US.

## THE OPPOSITION

Another aspect in which Maduro outperformed all expectations was in his instinct to handle the challenge from the democratic opposition, with a little help from his Cuban friends. Using all the state resources to trick or cheat the opposition, especially when it came to the handling of votes, he continued to win elections — until he didn't. By 2015, the impact of the economic crisis was so vast that important portions of the electorate that had either supported Chávez for his policies or simply adored him for what he was — a commoner and soldier who cared for his people — began switching sides.

In the end, what the Chavista leadership dreaded more came true. In December 2015, after the entire state apparatus was put to the service of Maduro's victory, the sum of all opposition forces, organized around the Democratic Unity coalition (MUD), won a two-thirds supermajority in the national assembly.

At this point the regime's effort to undermine whatever was left of a former democracy went into overdrive. Not only was the victory downplayed, but as 2016 advanced, Maduro and his tightly controlled supreme tribunal of justice began annulling the national assembly's powers in all domains: to advance legislation, to sanction the national budget, to supervise the executive

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branch and even denying payments to legislators.

When the opposition forces attempted to summon a recall referendum to unseat the president by following constitutional provisions, the electoral council sabotaged all the milestones for the mechanisms leading to the election. It was finally abandoned, along with the gubernatorial elections due at the end of that year. They also promoted, with the support of the Vatican, an attempt at dialogue that fell flat, producing a demobilization of the opposition in the streets.

In 2017, Maduro and his allies went a step further in their violation of the constitution. In the first term of that year, they called an election to the constituent assembly that violated the essential one-man, one-vote principle of democracy by “reserving” candidates to be voted in by specific social groups — workers, peasants, members of communal councils — more favorable to the current regime. Naturally, the opposition abstained, which in the end consecrated the almost total annulment of the national assembly, now with a handy substitute providing the semblance of a legitimate power. The following year, the same arbitrary use of the electoral calendar led to unexpected calls for elections for both governors and for re-electing Maduro.

In the end, Maduro secured the main precondition for his survival: the division of the opposition into several groups consumed by suicidal infighting

regarding who bore the responsibility for their defeat. By December 2018, the coalition that in 2015 had become a formidable adversary was in shambles, with all the main leaders diminished and even hated by the vast majority of the country.

## **INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

The only realm where the opposition scored important advances was with its international strategy. Slowly but steadily, many of the leaders who either left the country as exiles, remained under house arrest or were simply stripped of their political rights had advanced a campaign to isolate Maduro’s regime in Latin America — the so-called leftist pink tide bringing about a leadership close to Chávez had receded. In Europe, too, governments began to admit the obvious. Countries like Spain and France that have a long-standing relationship with Venezuela started to distance themselves from Maduro and began openly criticizing him and his regime. Not only was the world facing a nation known for its arbitrary relationship with human rights and civil liberties, but one that had thrown all democratic rules into the dustbin as it turned into a cesspool of corruption.

The focus of the strategy was well grounded in real facts: to declare the 2018 presidential election as illegitimate due to the fact that most opposition parties (including MUD) and the better positioned candidates were barred from running, as well the manipulation of the registry and public harassment of

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voters. What to the naked eye seemed only a standard diplomatic move was in fact a time bomb. A long list of European and Latin American countries failed to accept Maduro's election as legitimate.

Also, the change of power in the United States in 2016 made an important difference. At the end of the Obama administration, there had been timid attempts at producing pressure through limited sanctions against selected Venezuelan officials for corruption. But the Trump administration accelerated the pace, expanding the sanctions to perpetrators of human rights abuses and including financial penalties, denying both the Venezuelan government and PDVSA the use of the dollar and US territory for ordinary transactions. The already embattled and financially strained Venezuelan economy began feeling the pinch in having room to maneuver in the financial world.

In its change of strategy, the Trump administration showed its teeth, even hinting at the possibility of military intervention. While this path found a marginal echo in the opposition's quarters and a resounding negative within Latin America as a whole, it was true to US President Donald Trump's negotiating style: using a rhetorical menace to force his Venezuelan military adversary to retreat. It also elicited the outright rejection from the American and European left and even from liberal quarters in both regions.

## **A BRILLIANT STRATEGY, A NEW LEADER**

Come January 2019. Against all odds, the appointment of a new president of the national assembly by simply following protocol — electing a member of a different party of the opposition coalition each year — brought about commotion. Having the national assembly deny Maduro legitimacy, Juan Guaidó — an obscure legislator with the Popular Will party and the new president of the national assembly — became automatically a possible interim head of state according to the Article 233 of the Bolivarian constitution, provided that congress supported the measure.

What was intended as a chess move to force the regime into greater isolation produced a miracle. Suddenly, the 35-year-old congressman struck a chord with the country and the world at large, becoming first a fresh voice against a chorus of discredited leaders, later a novelty and, finally, a hurricane and a rock star. After a few years preaching in the wilderness, Venezuela's democratic forces found a new energy with Juan Guaidó.

The situation in Venezuela has dramatically changed, with the opposition regaining its offensive footing, cornering Maduro both internally and internationally. Most Latin American countries, the Organization of American States (OAS), the US, the European Parliament and even the Socialist International have recognized Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president.

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Furthermore, in practice, the country now has two presidents: Guaidó has constitutional legitimacy, but Maduro has the guns.

The bulk of the military high commanders still support Maduro. But gradually Guaidó has gained increasing support among the middle ranks and even among some generals. His greater advantage, though, derives from a change in the correlation of forces, both nationally and internationally.

First, he can bring millions of supporters to the streets in the entire country. Second, he had been granted international support. Third, Guaidó might acquire financial means through access to PDVSA and its US subsidiary, Citgo, in case Maduro loses his legal challenge against US sanctions raised at the World Trade Organization. Fourth, appointing representatives to strategic places like the OAS, the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, the Lima Group, Argentina, and eventually Brazil and the European Union strengthens the position of the self-appointed interim president. Finally, Guaidó still enjoys a relatively free hand in his actions as political leader with so far only marginal harassment from what is a very repressive regime.

## **WHAT COMES NEXT?**

It is difficult to predict any outcome out of the new situation. Apparently we are facing a transition out of the Maduro era. Interestingly, it does not follow other classic transitions to democracy in

recent times, most of which have been defined either by an election or military takeover. What we are facing is an odd situation of a parallel power where the interim president counts with both legal arguments and a vast support from the majority of Venezuelans. At the same time, this source of power — still weak — has strong international support and, more importantly, the clear decision of the United States to move forward until change is achieved.

The next rounds will be played in several realms. One is the quest for humanitarian aid, supported by the US and several European countries, and counting on logistical support from Colombia and Brazil. Maduro will probably stop any attempt to bring medicine and food, despite clear signs that a long list of hospitals and primary care units are in desperate need for the former, and those weaker parts of the population like children and the elderly are in dramatic need for the latter.

The second round will be played in the oil and financial world. PDVSA is already having trouble cashing in on the exported oil due to its inability to make any transactions under the Maduro administration as a result of earlier sanctions. But now it is also curbed in its capacity to sell heavy oil to US refineries and reap the benefits. The regime is desperately seeking new markets for its heavy oil, and it is unclear if countries that use it, like India, will be able or willing to circumvent potential US sanctions. In addition, a gasoline crunch

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is around the corner, worsening what already was a problem in 2018.

These pressures on the regime will force both internal and international reactions. Internally, the military will have the final say because in the face of the government's current isolation, and so far it has stood relatively solid in its support for Maduro. But this could change.

Up until now the cracks have been minor. Weary of the Salvador Allende experience in 1973 and of the coup against him in 2002, Chávez, with the help of the Cubans, reorganized the whole of the armed forces. The end result was that the control of a few garrisons by loyalists would grant the government the upper hand in the event of a coup. But the last two years have been full of unrest within the different branches, leading to the imprisonment of over 100 officers since the start of protests in April 2017. It is unclear how the military will react now that the shadow of a US intervention has become a possibility. Most experts anticipate that in most probability there will be no fracture within the armed forces. Instead, they will act as a whole in one — or the other — direction.

There are different options. The military might follow the Egyptian hypothesis, namely becoming neutral in the clash between the two civilian poles. Another is that it will support Maduro to the end, which does not seem very likely, unless it is willing to pay the costs for a long time to come.

The likelihood of switching sides and supporting Guaidó as a bloc is very low. Finally, it might be tempted to create a new alternative, different from either side — a bipartisan coalition of some sort (with Maduro out of the picture), which could garner some international support from Mexico, Uruguay and even some European countries weary of a civil war. In any event, the possibility of Maduro remaining in power on his current terms is slim. One way or another, it would seem that Maduro's time is coming to an end.

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**Leonardo Vivas** teaches international politics at Emerson College and is a consultant for Freedom House. He is a former professor and coordinator of the Latin American Initiative at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Vivas is a sociologist who studied at Central University in Venezuela, and he went on to get an MPhil from University of Sussex, UK, and a PhD from Nanterre Université in Paris.

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## **The Military Writes the Rules in Thailand's Election**

Natchapol Praditpetchara  
February 7, 2019

*Thailand will never be a fully democratic country as long as the military continues to intervene in politics.*

Although Thailand will officially hold its first general election in five years on March 24, 2019, the notion that the

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country will become fully democratic as a result is naive at best and dangerous at worst.

The fact is that after the election, Thailand will remain just as undemocratic and most likely governed by an undemocratic administration that has seized and held onto power through undemocratic means. It is absolutely imperative that the international community is aware of this and continues to apply pressure on the Thai government to undergo genuine democratic reforms.

The current leader, General Prayuth Gen-o-cha, became prime minister of Thailand in May 2014 after engineering a coup following months of street protests against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra. It was Thailand's 12th coup d'état since the abolishment of absolute monarchy in 1932. Since then, General Prayuth has ruled with an iron grip through essentially unlimited powers that he has granted himself in the 2014 interim constitution. He has arrested hundreds who have dared to criticize the junta and has gone out of his way to stifle both online and offline political discourse.

The upcoming general election in March is almost certainly not going to change the status quo, as General Prayuth is effectively locked in to retain his premiership, courtesy of shrewd electoral and parliamentary engineering. The deliberately designed mechanism of this election ensures the entrenchment

and the prolonging of military rule for many years to come.

From the beginning, it was clear that the military government was going to play a major part in the election. After writing the interim charter in 2014, the military government formed the committee to draft a new permanent constitution, which included provisions heavily favorable to itself before organizing a sham referendum to approve the constitution in 2016. The government essentially outlawed opposition campaigning and arrested over 100 people for campaigning against the draft. Furthermore, the referendum used heavily leading questions to sway voters.

The government's rubber-stamp parliament then passed the laws governing the selection of senators and the election of MP's with very little public participation. Through these laws, the constitution and other arbitrary orders, the government has meticulously shaped the rules of engagement well before the first ballots are cast. It has also shamelessly departed from several long-held democratic norms that ensure a peaceful transition of power. And these are just the methods that are known, with surely countless more hidden from the public eye.

## **THE HANDPICKED SENATE**

Thailand's Constitution allows the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) — the current government — handpick all 250 senators for the next



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parliament. Crucially, these appointed senators will join the 500 elected MPs in choosing the next prime minister. This means that General Prayuth may only need the votes from 126 MPs to go along with the 250 senators that the NCPO selected in order to hold onto power. Yes, the next election can result in a government that controls just over a quarter of the seats in the house of representatives. Other prime ministerial candidates, meanwhile, will most likely need 376 votes from MPs — a herculean task given the new electoral rules that disfavor large existing parties.

The constitution also conveniently allows the hand-picked senators to stay in power for five years. This means that they can take part in selecting the prime minister for the next two election cycles, thus giving General Prayuth a potential of eight more years at the helm — a total of 13 years in charge. This would make Prayuth the longest serving prime minister since Plaek Phibunsongkhram in the 1950s.

As mentioned earlier, the new electoral system largely disfavors large existing parties. It has been expertly designed in such a way that will dilute the votes for the larger parties by also taking into account the votes for candidates who do not win their district elections. Such electoral engineering ensures that it is highly unlikely that any party will win enough seats on its own to choose a prime minister without the votes from the senators who are almost certainly going to support General Prayuth.

Moreover, new election laws also indicate that the prime minister does not need to be an MP. This then clears the way for a majority in parliament to appoint General Prayuth to be the next head of state without him needing to campaign for any votes himself or represent any constituency. This is a remarkable step away from the traditional principles of parliamentary politics where the prime minister is usually also an MP in the lower house.

Furthermore, the new electoral rules also allow for candidates of the same political party to have different numbers for each district. This again is unprecedented in recent Thai politics and will cause great confusion among voters. It is likely a deliberate attempt to dilute the importance of existing political parties.

## **POLITICAL OBSTACLES**

Through the junta's ban on political activities, political parties not affiliated with the military government have faced paralyzing obstacles and restrictions to all their activities, including, but not limited to, making speeches, holding rallies, raising funds, announcing their policies and even holding party meetings. These restrictions have been partially lifted in December.

On the other hand, the government has been de facto campaigning across the country in recent months through so-called mobile cabinet trips as well as announcing a swathe of populist policies

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and handouts it has criticized politicians for.

In addition to a myriad of restrictions on political parties, the government has also held off on announcing the new election districts and election date until just a few months before the event. This has given political parties a very difficult task of preparing in time for such a consequential election, while the government and its affiliated parties have been busy campaigning for months ahead.

It is widely reported that the government resorted to bribery and extrajudicial legal remedies to “poach” over 80 former MPs and high-profile national and local politicians to Phalang Pracharat Party (“Phalang” means power while “Pracharat” is the name of the junta’s development policy which emphasizes the collaboration between the state and the people but is effectively just a platitude), the new pro-military bloc seen as a vehicle for General Prayuth to prolong his power.

Such methods to attract high-profile politicians are legally questionable and can have massive implications for the outcome of the upcoming elections. Many of these “poached” politicians face pending corruption investigations and, curiously, many of these probes have been mysteriously dropped after the politicians declared their support for Phalang Pracharat.

The new districts that have been redrawn by the election commission in

November 2018 are highly contentious. Many of the new districts did not undergo public hearings and have very unusual shapes and alterations from the previously-drawn districts. Such blatant gerrymandering seems to favor many candidates in the military-backed Phalang Pracharat. There is ample evidence that the government has intervened in the redrawing of these electoral maps.

## **ABSOLUTE POWER**

In yet another stark departure from democratic parliamentary norms, the military government has steadfastly refused to dissolve parliament and install a caretaker government in the run-up to the general election. This has previously been done in order to ensure a level playing field by limiting the government’s powers during the campaign season.

Citing powers granted to him by the constitution, General Prayuth has also ruled out ending the use of his absolute executive power, granted to him after the 2014 coup d’état. Hence, his government can use this power to curry favors to voters and gain an unfair advantage over other parties. In fact, he has already done that through various populist policies as previously mentioned.

Now, some people who have read up to this point may accuse this author of being a supporter of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, the two former prime ministers who were dethroned by

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military coups in 2006 and 2014 respectively. However, that is not the case — supporting the Shinawatrats would mean condoning a dictatorial style of leadership, mired in conflicts of interest and rampant corruption. But having elected unscrupulous politicians in the past does not give us the green light to now turn to dictatorship. We must strive toward democracy, even if times are as testing as ever.

Upon the conclusion of the upcoming elections, Thailand will transition from a military state to a flimsy, military-guided quasi-democracy. Thailand will never be a fully democratic country as long as the military continues to intervene in politics. Recent reports of countries preparing to normalize relations with post-election Thailand are a serious worry. The onus is of course on Thais to protect our democracy, but we need the help of our international friends.

The international community must refrain from recognizing the legitimacy of the upcoming elections and continue to pressure Thailand for a new constitution that is fairer and more democratic, as well as call for a new general election carried out on a level playing field. The current military government craves the legitimacy on the international stage that politicians enjoy. It needs the recognition from the international community to survive in the long term.

This is precisely why the international community can make a difference in

denying the regime the credibility it does not deserve.

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## **Have Chavistas Backed Themselves into a Corner?**

Glenn Ojeda Vega & German Peinado Delgado  
February 7, 2019

*The desire for change has rarely been this strong in Venezuela.*

On January 10, Nicolás Maduro staged a swearing-in ceremony that he hoped would legitimize the beginning of his second six-year term as Venezuela's president. After succeeding the late Hugo Chávez, Maduro won a special election in April 2013. Back then, he narrowly defeated opposition leader Henrique Capriles by riding on Chávez's popularity as his chosen successor and suppressing opposition votes. Ever since then, Maduro ruled over Venezuela in spite of his growing unpopularity and an escalating domestic crisis.

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With his first constitutional term coming to an end, Maduro staged an election in May 2018 that was widely seen as illegitimate, with the results largely unrecognized by the international community. The so-called elections weren't monitored by international observers or NGOs and were marked by a very low turnout of 46% (compared to approximately 80% in 2013) due to a boycott by most opposition parties; Henri Falcon, the only opposition figure running against Maduro with the Progressive Advance party, denounced the results presented by the national electoral authorities. The election sparked a political battle for legitimacy and recognition both in Venezuela and around the globe.

An associate of Hugo Chávez since the early 1990s, Nicolás Maduro was propelled through Venezuela's government ranks after the Chavistas took power in 1999. From bus driver to parliamentarian, foreign minister and eventually vice president, Maduro has distinguished himself as one of Chávez's most loyal surrogates, but he has always lacked the military pedigree, charisma and the ideological rhetoric that distinguished the Chavista brand.

Since Maduro assumed the leadership of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela and took over as president, the Chavista brand has been in decline due to both domestic and international factors. First, Maduro took over Chávez's socialist project just as international oil prices were trending downward, which resulted in a

significant budget cut for government handout programs that made Chávez so popular among the working class. Second, the regional scenario changed dramatically in the span of a few years as most countries in Latin America transitioned from left-leaning governments to markedly right-wing administrations. Last, but not least, Maduro, lacking Chávez's personal appeal, never enjoyed the same level of support within his own political party and the military ranks.

## **NOT LETTING GO**

In 2016, the Venezuelan government had to deal with a recall referendum against Maduro led by the opposition. At the time, the initiative was curtailed by the national electoral commission and Maduro's repressive tactics. Facing an increasingly dire domestic scenario, yet reluctant to retire in exile in Cuba, Bolivia or Nicaragua, Maduro remains committed to holding on to power for as long as possible. This is why the swearing-in ceremony took place before a loyal supreme court instead of the opposition-controlled national assembly as is mandated by the constitution.

According to Maduro, this poses no issue given that the national assembly was relieved of its duties by a loyalist supreme court in March 2017 in order to disable the two-thirds supermajority won by a coalition of opposition parties in Venezuela's most recent democratic election held in December 2015. The supreme court's decision to invalidate the national assembly after Maduro

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forced the departure of independent judges from the court was a desperate attempt by a withering executive to take over all three branches of government.

This authoritarian maneuver marked one of the turning points in Maduro's tenure as president because it led to widespread protests against the regime, which were violently suppressed and triggered a purge within the government apparatus. There have been numerous mass protests against Maduro since his election, and particularly since 2015; however, some of the most violence took place between April and August of 2017, with a death toll that surpassed 120.

For instance, in August 2017, Attorney General Luisa Ortega, who had been appointed under Chávez, was exiled by the Maduro administration after she denounced as unconstitutional the Supreme Court's decision to relieve the opposition-held national assembly from its duties and responsibilities — the judicial branch effectively eliminating the legislative branch. Ortega also denounced human rights violations during the suppression of mass protests in 2017.

Most significantly, Maduro quickly moved to disenfranchise all of the institutions that his government deemed as belonging to the ancien regime by creating a new constituent assembly led by a loyal strongman, Diosdado Cabello.

## **PARALLEL UNIVERSE**

Maduro's presidency started derailing in 2015, as the opposition began to gain ground in both the domestic and international political arenas. His grasp on power threatened, the president's increasingly authoritarian methods have isolated him both from his popular base and from regional allies. This severely deteriorated situation has opened the door for Juan Guaidó, the president of the national assembly, to declare himself as Venezuela's interim president by arguing that the executive branch is currently vacant due to Maduro's illegitimate position.

Eager for much needed change, numerous stakeholders, including the European Union and the Organization of American States, as well as the governments of Costa Rica and Colombia, have refused to recognize Maduro's new term and are seeking ways to support Guaidó in his bid to restore democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela. Most notably, the Lima Group, an ad hoc body composed of 12 countries that have sought a peaceful solution to the Venezuelan crisis since 2017, has embraced Guaidó's claim to represent the country's legitimate interim government as mandated by the constitution.

Opportunely, Guaidó's move comes after years of an increasingly dire situation in Venezuela, with unprecedented food and medicine shortages, and a mass exodus of refugees, which Maduro's government has refused to recognize. Moreover, the national crisis is further exacerbated by

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the curtailment of liberties and civil rights, such as shutting down of newspapers and media outlets as well as detaining journalists and limiting the entry of foreigners into the country.

With this crisis fast becoming the central issue for the region, governments in Lima, Bogotá, Quito and Brasília, among others, are pushing for a more hands-on approach to resolving the standoff and particularly to Guaidó's bid to lead a political transition that currently presents the best chance for a nonviolent outcome. As part of ongoing political posturing, Maduro's regime has decided to expel a number of diplomatic missions from his country, including that of the United States. Nevertheless, this puts some of these embassies in difficult positions because they cannot bow to orders from a government that they do not recognize, but they need their diplomatic status to be respected by the de facto authority in Caracas.

In spite of the numerous rounds of financial and travel sanctions (imposed mainly by the United States) bearing pressure on Maduro's regime, the reality on the ground is that the country's armed forces and the main state institutions still respond to the Chavista authorities. Simultaneously, left-leaning governments in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba and Mexico have refused to recognize Guaidó and are standing by Maduro despite growing international pressure. In addition to the pockets of regional support that Maduro has, his regime also enjoys the good graces of Tehran, Ankara, Beijing and Moscow,

who have served as Caracas' financial and military lifelines for several years now.

## **THE MILITARY**

Despite the crisis having the makings of a Cold War-era proxy conflict, the kingmakers in Venezuela are the country's armed forces, which have been co-opted, for over a decade now, by Chávez and Maduro loyalists. The current military leadership in the country is reluctant to support any sort of regime change out of fear that they will be held accountable for the human rights violations and drug-trafficking activities that Maduro has permitted and even encouraged. Moreover, the regime counts on strong military support because of the fact that military officers control 11 ministries, the country's oil and gas company, PDVSA, and various financial institutions.

Recognizing this stranglehold on power, Guaidó and the national assembly recently passed an amnesty law protecting soldiers who might help overthrow Maduro. Meanwhile, the embattled president announced major military exercises in a clear effort by the regime to show off its strength to the region and the world.

For the time being, disgruntled foot soldiers have preferred to defect rather than rebel against their superiors. In this regard, one of Venezuela's most powerful men today is Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, a pragmatic Chavista who holds a tight grip on the country's

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military and would be willing to negotiate with the opposition under the right conditions, such as full amnesty for all soldiers, a commitment to permitting exile for Maduro's government and a role for military leaders in the transition process.

## **THE DAY AFTER MADURO**

In order to continue pressing Maduro's hand, Western governments have denied him access to more than \$7 billion in assets within the international financial system as well as imposed sanctions on the state-owned PDVSA. Simultaneously, the Trump administration has maintained a strong rhetoric of "all options on the table" vis-à-vis the Maduro regime, including military intervention.

It remains to be seen whether the international pressure will bend the Chavista establishment in Venezuela. The desire for change has rarely been this strong in the region. A key concern, however, stems from the fact that even before the regional isolation campaign and the rounds of targeted sanctions, most Venezuelans were already suffering and malnourished after years of Chavismo. What Venezuela most desperately needs is to restock on basic supplies including food and medicine (likely in the form of emergency aid requested by Guaidó but blocked by Maduro from entering the country). It also needs to secure its foreign currency reserves and issue a new, credible national currency that allows the country

to trade internationally and its citizens to access products in the marketplace.

With the European Union set to recognize Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's president (with Spain being the latest to do so) after an ultimatum given to Maduro expires, the opposition and the national assembly are convinced that a full transition will take place soon. Thus, throughout the last several weeks, Guaidó has been setting up a new government featuring exiled opposition leaders and public officials, including ambassadors.

If successful, his main task and legacy will be to facilitate a democratic transition rather than govern himself. Be it for six months or six years, a Guaidó tenure must center on rebuilding Venezuela's institutions and allowing the country to regain a sense of normalcy through a renewed democratic process and a much-needed long-term reconstruction.

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## **Davos Has Turned Duplicitous and Diabolical**

Atul Singh

February 8, 2019

*The record number of corporate jets landing in Davos are testimony to a toxic ideology that must be replaced by a more humane zeitgeist.*

This author has been in touch with some of the Davos jet set. He can attest that the people who gather every year in Switzerland at the World Economic Forum do not have red horns and a spiky tail. They can be perfectly reasonable, civil and courteous in normal conversation.

Yet it is crystal clear that something strange and wondrous happens to them when they reach Davos. With some exceptions, the Davos jet set act with a sense of entitlement that they were born to enjoy wealth, power and priesthood, all together.

### **VERSAILLES IN THE SNOW**

In 1971, a Swiss-German business professor in John Calvin's French-speaking city of Geneva came up with a splendid idea. The talented Professor Klaus Schwab invited 444 executives from the western side of the Iron Curtain

to an Alpine village to introduce them to American management practices.

During the height of the Cold War, this event took off like a rocket. Soon, not only business but also political leaders started making the annual pilgrimage to Davos. After the Berlin Wall collapsed and the Soviet Union crumbled, Davos become the symbol of the dominant economic order. Wannabes from emerging economies flocked to Davos to prove to themselves and their people back home that they had arrived on the global stage. Rumor has it that Swiss bank accounts were a key reason for this winter pilgrimage. Inevitably, the discreet annual get-together turned into a gauche nouveau riche circus.

This year, the circus turned incongruous. David Attenborough turned up to plead with 1,500 global leaders to take urgent action on climate change. Even as the 92-year-old was exhorting his audience to save the Garden of Eden, they were flying in using an estimated 1,500 private jets, setting a new record in the process. The Davos jet set clearly invited Attenborough as window dressing even as they continue to buy bigger and more expensive jets. It is pertinent to note that, in a world of rising inequality, the number of private jet flights grew by 11% in 2018.

Davos has now become an exclusive club for rapacious self-serving elites who live in a world of private splendor and public squalor. It is a symbol of an economic order that is fundamentally unjust but legitimizes itself through the



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gospel of growth and Pablum about philanthropy, climate change and gender equality. Its hypocrisy is increasingly obvious even to its pilgrims.

Absolute belief in big business is central to the Davos ethos. In the brave new world after 1991, multinational corporations have usurped the power once wielded by nation-states. Stefano Marcuzzi and Alessio Terzi from dysfunctional Italy rightly argue that “faltering GDP growth, record-level public debt, increasingly polarized politics, and legislative paralysis” have chipped away at the authority and legitimacy of nation-states. Apple’s revenues exceed Portugal’s, Walmart’s income outstrips Belgium’s. Davos celebrates this development.

It is important to note that the Davos ethos is not exactly new. A few centuries ago, multinationals emerged more powerful than states and empires. The British East India Company grew opium in India and sold it in China. Its supporters justified famine in India and addiction in China on grounds of free trade and economic progress.

This year, billionaire Michael Dell smugly made a similar fallacious assertion at Davos. He claimed there was no incidence of strong economic growth in societies with high taxes for the rich. Even as moderator Heather Long of The Washington Post laughed nervously and obsequiously, Erik Brynjolfsson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) pointed out that Dell was simply and plainly wrong.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, none other than the US taxed its rich at rates of over 70% while growing robustly. In fact, Nobel laureate Michael Spence has argued that “growth patterns that lack inclusiveness and fuel inequality generally fail.”

This incident sums up all that is worrying about Davos. Like kings of yore, the lords of Davos choose modern-day minstrels and heralds to legitimize their rule. Moderators at Davos are sycophants who let specious assertions by the likes of Dell to pass off as legitimate arguments. They frame a narrative that justifies the primacy of the Davos elite. They also make the case that philanthropy by billionaires is more efficient than taxation to allocate resources.

Like Marie Antoinette who romanticized rustic life in her Versailles farmhouse, the Davos jet set talks of saving the world even as it does not give a damn for les sans culottes craving jobs and bread in their filthy slums.

## **THE SPIRIT OF SOLIDARITY, NOT THE CULT OF SUCCESS**

Even as Long and Dell spouted bunkum, dissidence reared its head even at Davos. Alex Karp, the CEO of Palantir that claims to help governments hunt criminals and fight terrorists, spoke about focusing not on rich persons but on men and women who cannot pay their bills.

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Karp, a poster child of Silicon Valley, lashed out against it. He declared that, historically, Silicon Valley has delivered either jobs or national security to the American people. Karp claimed that it is now home to micro-communities that break the consensus of larger society while simultaneously telling average Americans that they will not support their defense needs. He went on to point out that these micro-communities are selling their products to countries that are adversarial to America in a manner that is “borderline craven.”

If Karp rocked the Silicon Valley boat, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman caused a storm in the Davos teacup by saying that the language of “participation and justice and equality and transparency” was “bullshit” that diverted attention from the real issue of tax avoidance and the rich not paying their fair share.

Bregman has a point. The elites and wannabes flocking to Davos want to convince the world they can have their cake and eat it. That is preposterous. The Davos jet set cannot claim to fight climate change by using bigger jets more often. They cannot parade themselves as paragons of virtue after being bailed out by taxpayer money, profiting from quantitative easing, exploiting labor and avoiding taxes.

The reality is that the Davos jet set perpetuates the cult of success because it benefits from it. In April 2016, this author argued that democracy itself was in danger because of this cult, which allowed companies like Apple and

individuals like Warren Buffett to pay minimal taxes. Three years on, the worship of the wealthy and rising inequality with ghastly intergenerational mobility is tearing apart our social fabric even more strongly.

Yet Davos is celebrating *Übermensch* as the solution to our problems. It cleverly undercuts the idea of social solidarity that philosophers such as Confucius, Plato and ibn Khaldun once emphasized most eloquently.

It is most certainly true that governments waste money. In countries like India, Kenya and Argentina, red tape asphyxiates citizens. Corruption ensures that public money ends up in private coffers. The experience of European welfare states demonstrates that the approaches of handouts, assistance and aid are no panacea.

Having said that, the solution is not trusting *Übermensch* who lie brazenly about the past or minstrels who laugh along. The solution is thinking hard to resolve deep injustices, creating institutions with integrity and crafting policies that combine lofty principles with earthy pragmatism. And we can only do that if we replace the toxic Davos ethos with a strong social conscience that prizes equity and the environment.

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## **Why a Car Bomb in Northern Ireland Should Worry Colombia**

Jamie Shenk

February 11, 2019

*A warning to Colombia is that peace, even after 20 years, is not guaranteed.*

Colombians are just beginning to recover after a car bomb, planted by the country's last remaining guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), detonated in the capital city of Bogotá on January 17. The blast, which killed 21 people and injured dozens during a promotion ceremony at the General Santander police academy, evoked for many the fear of the "bad old days" of the 1990s, when bombs indiscriminately planted by guerrillas and drug traffickers wreaked havoc on the Andean nation. Amidst renewed fear and the desperate search for what motivated the bombing, Colombians may be forgiven if they missed the news of another car bomb

that weekend, an ocean away in Northern Ireland.

While Colombian authorities were busy picking shrapnel from their streets, Northern Ireland faced a horror of its own when a car bomb planted by Irish Republican Army (IRA) exploded outside a courthouse in Derry (also known as Londonderry) on January 19. While no one was killed in the blast, the parallels between the bombings occurring in the same weekend — both carried out by members of organized rebel groups, both in countries trying to recover from decades of conflict — are striking. So as the Colombian government coordinates its response to the Bogotá bombing, it should look to Derry as a warning: Peace, even after 20 years, is not guaranteed.

It would not be the first time Colombia looked to the Irish for cues. The Good Friday Agreement, which ended decades of Northern Ireland's Troubles in 1998, served as a model for Colombia's most recent peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's oldest and largest guerrilla group until its demobilization in 2016.

Former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has talked about how the improbable peace between the British and the IRA inspired his own quixotic peace negotiations. "I was in Belfast seeing how people are still trying to reconcile and it has been a great inspiration for me and for the peace

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process in Colombia,” he said in November 2016.

Irish politicians, trade unionists and human rights activists also played a more formal role in the peace process with the FARC, traveling between Belfast, Bogotá and Havana, where the negotiations were held, to share best practices and lessons learned from the Northern Irish process.

While Northern Ireland’s peace agreement may have served as a model for Santos, what happened after its ratification should instill trepidation among Colombians. Violence did not end as the agreement went into effect, as IRA dissidents refused to accept the compromises made by their party leaders at the negotiating table. This violence helped foment political polarization, and anti-agreement politicians have tried repeatedly to dismantle various aspects of the deal. This situation should sound familiar to those in Colombia, where FARC dissidents continue to rule parts of the countryside, and where voters rejected an initial peace deal by less than one percentage point.

Today, the sectarianism that drove the Irish conflict continues to flourish. There are more peace walls segregating communities in cities like Belfast than when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. The power-sharing agreement between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the (Republican) Sinn Féin in the Northern Irish Assembly that served as the cornerstone of the 1998 peace

deal has effectively fallen apart. Disagreements over legislation forced the government into gridlock in January 2017, and the continuing impasse has left Northern Ireland without a functioning parliament for over two years.

Finally, Britain’s impending exit from the European Union threatens to completely unravel the Good Friday Agreement by reestablishing a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which is part of the EU. This year’s car bomb in Derry is only the most apparent example of how fragile Northern Ireland’s peace remains, over 20 years after the conflict officially ended.

Of course, many Colombians don’t need to look across the Atlantic to know that peace is not guaranteed. Killings are on the rise in many areas of the country, where community leaders and activists are assassinated for supporting implementation of the Havana peace accords. But for others, the bombing in Bogotá may have been a wake-up call. The country’s leaders must think carefully about how to respond to the ELN’s attack. The Colombian government has already called off peace talks with the rebel group, but it cannot lose sight of its commitments to peace with the FARC.

As the Derry bombing illustrates, halting implementation of the peace accord today would set Colombia up for continued violence decades from now. The Colombian government must never

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stop working to maintain and build peace. Colombia — and Ireland — already have too many victims.

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## Was the Iranian Revolution Historically Inevitable?

Ghoncheh Tazmini  
February 18, 2019

*While revolutionary protesters espoused diverse ideals and ambitions and worldviews, there was one objective that was almost universal: wholesale opposition to Western political exploitation.*

As Vladimir Lenin famously said, "The revolution does not need historians." The Iranian Revolution of 1979, lacking the old Marxist grandeur of historical necessity, it seems, does. At 40 years old, the revolution has become subject

to a rash of analyses, from autopsies to pathologies to prognoses. Fluid, spontaneous and unpredictable, the Iranian Revolution has had a profound and global impact, changing the destiny of Iranians and giving rise to the great adversary the US and its allies face in the Middle East.

To understand the current debate on the 40th anniversary of the revolution, we need to look back at some of the old controversies, notably the one about inevitability: Was 1979 necessary, or was it historically inevitable? Were there moments when a single decision taken another way or a random accident could have altered the whole course of Iran's history? Was the overthrow of the shah preordained, or was there a liberal alternative to the Pahlavi monarchy in the *longue durée*?

## REVOLUTIONARY ENERGY

The accumulation of revolutionary energy in the build-up to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi seems to suggest that it was both necessary and inevitable. The masses revolted, believing in revolution as a form of social progress and development. Others argue that the shah had placed Iran on the road to modernization, and that liberalism was an eventuality had revolution not stopped it in its tracks.

What can be said with a degree of certainty is that the character, course and direction of the revolution would

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have been different if Iran's dialectic with the West had been different.

For instance, how would the course of Iranian history have changed had the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, orchestrated by Britain and the US, not occurred, and had Mohammad Reza Shah instead worked with the beleaguered prime minister to foster genuine participatory politics? What if the shah had secured his position and legitimacy without Western backing? What if he had not launched a Western-inspired modernization program that entailed marginalizing the clergy? These what-if scenarios all shed light on the question of historical inevitability.

While revolutionary protesters espoused diverse ideals, preferences, ambitions and worldviews, there was one objective that was almost universal — and it was not only the fact that the shah had to go, but wholesale opposition to Western political exploitation. There were those who wed this idea to resistance toward cultural capitulation, which had manifested during the shah's state-imposed Westernization campaign, a form of “modernization without modernity.” In the two or three decades preceding the revolution, there was a paradigmatic shift in political imagination as Iranian intellectuals began to define their identity by searching for authenticity and by “Othering” the pro-Western Pahlavi state.

Thus, one of the unequivocal achievements of the revolution was

Iran's emancipatory aspirations vis-à-vis the West: independence from Western political encroachment and interference. This idea is firmly built into the conceptual architecture of the regime, showcasing 1979 as a revolt in defense of culture and tradition.

This narrative is so potent and commanding that it is institutionalized in virtually every facet of Iran's political system — from its governing bodies to its vetting agencies, its security apparatus and its religious bodies. It informs the country's economic outlook, regional and foreign policy, and defines the boundaries of social and civil liberties. It buttresses national affinities and supports the psychological and political roots of the post-1979 national identity. It also provides the ideational and emotive canvas on which hegemonic emotions geared to nationalist activism are explored.

## **LESSONS OF THE REVOLUTION**

What are the lessons of the revolution? Those who speak of the “Iranian soul” ask whether the revolution ruined Iran, while revolutionary romantics and utopians ask whether Iran ruined the revolution. It may be more useful to take a less forensic approach: Rather than looking at the afterlife of the revolution, we can broach the revolution as less abstract and as a lived and living historical experience.

The 1979 revolution should not be viewed as a historical dead end or a failed experiment, but rather as a work

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in progress — with a lot of work still to be done.

While there is consensus on when the revolution began, there is less agreement on when the revolution ends. Again, this has to do with how one perceives history — either as open-ended or as hermetic/closed. Adopting the former, I would argue that at 40 years young (in revolution years), the Iranian Revolution is, at best, a young adult. It is too soon to determine definitively if the revolution will ever achieve the social and political emancipatory ideals of 1979.

What is useful to acknowledge is that the revolution happened and that it is historically irreversible, and that at some stage it will have to start fulfilling the potential that the revolutionaries saw when they rallied for a better system. However, the bulk of the Iranian populace, including the nezam (the ruling establishment), and the diaspora, all operate under the assumption that the revolution might be “undone.” The nezam, fearing regime change, validates this mindset with its firm grip on civil society.

The Iranian people cling to the hope of a sudden, overnight change, but no longer US-sponsored, as polls show; far fewer have faith in this option given the US blunders in the region and President Donald Trump’s deleterious policies. And, finally, the diaspora awaits nostalgically for an “end of times” moment, auguring the return to the vatan — the motherland.

## HERE TO STAY

The general academic consensus is that the revolution is here to stay, having weathered many storms: everything from sanctions to erosion of the value of the national currency to terrorism on Iranian soil. There is little likelihood of regime overthrow or foreign military intervention, made patently clear by Trump’s toing and froing on Iran, and by desperate attempts to pressure Tehran through Iran-bashing conferences à-la Warsaw. In view of its revolution and the regime’s durability, it would be an opportune time for state and society to adopt a more dialogical form of engagement, one where there is genuine political evolution. To this end, the first step is a shift away from opposition to the revolution to opposition within the revolution.

Let us not forget that until Mohammad Khatami came to power in 1997, setting in motion a pluralistic momentum, there were no reformist, moderate, centrist, technocratic, principlist or radical categories in Iran’s politics. These labels gained traction and popular usage during and after Khatami’s reform-orientated presidency. Different political forms of organization develop at different stages.

The late Fred Halliday reminded us that democracy is not a sudden, all-or-nothing event, and that it took Britain and the US 300 years and three internal wars between them to move from tyranny to the kind of qualified democracy they have now. Perhaps this

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is the lesson that the revolution itself can learn from its 40 years.

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## **Donald Trump Is the Real National Emergency**

S. Suresh

February 18, 2019

*America's national emergency is not on its southern border, but rather in the White House in the form of its inept president.*

On February 15, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency in

order to appropriate the funds needed to build a wall on America's southern border with Mexico. Trump's autocratic action will definitely face legal challenges as lawmakers and political pundits debate the extent of the president's executive powers.

In deciding to arrogate some \$8 billion earmarked for military construction, Trump has effectively sidestepped the nation's legislative procedures to solve a non-existent crisis that he had manufactured for political gains.

Trump was at his incoherent best when he made the announcement from the Rose Garden:

*"And by signing the national emergency, something signed many times by other presidents, many, many times, President Obama, in fact, we may be using one of the national emergencies that he signed having to do with cartels, criminal cartels. It's a very good emergency that he signed ... And what we really want to do is simple. It's not like it is complicated. It's very simple. We want to stop drugs from coming into our country. We want to stop criminals and gangs from coming into our country. Nobody has done the job that we have ever done."*

Trump had touted his astute business sense and deal-making in the course of his election campaign, publicly asserting several times that Mexico will pay for the wall. Following a Super Tuesday win in March 2016, Trump stated during a press conference that "We have a trade



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deficit with Mexico of \$58 billion a year — \$58 billion. The wall is going to cost \$10 billion. It's so easy. I've had these guys that I'm on the stage with go you don't really mean Mexico is going to pay for the wall. One — as sure as you're standing there, 100 percent, Mexico's going to pay, 100 percent.”

Trump failed miserably to deliver on his signature campaign promise, demonstrating utter incompetence when he could not secure the funds needed for the wall's construction from a Republican-controlled Congress for two full years.

When the power dynamics shifted in 2019, with Democrats taking control of the House, Trump gambled with the lives and livelihoods of 800,000 federal workers, petulantly instituting a government shutdown that lasted a record 35 days. The Democrats' steadfast refusal to fund the wall forced Trump to end the unnecessary impasse on January 25, just so he could secure House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's invitation to give the State of the Union address.

## **CRIMINAL IMMIGRANTS**

Crime, murder and social turmoil in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, known as Central America's Northern Triangle, have contributed to a sense of disdain in the United States toward socialism and paranoia against communism that have led to meddling in the internal politics of the three countries.

The humanitarian crisis at the Mexican border is largely the result of an irresponsible US Central American policy over the last half century.

Refusing to acknowledge this in any fashion, America's xenophobic president has referred to Mexicans as rapists, and to immigrants and asylum seekers at the southern border as drug addicts and criminals. A study by the Cato Institute, an independent, non-partisan public policy research organization, has determined that Trump's White House has repeatedly misled everyone with an error-filled and false narrative on crimes committed by immigrants. Trump has claimed that more than 25,000 criminal aliens have been arrested on homicide charges.

The Cato Institute study points out that the number is over a 55-year period, and that immigrants could have accounted for no more than 2.7% of the 934,000 homicides committed in the country during that timeframe. Trump continues to whip up frenzy about border crossings despite the fact that arrests at the southern border are at a historic low: The numbers have come down from 1.6 million in 2000 to about 303,000 in 2017.

If the number of people trying to enter the country illegally has drastically fallen, and the amount of crime committed by immigrant pales in comparison with those committed by native-born Americans, Trump's assertion that there is an invasion happening on the southern border is

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merely an attempt to create hysteria and a warlike atmosphere in order to justify his national emergency proclamation.

The United States has declared a state of national emergency 58 times since the National Emergency Act was passed in 1976; 31 of these are still active. Emergencies that have been declared by previous presidents have typically been in response to humanitarian and political threats abroad caused by government-sponsored human rights abuses, terrorism and regional destabilizations.

Most national emergency declarations work in tandem with sanctions the United States imposes on a country or a specific group, as in the case with sanctions against Russia introduced by President Barack Obama in 2014 in connection with its annexation of Crimea and incursions into Ukraine.

Markedly different from most of the 31 active emergencies, President George W. Bush promulgated a domestic national emergency in response to the 9/11 attacks. Trump's latest proclamation is essentially positioning the humanitarian crisis at the Mexican border as an invasion against the country and a threat to its national security.

## **THE REAL CRISIS**

There is indeed a humanitarian crisis at the southern border: It is one faced by the thousands of migrant families and asylum seekers who have been displaced due to the violence and

turmoil in their home countries as a direct result of US actions in the past. While migrant crossings and arrests are at a historic low, Trump's executive order bemoans America's inability to provide detention facilities for immigrants, and especially the growing number of families seeking entry into United States.

Instead of building a wall, perhaps the Trump administration should have considered using the money to provide temporary amenities to those looking for refuge in the US and at the same time address the root causes of the problem that are driving this exodus.

Not surprisingly, Trump's national emergency proclamation has met with a swift disapproval from Democratic leaders. "The President is not above the law. The Congress cannot let the President shred the Constitution," said Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer in a joint statement. Trump's action also drew criticism from several Republicans, albeit his diehard supporters, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senator Lindsay Graham, continue to stand by him.

While the inevitable challenges to Trump's national emergency plays out in the courts, Congress has in its power to rein in a president who abuses his executive powers. A simple majority vote of disapproval in both chambers of Congress is the first step. With a Democratic House majority and several outspoken GOP senators united against Trump's action, the vote of disapproval

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may actually come to pass, although it will most certainly be vetoed by the president himself. In order to formally end a national emergency declared by the president without the possibility of him vetoing it, there has to be a two-third majority in both chambers of Congress. That is a tall order as long as there are those like McConnell and Graham continuing to support Trump.

America does have a real national emergency on its hands right now. It is not on its southern border with Mexico. Rather, it is in the White House in the form of its singularly incompetent president.

The sooner the Republican senators and House representatives acknowledge that fact honestly and rein in the blundering leader who is running amok, the faster the real crisis can be contained.

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## Shamima Begum: A Jihadi Bride's Plea to Return

Ellis Cashmore

February 19, 2019

*A case of an IS bride's newborn child raises questions of citizenship, personhood and agency.*

You probably haven't heard of Marshae Jones. Last December, she was arrested after a shooting at a convenience store in Pleasant Grove, a small town in Alabama. Jones, who was pregnant at the time, was shot in the stomach. She recovered, but the unborn child didn't survive. The shooter, Ebony Jemison, was initially charged with murder, later adjusted to manslaughter. The fight was over the unborn baby's father. Crucially, Jones started it.

Why crucially? "The mother's involvement and culpability will be presented to a grand jury to determine if she also will be charged in the incident," declared police officer Lieutenant Danny Reid, adding that "When a 5-month pregnant woman initiates a fight and attacks another person, I believe some responsibility lies with her as to any injury to her unborn child." Reid concluded that was that there was only one victim in the affair: "That child is dependent on its mother to try to keep it from harm, and she shouldn't seek out unnecessary physical altercations."

UK readers will most certainly have heard of Shamima Begum. An East Londoner, she left Britain in 2014 to join the Islamic State (IS) as a jihadi bride,

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aged just 15. After losing two consecutive children because of the cruel and severe conditions in the former IS stronghold of Raqqa, she became pregnant with a third. Tracked down by The Times team at the al-Hawl refugee camp in Syria a week ago, Begum, then nine months pregnant, has appealed to the British government to allow her to return to her own birthplace to give birth and raise her child, in the words of the family lawyer “away from ISIS thinking.”

Begum has since given birth, and the nation is divided over whether she should be allowed back into the UK after more than four years of life in an environment and culture that is hostile to the UK and among people who are openly opposed to Western ways of life.

## **NEWBORN CITIZEN**

Begum’s family has asserted that “As a British citizen, Shamima has every expectation to be returned to the UK and be dealt with under the British justice system.” At the moment it’s not clear how justice would be served. The new Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, which will grant greater powers to crackdown on hostile state activity, will not apply to Begum retrospectively.

The British government has the power to deprive a person of citizenship if it decides the action would be “conducive to the public good.” However, it can’t render someone stateless. It’s not even clear if Begum has actually committed

an offence at all. Britons who leave the UK for IS-controlled territory are usually not welcomed back, particularly if they are known to have engaged in fighting allied forces or terrorist-related activities, which will be punishable by up to 10 years in prison under the new legislation. The response to their family members is less clear-cut. It is thought that Scotland Yard’s counterterrorism command has studied whether Shamima Begum was involved in activity that makes her “a danger to British national security or would constitute an offence that she could be charged with in the UK.”

Some argue that she was manipulated at an impressionable age and has now matured enough to mend her ways. The trouble is that she shows no apparent remorse. Speaking to Sky News, Begum said: “In a way, yes, but I don’t regret it because it’s changed me as a person. It’s made me stronger, tougher. I married my husband. I wouldn’t have found someone like him back in the UK.” There is also a question over her complicity in the transition to Syria. Those who insist she was in some way “brainwashed” are criticized for not crediting her with intelligence and decision-making agency.

## **PERSONHOOD**

But while much of the debate centers around Begum herself, considering the rights of her newborn invites us to venture along a different narrative. Since the mother is a British national, the child will technically be British and

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should, by extension, have a right to be brought up on British soil, have access to the NHS, go to school in Britain and participate fully in the welfare state.

Whether the mother committed acts of treason against the British government by voluntarily leaving for Syria and aligning herself with an enemy of many Western nations, including Britain, is, in a sense, irrelevant. A child, especially when still in its mother's womb, is innocent and in danger of becoming a victim. Perhaps not a victim to the same extent as Marsha Jones' unborn child, but a victim in the sense that its life chances will be overwhelmingly determined by the actions of its mother.

It's too easy to argue that the British government's responsibility should be to the child and its duty to protect that child regardless of the transgressions the mother. But this presumes the child would theoretically prefer to be born, live and mature in an environment its mother found repugnant — or at least did in 2014.

Obviously a child has no cognitive capacity to choose where to be born and grow. Those who point out that the child is innocent seem to presume life in East London would be preferable to Syria. It could also be argued, at least theoretically — I know of no one who has advanced this view — that were the child born and allowed to develop among the Islamic State, he would see life very differently and repudiate the infidels his mother left behind. The

unborn child will be shaped by whichever circumstances he is born into. All of which prompts us to wonder whether personhood is appropriately conferred on unborn children.

The concept of personhood is under constant revision. I'm going to define it straightforwardly as the quality or condition of being an individual human being. A society that accommodates a legal understanding of fetal personhood has to face some uncomfortable implications. If a woman chooses to smoke and drink during pregnancy, and the child is born prematurely and underweight, is the mother responsible for the child's health? What if a mother exercises too vigorously or runs ultramarathons or travels abroad to work for humanitarian causes? There was a fictional, but reality-like, case on Coronation Street recently, in which a pregnant woman with cancer refused to undergo radiotherapy in order to save her child. She endangered herself, of course. But she could have opted for the therapy and jeopardized the child's chances of survival. Would she then be morally, if not legally, culpable?

If so, then we are bestowing rights on fetuses. This takes us very close to a zero-sum situation in which whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other: Pregnant mothers lose autonomy as people in almost direct proportion to the rights we confer on unborn children.

## **REBALANCING OF POWER**

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There's been a rebalancing of power when it comes to human reproduction. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the interests of mother and fetus are exactly the same. But every so often, a case like Shamima Begum's challenges us to determine whose interest is best served by a decision. The British state is now struggling with this question: If it's in the child's best interests to grow up in Britain, should it prioritize those interests and admit Begum? If it decides to stick with a traditional conception of human individuality and refuse to confer this capacity on a newborn child, then it will assert that it has no legal or moral duty to allow Begum's return.

At the moment, human beings in Britain acquire legal personhood when they are born. In other jurisdictions, a being has rights even before birth. Begum's case came to light only days before she gave birth to her son. Some insist that an embryo in the first trimester (from conception to about the 12th week of pregnancy) should be treated legally in exactly the same way as a fetus in the final stages of pregnancy. This seems a tenuous argument, though one that challenges us to determine at what cycle of pregnancy does a being deserve if not personhood, then at least some recognition of rights.

But consider: If the government determines the child has rights and freedoms comparable to, if not commensurate with, other humans, then it will segue into philosophical water. If a government can intercede to protect the best interests of a fetus, how might

those opposed to abortion and the miscellany of women's right associated with it turn this to their advantage?

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## The Coming Chinese World Order

Daniel Wagner

February 19, 2019

*Not since the modern liberal order was born in the 1940s has the world had to grapple with the possibility of its demise — at the hands of a rising China.*

China and the United States remain engaged in the most serious trade dispute the world has seen in generations. Today, English remains the world's predominant language, the US is the world's largest economy and the dollar its reserve currency, Google is the world's primary search engine and Facebook the largest social media platform.

But in 30 years, once China's Belt and Road Initiative is completed, Beijing's ability to project its soft and hard power will be greatly enhanced. If predictions prove correct, China will in a few years become the world's largest economy,

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and parents around the world will ensure that their children speak Mandarin (if they do not already).

Once the Chinese government makes the yuan fully convertible, it could well become the world's reserve currency, and given the growth in Chinese speakers, it could well be Baidu that becomes the world's predominant search engine, and Weibo that supplants Facebook. The growth in the Chinese middle class, already larger than the US, will help ensure that China weans itself of overdependence on exports to sustain growth and becomes increasingly self-reliant for economic development.

If President Xi Jinping has his way, it will be China that is the world's center of gravity. The coming Chinese world order is likely to be devoid of the kinds of checks and balances we take for granted in the post-World War II system. Rather, it is more likely to be akin to a transaction-driven landscape where the strongest party rules, and the weak are considered collateral damage. This transformation has already begun, and as it is occurring, the US and many other countries are essentially asleep at the wheel. As domestic crisis upon crisis piles up, the world's leading Western economies continue to turn their attention inward, preoccupied with political and economic issues at home and functioning with unipolar blinders on.

Many of the world's leaders fail to see all that Beijing is doing and fail to

appreciate the implications for the future.

Not since the modern liberal order was born in the 1940s has the world had to grapple with the possibility of its demise — at the hands of a rising China. Just at a time when the world is in need of the stability and good governance it has had the luxury of relying upon for decades, it must contemplate transitioning to a world order not of the West's choosing.

Clearly, the era of US hegemony is coming to an end. Will the global institutions it was so instrumental in creating become less relevant and influential with time? Will Beijing be successful in crafting new institutions derived from a Chinese footprint? If so, will good governance and rule of law be consistent with such organizations? Only time will tell, of course.

What is certain is that Beijing's realization of the Chinese century is sure to be infused with precepts and applications that are uniquely Chinese. The world has yet to fully contemplate all that this portends, but President Xi wants to achieve a pathway that guarantees the supremacy of China throughout this century and beyond. He is likely to do just that, for he has a vision not only for how China reigns supreme in the economic, political, diplomatic, technological and, eventually, military arena, but also how it gets there.

That is certainly more than can be said for the United States at this juncture,

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much less of other Western powers that appear to be sitting on the sidelines as Beijing smashes barrier after barrier for how things get done. Xi deserves credit for having a vision of the future and for acting swiftly and decisively to achieve it — whether in the area of technology (where China is outspending Silicon Valley to achieve AI supremacy), building the world's largest navy by number of ships (currently in second place behind North Korea), landing a probe on the dark side of the moon as evidence of its growing strength in the field of science, or seeking to influence the world's media. China is engaged in a multi-pronged effort to become influential in a wide spectrum of areas of global importance.

Let us hope that Beijing's tendency to elbow its way to the front of the line, find a way to get more or less whatever it wants from the world's poorest and weakest nations, and at time ignore the rule of international law yields to a kinder, gentler China in the future that shows evidence of a respect for the established international order and well-worn rules of the road.

The current international system did not come about quickly, or by accident. It was established as a result of a deliberate effort to be transparent and inclusive, placing a premium on governance and the rule of law.

If China really wants to achieve top-tier rankings in the areas it considers important — and do so in a manner that helps ensure its longevity — Beijing

should seek to enhance, rather than supplant, the very world order that has enabled it to rise to become the global power it already is.

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