

# Fair Observer

Monthly



August 2019

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>

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# Fair Observer Monthly



August 2019

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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

Our digital media platform has more than 2,000 contributors from over 80 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

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

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

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# Can Technology Help China Rebuild Social Trust?

Elizabeth Van Wie Davis

August 1, 2019

**China sees social credit as a helpful means of disciplining negligent commercial entities in an era of rapid commercialization, economic growth and residual distrust.**

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The world's governments and peoples must decide how to address the increasing surveillance and data collection — and the resulting loss of privacy — that digital formats provide. In recent years, much of this attention has focused on the rapidly building surveillance and data aggregation in China in terms of the emerging social credit systems, which received strongly pessimistic coverage from the Western press in the past two years. At issue is the Chinese government's plan to "comprehensively move social credit system construction forward" by 2020.

According to the systems' founding document, the optimistic scheme should establish "the idea of a sincerity culture and carrying forward sincerity and traditional virtues." So why is there such a strong difference between the optimistic Chinese and pessimistic Western perceptions of social credit systems?

Many reasons contribute to this chasm between the Chinese and Western perceptions. First, the outcry may relate to the erroneous idea that this information is consolidated into a single file on individuals, combining financial data, purchasing patterns, travel records and facial recognition. Second, the Western perceptions are influenced both by suspicions

of the Chinese government and by a Western failure to come to grips with their own domestic electronic collection. Finally, and uniquely, the social credit network mimics some elements and repairs other consequences of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution in China.

## Good Standing

The Chinese government is proposing a social credit network as a desirable way to measure and enhance "trust" nationwide and to build a culture of "sincerity" in a society still suffering from the shattered trust of the Cultural Revolution. The policy states: "It will forge a public opinion environment where keeping trust is glorious. It will strengthen sincerity in government affairs, commercial sincerity, social sincerity and the construction of judicial credibility."

There is no single social credit system in China. There is a wide spectrum of pilot systems, some commercial and some run by local governments that measure different elements related to social trust. Eventually, however, the National Development and Reform Commission, a powerful central body, will have vast amounts of data available. Striving to minimize the flaws of existing systems, "The government is responsible for formulating and implementing development plans, completing regulations and standards, fostering and supervising credit service markets. Focus on giving rein to the role of market mechanisms, coordinate and optimize resource allocation, encourage and muster social forces, broaden participation, move forward together, shape joint forces for social credit system construction."

Specifically, the credit system wants to limit commercial swindles, sales of counterfeit products, tax evasion and fraudulent financial claims. Not only is there no overall system yet

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to monitor this fraud by commercial entities on citizens — or by citizens on other citizens — but also Chinese authorities are not creating a single social credit score that will determine every aspect of every citizen's life.

Of the pilot systems, most Chinese citizens — 80% of respondents — approve of both the commercial and the government-run systems. In one commercial program, now ended, the government allowed private companies to pilot systems and algorithms for social credit scores, including two widely covered projects: one by a partner of the social-network giant Tencent and developer of the messaging app WeChat, and another, by Sesame Credit, is run by the Ant Financial Services Group (AFSG), an affiliate company of Alibaba. These private systems appear to have ended in 2017.

Although the commercial pilot social credit programs have ended, commercial entities feature first and foremost in the systems of Chinese social credit. Commercial entities retain their good standing if they pay taxes on time and lose good standing for substandard or unsanitary products — a sore point for people across China due to frequent scams and food safety scandals. Chinese citizens see social credit systems as a reliable source of information on the trustworthiness of commercial entities, social organizations and individual service providers to such an extent that 76% of people queried responded that a general lack of trust in Chinese society is a problem.

Respondents see social credit as a helpful means of punishing polluters, reducing substandard products and otherwise disciplining negligent commercial entities in an era of rapid commercialization, economic growth and residual distrust.

## Signs of Abuse

In addition to monitoring the trustworthiness of commercial entities, the social credit network is meant to provide individual citizens with credit records. The more durable social credit pilots have been primarily piloted by local governments. In these local government schemes — there are approximately 43 cities running pilot programs — negative criminal infractions lead to deductions from the overall individual credit score. The government asserts that social credit systems are also a positive way to bring in those people left out of traditional credit systems, including low-income and rural households.

The negative and positive also extends to the overall systems, where the negative impacts of social distrust inculcated by the Cultural Revolution and adverse side effects of rapid economic expansion are intended to be balanced by the positive aspects of social credit systems that discourage scams and reward good citizenship.

These programs to monitor commercial entities and citizens — both civil servants and private citizens — are being developed simultaneously with video surveillance systems and rapidly developing facial recognition software. China is now rivaling the West and Japan in implementing a pervasive system of algorithmic surveillance as well as becoming a major distributor of surveillance equipment.

While there are justifiable concerns that these closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras combined with facial recognition networks can be used for nefarious purposes in China and elsewhere, so far government-reported instances include boarding subways in Shanghai, catching shooters in the West, waking up drowsy workers in Japan, checking bus driver fitness in the UAE and finding elders with dementia in Singapore.

Again, it is vital to watch for signs of abuse from both governments and commercial



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entities in this rapidly expanding technology. Reported cases of abuse include Uighur Muslims in Western China, where victims relate stories of being tracked by cell phones, facial recognition software attached to either CCTV or drones, and DNA testing.

According to official Chinese press, “The field of big data in cloud computing is slowly blossoming.” The surveillance of specific political or ethnic groups was designed, as the Western press quotes, to “apply the ideas of military cyber systems to civilian public security.” These cases — especially those targeting political opposition in Ecuador, Rwanda and Zimbabwe — are troubling at best.

With a 2020 goal to get systems in place — although the goal seems to be less a deadline and more the end of a planning period — the social credit network appears to be an ecosystem made up of various stratagems that are all run in different ways by cities, government ministries, online payment providers, neighborhoods, libraries and businesses, according to Chinese researchers who are designing the national scheme. Although many of these subsystems may be interconnected by a network of information, it will not be a unified platform where one can type in one’s ID and get a single score that will determine a citizen’s life.

This caricature of a unified system that doles out unique scores to 1.4 billion people — with around 46,000 born and some 19,000 dying each day — would come with nearly insurmountable technical and political obstacles. Politically, the Chinese government is not only trying to build trust for and within commercial entities and individual citizens, but also runs a terrible risk if it loses this same trust from those same commercial entities and citizens, as it has during the Cultural Revolution.

## **Western Perceptions**

Western perceptions of Chinese social credit systems are pessimistic. This negative perception has at least two major parts. The first part is the horror of seeing a complex electronic network implemented over a few years with its resultant loss of privacy and inevitable errors. Although the developing social credit systems are similar to the systems in the West, these Western systems emerged bit by bit and are rarely considered as a whole. The second part of negative perception is the fear that the Chinese government is not to be trusted with such data, especially given the history of that government with similar data during eras like the Cultural Revolution.

Westerners are often appalled by the Chinese social credit systems for many reasons, not the least of which is seeing the systems that have slowly accumulated in the West appear fully formed in China. Westerners have become accustomed to losing privacy in small bits — by private commercial entities like Amazon, Google and Experian — and have eagerly participated in rating other private entities based on their experiences, such as doctors, realtors and restaurants. With Uber and Lyft, riders rate the drivers, and the drivers rate the riders.

Entire podcasts exist just to rate movies, books and television series. Facebook automatically identifies people in photographs with facial recognition software and chooses advertisements based on account content. These rating systems that developed over decades become truly shocking when Westerners see it developed in a single leap, much as it is in China.

Governments in the West increasingly monitor their citizens with the resultant loss of privacy. The US National Security Agency (NSA) monitors phone calls, emails and locations, then uses that information to try to identify

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potential wrongdoers. The UK intelligence agency, GCHQ, with collaboration from the NSA, has been collecting millions of webcam images from guiltless Yahoo users. GCHQ files between 2008-12 state that a surveillance program, Optic Nerve, collected still images of Yahoo webcam chats in bulk and saved them to agency databases, regardless of whether individual users were an intelligence target or not. The collected data was used to experiment with facial recognition, to monitor existing targets and discover fresh ones.

The electronic systems in the West, and the loss of privacy, reached a tipping point over a decade ago. Richard James Thomas, who served as the UK information commissioner from 2002-09, says more and more personal data is being collected and stored, both by Western governments and commercial entities. He feared back in 2006 that “we are in fact waking up to a surveillance society that is already all around us.”

Moreover, Western electronic surveillance has a few known flaws. On the one hand, there is always the potential for false positives with algorithms. For instance, think of irrelevant advertisements popping up online based on some algorithm misinterpreting one’s interests. In another instance, false information is almost impossible to remove from FICO scores based on similar names or some other error.

On the other hand, the databases are being stretched. Alec Jeffreys, a pioneer of DNA profiling, said fingerprint, DNA and facial recognition databases originally created from criminal arrests or investigations are now running biometric network searches against massive state driver’s license data bases that are primarily made up of law-abiding Americans. The UK’s David Murakami Wood, from the Surveillance Studies Network, says that “The surveillance society has come about almost without us realizing.” Although the

West has sleep walked into the massive collection of data and loss of privacy, the Chinese electronic systems have leapt nearly fully formed into view.

### **Suspicious of the Chinese Government**

So, although the technologies and methodologies of electronic surveillance are similar in the West and in China, one big difference is that the Chinese government is viewed suspiciously. For instance, there is an outcry that China issues national ID cards at age 16; however, the German national ID card is also issued at 16. There is outrage at the Chinese use of facial recognition software, similar to the systems set up by the FBI and used extensively in Singapore. There is unhappiness concerning the Chinese government’s reading emails, texts and social media, which is done throughout the West, especially in the context of terrorism or to aid law enforcement or for visas, or even “inadvertently.”

Complaints highlight the Chinese use of credit scores, like the US FICO score, and CCTV, which is used intensively in the UK. Especially ironic is the emphasis on China’s viewing of shopping habits, which are so notoriously scrutinized in the US that shops knew women were pregnant based on what they purchased before their families did.

One basis of these concerns seems to be Western commentators’ worries that this information will allow the Chinese government to target citizens’ behavior and political beliefs. Of course targeting Western citizens’ beliefs is rampant in the West in an age where the disclosure of Cambridge Analytica’s massive voter data scoop — a database that combines government voter rolls with social media data such as lists of people who liked certain Facebook posts, commercial data from grocery chains and religious leanings based on church

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membership rolls — caused popular distress and government hearings.

Google street views can determine whether voters on that street are conservative or liberal based on the number of parked pickup trucks or Toyota Priuses. Moreover, most US states allow campaigns to obtain voter lists, including every registered voter, along with their name, addresses, party registration, voting frequency history, employer and job title.

Clearly, most Westerners give their governments the benefit of the doubt that this data will only be collected under specific constraints and for trustworthy purposes. The same benefit of the doubt is not conferred on the Chinese authorities. While the Chinese government may be seeking to develop domestic trust with the collection of data, internationally the trust seems to be waning rather than waxing. Some Western suspicions are likely based on the former Chinese dangan and hukou systems that kept public records and encouraged neighbors and co-workers to check on each other.

These systems played an important role in the Cultural Revolution, and fears are that an electronic version is being created in an era of massive urbanization, where people have left their home villages to work in the cities and live side by side with people they do not know well.

Chinese citizens, however, do give their government the benefit of the doubt both that this data will be used responsibly and that the social credit system will help alleviate the massive lack of trust in Chinese society. Much of this lack of trust stems not only from the rapid industrialization and modernization, but also from the long-lasting and unprocessed effects of the Cultural Revolution. It is not a coincidence that both China's first leader to grow up during the Cultural Revolution and the renewed assertion that local officials implement a "mass line" — that is, go among

the people, talk to everyone and collect and distinguish correct and incorrect ideas — are occurring simultaneously with the creation of social credit systems. The social credit systems mimic some elements and repairs other consequences of China's Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution's massive discord saw citizens turn on citizens and destroy social trust, which is the main area that the social credit systems try to repair. An important study shows that the Cultural Revolution, in which more than a million have lost their lives, affected everyone in society. It affected not only citizens who were mistreated during the revolution, but also those who witnessed the untrustworthy behavior of their neighbors and friends even when these behaviors were not directed at them. Another study also shows the continuing loss of social trust as a result of the culture of spying and snitching that the Chinese Communist Party fostered among the population. It is this loss of social trust that the social credit systems attempt to address.

### **Children of the Revolution**

The Cultural Revolution was a formative time for Chinese President Xi Jinping and for his generation. The president's father, once a high-ranking official, was purged in the early days of the Cultural Revolution, and Xi Jinping — thus considered a "princeling" — was among millions of urban youth sent to rural areas to be reeducated by farmers and laborers. Some of President Xi's critics argue that his experiences during the Cultural Revolution support his authoritarian approach; that is, instead of turning against the party, government or leader, he revered strict order and abhorred challenges to hierarchy.

As the Cultural Revolution cooled, one of Xi Jinping's friends saw him choose to become "redder than red" — red symbolizing the Communist Party's ideology — to survive. If

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any of these observations are true, they certainly lend credence to a reliance on a government-run social credit network.

Xi Jinping, the leader creating and implementing the social credit score, took the trauma of the Cultural Revolution to move back into and up through the ranks of the Chinese government and party, but never throwing off its impact. In 1975, the 22-year-old Xi Jinping attended the esteemed Tsinghua University to study chemical engineering. By the time Xi graduated in 1979, he worked as secretary to the then-secretary general of the Central Military Commission, Geng Biao, until 1982. Twenty years later, Xi Jinping came last in the rankings of alternate members of the 15th Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1997.

Working his way up the party ranks, Xi served in several provinces, ending with a brief but prestigious stint in Shanghai, to be unexpectedly promoted in 2007 directly to the Standing Committee of the Politburo — China's most elite political body. His appointment just months later, in March 2008, as vice president signaled his rise to president and party general secretary in 2012.

Xi Jinping is a powerful leader, but it is an error to assume that the party is a monolithic structure or that the success of policies like the social credit systems do not matter or that popular support for social credit networks do not matter. Xi's strength is clear: Not only was his political ideology written into the Chinese Constitution, but also a constitutional amendment was passed on March 11, 2018, after his first five-year term, that removed the country's 10-year presidential term limits.

In addition to his strength, however, Xi Jinping has many enemies and a formidable political opposition. Since Xi's removal of the two-term limit, murmurs of discontent have risen among academics, businesspeople and

former officials despite censorship and the security police. So far, that discontent has not visibly extended to the creation of the social credit network.

So, while the party holds a monopoly on power, the party leadership is not a monolith. The current leadership and its programs not only reflect the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, but also must survive the political mechanisms. The political mechanisms center on two main political coalitions within the party that are often in tension with each other and promote different policy agendas. These coalitions have become dangerously antagonistic. The success and popularity of the social credit systems may be hostage to these political tensions.

### **21st-Century Mao Zedong**

On one side is the elitist coalition, now led by Xi Jinping. Its supporters come from the families of the old-guard revolutionaries who held top posts upon the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Those revolutionaries mostly lived and worked together, coalescing into a tight social group, until the Cultural Revolution dispersed them. Officials with a direct lineage to those founders, who claim to be the republic's rightful heirs, have experienced a resurgence under Xi Jinping. The elitist coalition wants the party and the state to have more control in markets and corporations, and have an expansionist and nationalist position in international trade and politics. They are the primary advocates of the social credit systems.

On the other side is the populist coalition headed first by the previous president, Hu Jintao, and now by China's premier, Li Keqiang. They drew their power base in part from the Communist Youth League, a gateway for young Chinese to achieve party membership that is often identified with populist positions.

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Populist coalition supporters are often without significant pre-1949 revolutionary credentials or family lineage. The populist coalition policies are more pro-market, perhaps because they consolidated power in the new socialist market economy and take a more subtle approach to international politics. They tend to represent the more disadvantaged groups in the rapidly modernizing society. The Communist Youth League has been attacked vigorously by Xi Jinping and his faction within the elitist coalition. The populist coalition's stance on the social credit systems is less clear.

The Xi Jinping faction — mainly Xi's subordinates when he served in the provinces and Shanghai, his home province of Shaanxi and graduates of Xi's alma mater Tsinghua University — initially targeted another faction within the elitist coalition, and then the populist coalition, with his anti-corruption campaign. It directed the campaign against the former president Jiang Zemin's business faction within the elitist coalition, destroying families and wealth and networks of many powerful people. The faction simultaneously consolidated power by filling top regional posts and the top leadership positions in most of China's 31 major administrative districts.

The Xi faction within the elitist coalition is strong, but his base is small, at around 40,000 people, and he certainly has his domestic detractors. His admirers, reflecting back in part to the Cultural Revolution, like to call Xi Jinping "the Mao Zedong of the 21st Century." The opposition, however, is not hesitant in calling for Xi to moderate his policies.

The social credit systems, a major policy initiative, is clearly identified with Xi Jinping. While he is powerful and the pilots are popular, the social credit network is secure. However, if the citizens find the social credit systems to be unduly burdensome or too reminiscent of the negative aspects of the Cultural Revolution,

there are plenty of powerful people in China — both within the elitist coalition and in the rival populist coalition — willing to find Xi Jinping responsible and weaken him.

While the Western fears of an all-pervasive, socially stifling social credit system are not impossible, Chinese domestic politics do provide something of a counterweight. Chinese citizens want to take the best from a social credit network: rebuild the trust destroyed by the Cultural Revolution and prevent the food scandals and general scams.

The development of Chinese social credit systems does provide an important opportunity for all countries using electronic surveillance to make important judgments regarding the boundaries of this new massive era of data collection. It is not very realistic to ask China to take the lead on this, especially given the wider Western experience, but China certainly should be part of emerging global standards on what is an acceptable loss of privacy by both governments and commercial entities.

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**Elizabeth Van Wie Davis** is an expert on security and the Asia Pacific. She has lived and worked in Asia for many years. She and her family lived in China on several occasions, primarily in Nanjing and Beijing, and traveled extensively throughout the country. After 17 years in academia, Davis took a hiatus to work for the US government on issues related to Asia. Based in Hawaii, she traveled regularly to Asia working on issues of preventive diplomacy. Simultaneous to on-the-ground projects, Davis maintained a rigorous academic agenda, including briefing US senators and congressmen, top military officers, and foreign government officials on issues related to China and Asia.

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## **Saudi Arabia Eases Male Guardianship System**

Suad Abu-Dayyeh

August 2, 2019

**The male guardianship system is extremely repressive, treating adult women as minors under the legal control of their guardians.**

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It comes as welcome news that authorities in Saudi Arabia have taken important steps toward dismantling the repressive male guardianship system, which treats women in the country as minors. Women will no longer require permission from a male guardian to travel abroad and can apply for a passport without authorization. They have also been granted the right to register births, marriage and divorce, giving them greater control over family matters. The law also now stipulates that the breadwinner of the family can be either the father or the mother in relation to minors in the application of this system.

Other changes announced relate to employment regulations that extend work opportunities for women, who represent a big proportion of unemployed Saudis. Under the new ruling, all citizens now have the right to work without discrimination based on gender, disability or age. Another welcome amendment is that employers cannot fire a woman or give notice to fire her while she is pregnant or on maternity leave.

Changes to the law were announced on August 2 by royal decrees and published in the kingdom's official weekly, Um al-Qura gazette.

### **There's Still Work to Be Done**

Although these important advances in removing long-standing social restrictions are

to be applauded, much still remains to be done to protect and promote the rights of women and girls in this deeply conservative Arab state. Saudi Arabia was ranked 141 out of 149 countries in the 2018 Global Gender Gap, an annual index released by the World Economic Forum that measures how women in countries around the world fare in economic and political participation, education and health.

Women in the kingdom still require male consent to marry, live on their own and leave prison or a domestic abuse shelter. In addition, women are barred from passing Saudi citizenship onto their children, nor can they provide consent for their children to marry.

The male guardianship system is extremely repressive, treating adult women as minors under the legal control of their guardians, who could be a husband, brother, uncle or even a son. Women in Saudi Arabia require permission from a male family member to do many things, such as enrolling in school, filing a lawsuit, opening a bank account and accessing some medical procedures. Women and girls are also subject to strict dress codes and gender segregation.

This creates an oppressive society, both inside the family environment and within the country as a whole. Such wide-ranging restrictions have curtailed the human rights of women, depriving them of the freedom to make essential decisions in their daily lives and preventing them from participating fully in society. Treated as second-class citizens, every Saudi woman and girl is impacted from birth to death.

The new laws announced by the Saudi government have been a long time coming, and it is unclear when the order will take effect. It is vital that these advances are implemented in a way that complies with the international conventions that the country has committed itself to. Saudi Arabia is a member

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of the UN Human Rights Council and has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. As such, it is obliged to uphold the highest standards for the promotion and protection of human rights and to take action that ends discrimination against women in all its forms.

### **Women's Rights Defenders**

Despite this, Saudi Arabia continues to detain women's rights defenders who have advocated for an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system and for changes to the deeply patriarchal society. This has included the right for women to drive, which was finally granted in June 2018 with some restrictions to their access to driving schools and the fees that are triple the price for women.

Numerous activists have been imprisoned since mid-2018 solely for peacefully campaigning for the protection and promotion of human rights, including women's rights, in the kingdom. This has been accompanied by horrifying reports of torture, sexual assault and other ill-treatment perpetrated by the authorities against those who have been detained. Whilst some campaigners were temporarily released on bail earlier in the year and are still awaiting trial, others remain in prison. This includes Loujain al-Hathloul, the prominent campaigner who this week spent her 30th birthday languishing in a Saudi jail.

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia announced its ambitious Vision 2030 plan to diversify the country's economy, reduce dependence on oil and develop its public service sectors. This included programs to promote and strengthen women's rights. However, the arrests of women's rights defenders by the government have created a toxic environment where many have effectively been silenced by fears that if they express views that could be construed as

critical of the state, they could face reprisals by the authorities.

Saudi Arabia's citizens should be free to exercise their civil rights in their own country, including advocating for gender equality without the threat of intimidation, arrest or torture. Calling for greater women's rights should never be treated as a crime.

This week's sweeping reforms denote a tangible advance in the dismantling of Saudi Arabia's deep-rooted system of male domination and are a significant testament to the positive impact that brave activists within the country are having, often at huge personal risk and sacrifice.

The world's gaze is firmly fixed on the Saudi authorities to ensure that the promised repeal of discriminatory legal provisions translate into tangible improvements for women and girls on the ground, and that all women's rights defenders who have been charged and imprisoned are immediately and unconditionally released, all charges dropped and they face no further persecution.

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**Suad Abu-Dayyeh** is a women's rights expert based in Jordan. In 2008, she joined the international women's rights organization Equality Now where she works on issues affecting women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa region. Previously, she spent 10 years with the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), a Palestinian NGO that addresses gender-based violence in Palestinian society. Abu-Dayyeh is fluent in Arabic and holds a master's in women and development from the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands, a bachelor's in social work from Bethlehem University, and a bachelor's in law from Al Ahliyya Amman University in Jordan.

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# Intellectual Enablers Carry a Responsibility for Mass Shootings

Hans-Georg Betz

August 5, 2019

## Western Europe has so far largely served as a source of ideas that inspire right-wing violence like the shooting in El Paso.

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Another day, another mass murder. This time in El Paso, Texas, leaving scores dead, scores injured. This time the targets were Hispanics. Last time, Muslims — or Jews. Next time it may be the (white) “racial traitors” responsible for the current “invasion” from all corners of the earth. Republicans in Congress, Fox News talking heads, capitalists financing Donald Trump reelection campaign are all delusional if they believe they will be spared. The author of “The Inconvenient Truth,” posted online moments before the El Paso massacre, made it quite clear: “America is rotting from the inside out,” and neither Democrats nor Republican have done anything against it.

Anders Behring Breivik — the perpetrator of the Utøya Island massacre and a bombing in Oslo in 2011 that collectively claimed 77 lives — has demonstrated that this is far from an empty threat. Breivik’s main victims were members of the Norwegian Labor Party’s youth organization, presumably to prevent a new generation of “do-gooders” from actively fostering the “cultural and ethnic replacement” — “The Inconvenient Truth” of the Norwegian people. “Wehret den Anfängen,” as they say in German — nip things in the bud.

### Intellectual Arsonists

The reference is to the “theory” of the “great replacement” advanced by the French essayist

Renaud Camus. It already served as justification for the Christchurch massacre in New Zealand last year and is bound to serve as justification for white supremacist massacres to come. Today, Camus is generally credited for having developed the notion of the great replacement. In reality, its genealogy goes all the way back to late 19th-century France. This was a period of political turmoil that became the breeding ground for a number of racist, xenophobic and nativist ideational constructs — it would be stretching the concept to characterize them as ideologies — which had a lasting impact on French politics.

It was also a time when France experienced a growing tide of immigrants from neighboring countries, looking for work. It was the literary icon and politician Maurice Barrès, a left-wing populist turned right-wing nationalist, who coined the phrase as part of his “national socialist” program intent on appealing to the workers in his electoral district. It was informed by the charge that migrants refused to assimilate into French culture and the French way of life. Instead, Barrès claimed, they sought to impose theirs, in the process destroying French civilization and the French patrie (fatherland) itself.

Camus’ version of the great replacement follows the same lines, yet with a twist. In Camus’ version, the great replacement represents a “genocide via substitution” and, as such, a crime against humanity. If it is not recognized as such, it is because national and supranational economic and political elites (i.e., the EU bureaucracy) are actively involved (via a secret design) in advancing its progress, largely because of their disdain, if not outright contempt, for ordinary native-born Europeans. This has been a popular trope on the contemporary political radical right in Western Europe, and particularly in Germany, where it



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is propagated by the Alternative for Germany party.

Camus's influence has been particularly pronounced among the various identitarian movements. They have made it their calling to defend Europe against the "onslaught" from across the Mediterranean and what they consider the threat of cultural subversion posed by Islam. Although not prone to violence, the German Verfassungsschutz (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) has declared them extremists, if for no other reason that they represent dangerous "geistige Brandstifter" (intellectual arsonists).

### **Much to Think About**

It is somewhat ironic that the American far right would adopt a French idea. But perhaps they suffer from memory loss, having forgotten the shrill nationalist resentment that gave birth to the brief episode of "freedom fries." But then, the Iraq adventure has become part of that history long ago, inglorious and better buried.

But then, the American far right need hardly borrow from these despicable, pesky "frogs," as the British like to refer to the French. They have their own nativist illuminati (irony intended) to justify their actions. A prime example is Samuel P. Huntington, the eminent Harvard political scientist who passed away in 2008. For the general public, Huntington is best known for his expose on the "clash of civilizations" that, again somewhat ironically, has given European radical right-wing populists much to think about.

What is perhaps less known is that at the end of his life Huntington was increasingly haunted by Camusian nightmares about the invasion underway from the south. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Huntington detected a process which he pithily characterized as "from diversity to dominance" — or the gradual

Hispanization of the United States — the result of mass migration from south of the border. For, as Huntington maintained, unlike earlier immigrant groups such as, for instance, the Irish and Italians, once themselves targets of ferocious nativist attacks, "Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves — from Los Angeles to Miami — and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream."

In fact, Huntington charged, Hispanic immigrants, particularly those originating from Mexico, had nothing but "contempt" for America's Anglo-Saxon Protestant "founding" culture — the basis for American basic values such as "individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a 'city on a hill.'"

I doubt that the El Paso mass murderer ever read Huntington. After all, Huntington was part of that intellectual elite which radical right-wing populists utterly despise. This, however, does not absolve intellectuals such as Huntington from responsibility. I don't know whether or not Camus is able to sleep at night, knowing that his rantings contributed to the murderous acts in Christchurch and El Paso that cost scores of innocent lives.

As a German, I am more than familiar with phrases such "I never imagined" or "I didn't know." Seriously? It is time that intellectuals — and those who pretend to be intellectuals — and "influencers" take responsibility for their vacuous musings (most prominently these days on the question of global warming and climate change), not least because they are bound to have real-life tragic consequences.

So far, Western European societies have largely been spared from the new scourge of white supremacy-inspired mass murder on the scale of Christchurch and El Paso. Instead,

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Western Europe has so far largely served as a source of ideas, promoted in numerous texts online and books, some of them international bestsellers, such as the late Oriana Fallaci's "The Rage and the Pride."

But make no mistake, the beginnings of the white panic and siege mentality that inform white-supremacist angst and rage in the United States are also being felt throughout Western Europe, fueled by American-style provocateurs cashing in on popular anxieties and resentments and popular media, ranging from tabloids to popular news magazines. What lacks is the freely available access to firearms that allows virtually anyone to purchase semi-automatic weapons — at least until somebody has figured out how to 3D print them in the privacy of his or her home.

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## **Climate Change Is Exacerbating Iraq's Complicated Water Politics**

Theodore Karasik & Jacopo Spezia

Depretto

August 6, 2019

**Environmental degradation feeds into social insecurity, which in turn has the potential to feed into social conflict and instability.**

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Today, what is commonly known as the Fertile Crescent — the cradle of civilization and the Garden of Eden — is not so fertile anymore.

The region that extends from the Nile Valley, through the Levant and along the Tigris-Euphrates river system is facing unprecedented pressure stemming from a toxic combination of global climate change and localized poor environmental management. An article published by 16 climate experts in 2017 highlighted the critical exposure of the whole Middle East to present and future climate change, with devastating consequences for the agricultural sector, water and food supplies, and overall livelihood and social welfare.

Furthermore, in a landmark academic peer-reviewed article, US scientists directly linked the undergoing political unrest in Syria with the record-setting drought that affected the Fertile Crescent between 2006 and 2009. Iraq's ecosystem, running along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is facing an environmental disaster.

According to the UN, Iraq's rivers have decreased to less than a third of their normal capacity. Specifically, the Tigris and the Euphrates are expected to decrease their discharge by a shocking 50% by 2030, compared to 1980s levels. The two rivers account for 98% of the Iraqi water supply used for drinking, sanitation and irrigation. Lake Milh, Iraq's second-largest lake, has practically disappeared.

Additionally, the quality of the remaining water is deteriorating due to increased salinization. As the Mesopotamia Basin receives between 150-300 millimeters of rainfall annually but experiences 1,500-2,500 millimeters of evaporation per year, it is estimated that 92% of Iraq's total surface area is subject to desertification, while 100 square kilometers of fertile land are lost each year because of salinization.

This land degradation is translating into an increased frequency of sand and dust storms (300 per year), which are converting Iraq into a

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“dust bowl.” These dust storms create headaches for industry and aviation, as well as commercial businesses, which restrict operations or operating hours due to maintenance. In general, with the reduction in freshwater resources, plant cover, wildlife stocks, traditional agriculture, local races and endemic species, the loss of biodiversity in Iraq is daunting.

### **Vicious Circle**

Numerous scientists are linking these outcomes to the impact of climate change. Two Iraqi scientists, A. A. Azooz and S. K. Talal, compiled primary data for Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Kirkuk, which showed a systematic drop of precipitations and increase in temperatures for all cities in the last century. If the trend continues, the scholars estimate, by 2050 Iraq will see a 25% drop in precipitations and a 2.2°C increase in mean temperature by 2050, compared to 1900. That trajectory contributes to the desertification and water scarcity dynamics in the world’s climate specifically in this ecosystem.

Although global trends in the biosphere are undoubtedly crucial in interpreting and explaining local phenomena, meso and micro instances of environmental politics in the region play their part. The concentration of precious natural resources along the Tigris and Euphrates is leading to their constant politicization throughout Iraq’s recent troubled history. Today, climate change and local human action are embroiled in a vicious circle that is progressively deteriorating environmental resources and social welfare in the Fertile Crescent.

Notably, Iraq’s environmental misfortunes stem from its geopolitical position. Nearly 91% of its water supply is not originated domestically but flows first through Turkey, Syria and Iran. Turkey is taking advantage of its

upstream position to implement the Southeastern Anatolia Project that envisioned 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric plants and extensive irrigation systems along the Euphrates and Tigris. This infrastructure is drastically reducing the amount of water received by Iraq, with successive governments in Baghdad finding themselves on the receiving end of a troubling hydro-political position.

Also, domestically, the two rivers are suffering from continuous weaponization over recent history. Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq between 1978 and 2003, harnessed the symbolic power of the Tigris by swimming from side to side in a PR stunt. At the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, Hussein cited the need to control the entire Shatt al-Arab river (confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates) as a major justification for invading Iran. Yet Iraq’s leader did not hesitate to send fighter jets to bomb the Iraqi Marshes, one of the largest wetland ecosystems in the world. The area was populated by the Madan — or Marsh Arabs — a people heavily dependent on the wetlands who were punished by Hussein for taking part in the 1991 rebellion against his rule. In an ethnic cleansing effort, the Iraqi leader instructed his engineers to divert the Tigris and Euphrates, thus leaving Iraq’s agricultural powerhouse dry and devastated.

US operations in Iraq further contributed to the destruction of key water infrastructure and facilitated the degradation of soil and vegetation. The politically fragmented context of post-invasion Iraq enabled the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) group that weaponized the scarce water resources to its advantage. By seeing control of dams and water supply systems, it cut off entire districts, towns or provinces from the outflow of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, deliberately contaminated water with crude oil and used water to flood 10,000 houses and 200 square kilometers of

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fertile farmland, wiping out the entire harvest, killing livestock and displacing 60,000 locals.

### **Zero-Sum Game**

In order to grasp the current environmental disaster in Iraq, it is necessary to consider the zero-sum game that is being played by various political forces in the last decades. The state is failing to monopolize the legitimate use of force and to build infrastructural power. Hence, micro-level environmental conflicts are mushrooming across the country. Provincial councils and governments accuse each other of exceeding water quotas and engage in unlawful use of force against each other. Violent inter-tribal clashes have proliferated over access to water, often because of lack of cooperation between upstream and downstream tribes.

The Kurdistan Regional Government, exploiting its upstream position within Iraq, has often threatened to reduce downstream flow to lobby Baghdad. Sectarian conflicts and remaining IS cells are starting hundreds of fires across the country, destroying vast areas of agricultural fields. Furthermore, years of a lack of education and government control are favoring unsustainable farming practices with detrimental repercussions on arable lands affecting crop rotations and land use.

Looking ahead, as the global climate mutates, rising temperatures and decreasing precipitations will only exacerbate environmental mismanagement of the last decades. Increasingly frequent droughts are devastating crop production, leading to unemployment — as agriculture accounts for 36% of all jobs — and increasing some diseases such as diarrhea and typhoid. Salinization is causing a 50% drop in agricultural production capacity over the last two decades.

In many provinces, according to the International Organization for Migration, drought and pollution are the main reasons

behind displacement. Decreasing water levels are affecting energy production at Iraq's largest hydropower plants, while increasingly salinized water threatens the capacity of thermal power stations and is already poisoning livestock and people. The situation is likely to worsen before there is any improvement.

As demonstrated by the uprisings in Basra, Iraqis are protesting against the depletion of natural resources and demanding basic services from the government. Environmental degradation feeds into social insecurity, which in turn has the potential to feed into social conflict and instability. The government is trying to address such issues with a tentative environmental policy, but the prospects for further conflict and environmental disaster remain compelling. Unstoppable climate change is exacerbating the already complicated water politics that Iraq faces. The snowball effect across Iraq, and the region, is a serious policy challenge.

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## **It's Time for Hong Kong to Get Real**

Rupert Hodder

August 7, 2019

**A big-bang approach to integration is needed, but too many Hongkongers prefer the old, young and dispossessed to suffer for another 28 years.**

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It is easy to sympathize with anxieties over the extradition bill and worsening living standards that prompted the current eruption of protests in Hong Kong. But many people are talking and behaving as if the territory will not be fully integrated with mainland China by 2047. This is fanciful. The question of who controls Hong Kong today was answered long before any of us were born. In these circumstances, sympathy for Hongkongers is no substitute for a good dose of reality, and sentimentality is likely to be dangerous.

### **The Last British Governor of Hong Kong**

The present troubles are rooted in the snake oil peddled before 1997 by what is now, very largely, an English Conservative Party that was then in office. Like all British governments, they

scattered appointments about like golden corn to clucking hens.

Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong before the end of the British administration, was a parochial politician for one of the most parochial constituencies in England: Bath. He was no statesman. But he was good at presenting arguments clearly — and himself as thoughtful, intelligent, intellectual, self-deprecating and wise — irrespective of the truth. Patten ran in a successful general election for the Conservatives in 1992, though he lost his own seat in the UK Parliament. For this, he was rewarded and compensated with Hong Kong.

Once there, his thinking didn't change. He took the view that the Beijing leadership — responsible for the well-being of 1.16 billion people at the time and for lifting hundreds of millions from poverty — ought to make exceptions for an Englishman who still had his mind on home and what it would think of him after the handover of Hong Kong to Chinese authorities. Patten created the impression that he and the British cared about Hong Kong, and that Hongkongers (just like the good people of Bath) would control their own destiny through local democratic mechanisms that he would introduce. He advertised himself and his reforms shamelessly. It was an exhibition in self-delusion and sentimentality only now matched by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's desire for Brexit, no ifs, no buts.

True, Patten was dealt a poor hand. Although the colonial administration could be effective when its military-style simplicity and self-imposed limitations were at their best, Hong Kong never had good government, let alone democracy. The majority of people had always lived in cramped accommodation as they do today, struggling to make ends meet through work, work, work and still more work. There was corruption in the administration, in

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the universities, in the judiciary and in business. The police worked hand in glove with gangsters. Everyone from the poorest immigrant to the highest colonial officer had to pay their way somehow.

Those insulated by money or a passport to another world might have found life in Hong Kong to be an “experience,” exciting and even romantic. For the rest, it was a grubby, dog-eat-dog existence. But Patten made a bad situation worse by foisting on it the democratic pretensions of an English market town.

Consequently, Hong Kong was left with no tradition of good government and no pool of committed and effective public servants. There was just a collection of tycoons and merchants, intellectuals and professionals, only some of whom might conceivably oversee Hong Kong’s gradual integration with China. The field was narrowed further after many of them — hooing and cooing at the world in what D.H. Lawrence called an “Oxford voice” or, worse still, a “would-be Oxford voice” — wrapped themselves in Patten’s democratic cloak. They were the ones upholding democracy and defending the people’s “unique” way of life.

So, don’t blame them if they were incompetent; if they were unable to agree on anything or do anything; if they failed the people through maladministration and petty bickering; if they had no imagination or foresight or just did not care; or if they spent their time grandstanding while others scratched out a living in tiny rooms amongst the skyscrapers.

Blame the outsiders instead. Blame the day-trippers who pack the shops, stuff their wheelies full of Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent, pour through the streets, clog up the trains and buses, fill the parking lots, push up prices and are generally “there” in too great a number. Blame the outsiders who are picking up jobs, buying up apartments, fouling up the

bureaucracy and public services and who, in just about every other sense, are behaving rather badly. Just blame the outsiders.

For the last two decades, these writhing factions have preferred to engage in whatever shabby tactic is needed to get one up on their opponents. Having grown up in this morass, it is unsurprising that today’s politicians and “influencers,” professional dissenters and career activists (many of whom are still only in their 20s and 30s) are just as uncompromisingly bitter, ambitious and moralistic as their mentors. If things should go badly wrong in Hong Kong, well that will only give these careerists the profile they need and another entry for their résumé. They might even be able to scoop up a stipend as a “scholar” at a prestigious university overseas and write books about the crisis they saw coming.

### **The Mainland**

The most critical problem confronting Hong Kong, and the source of the despondency eating away at its soul, is second-rate political leadership by Hongkongers, for Hongkongers. The solution lies just across the border. If absorbed by Shenzhen, Hongkongers would quickly see an improvement in their living standards. The high-quality government that the city so desperately needs would be forthcoming immediately, the political and physical constraints on the territory would be relieved, living spaces opened up, corruption expunged, businesses controlled and inequalities finally tackled as subventions are pushed toward those who need it most.

Beijing is certain to act positively because its long-term survival, just like that of any other leadership the world over, depends upon how well it looks after those it governs. Moreover, Beijing will want China to look good. And there is the simple fact that the Shenzhen government really does know what it’s doing.

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The solution might seem radical, even unthinkable in the present circumstances. Yet full integration by 2047 will take place come what may. I suspect it will be necessary sooner rather than later. At the moment, Hong Kong's government probably has neither the will to make such a proposal, nor the ability to win enough support for it after 22 years of misrule.

The most likely scenario is that Beijing will increase pressure on Hong Kong's tycoons to govern properly and look after its own people rather than just administer them. Equally likely, however, is that Hong Kong's youth, seduced by that Oxford voice breathing gently and languishingly on the back of their necks, will cling to the hope that they can unmix Hong Kong from mainland China. Beijing will then have no choice but to conclude that the slow path to integration is taking Hong Kong over a cliff. Unity will come sooner rather than later but in a different and extremely unhelpful atmosphere — one, it will be said, that all along could have been avoided.

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## **What the Jeffrey Epstein Case Means for #MeToo**

Ellis Cashmore

August 10, 2019

### **Amid the cases of Jeffrey Epstein and Bill Cosby, can the #MeToo movement keep up its momentum in exposing sexual predators?**

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**Editor's Note:** Jeffrey Epstein, a wealthy American financier, was found dead in his

prison cell in an apparent suicide on August 10, 2019. He had been awaiting trial on sex trafficking and conspiracy charges, to which he pleaded not guilty in July. This article by Ellis Cashmore, author of "Kardashian Kulture," was written prior to Epstein's death.

### **#MeToo and Jeffrey Epstein**

"I've known Jeff for 15 years. Terrific guy. He's a lot of fun to be with," Donald Trump told New York magazine in 2002. He was talking about Jeffrey Epstein, described as a "mysterious, Gatsbyesque figure ... with cash to burn, a fleet of airplanes, and a keen eye for the ladies."

Now, President Trump's buddy Jeff has emerged improbably as the raw material for a litmus test. The handling of allegations against him involving sex offenses against young women under the age of consent has raised suspicions of political cronyism and excessive leniency, prompting many to wonder whether #MeToo is just another quirky cultural moment, or whether it has genuinely upended all the usual questions about men's historical rights and immunities. In an era in which gender has become a burning or at least smoldering issue, a case implicating the US president, his labor secretary and perhaps other as-to-yet undisclosed dignitaries promises to test the resilience of the #MeToo movement to its limits. Will the movement prevail, or will the patriarchal old guard restore business as usual?

Not yet two years since the revelations of Harvey Weinstein's profuse sexual maleficence and there are already doubts over whether #MeToo can maintain momentum. Dozens of cases involving public figures, many with the kind of status and influence that would have insulated them against scandal in the past, have been paraded in our media, leading many to assume a new era has arrived. After all,

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dozens, perhaps even hundreds of predatory men have been exposed, shamed and ruined. But actual prosecutions have been few.

But Weinstein apart, there hasn't yet been an accused to rival Epstein in terms of wealth — estimated by the Financial Times at more than \$500 million and his annual income over \$10 million — or political connections. Rolling Stone lists his powerful associates: Apart from Trump, Epstein is on good terms with Bill Clinton, Attorney General Bill Barr, former Harvard President Larry Summers, Ghislaine Maxwell, the daughter of the media mogul Robert Maxwell, and Britain's Prince Andrew.

Epstein stands accused of trafficking and sexually abusing dozens of underage girls at his homes in New York and Palm Beach, Florida, between 2002 and 2005. The latest case, which has been brought by the Manhattan US attorney's office, comes over a decade after a controversial plea deal in Miami that enabled Epstein to escape a potential federal indictment for sexually abusing dozens of girls between 1999 and 2007. He pleaded guilty in 2008 to state prostitution offenses. In July, he pleaded not guilty to the charges at an initial hearing, at which he was denied bail, the judge deciding Epstein's "alleged excessive attraction to sexual conduct with or in the presence of minor girls [that]... appears likely to be uncontrollable," designating him as a flight risk.

On one level, the trial will be about an individual with an unwholesome criminal appetite for young girls and a penchant to use his influence either to cover up his maleficence or minimize the fallout. On another level, it will be a major confrontation in the post-Weinstein culture war, a war that is being won by #MeToo advocates who have successfully persuaded hundreds of women — and some men — to come forward and name their abusers, even after many years.

Yet there is still a lingering suspicion that the Epstein trial could be different. Will a man who has sedulously cultivated friendly associations with the rich and powerful and, for years, staved off attempts to incarcerate him, finally be brought to book? Or will he feature in a show trial, an exhibition designed to satisfy public opinion rather than ensure justice?

Those who believe #MeToo is an unstoppable force, much like the River Alpheus that coursed through King Augeus' putrid stables that hadn't been cleaned for 30 years. If the #MeToo movement is still flowing with fury, Epstein will face a punitive prison sentence, the maximum being 45 years, according to CNN.

### **The Case of Bill Cosby**

It's a plausible argument in favor of #MeToo's effectiveness. Consider the case of Bill Cosby, like Epstein, a well-heeled figure with influential friends and, in his case, an A-list celebrity presence. Once one of the most popular comedy actors in the world, Cosby was charged with sexual assault and, in 2017, went to trial. It resulted in a hung jury and declared a mistrial. Cosby walked. Remember: This was before the Weinstein case broke.

The retrial was conducted in the aftermath of the Weinstein scandal and resulted in Cosby's conviction. He is currently serving a three-to-10-year prison sentence and is presently appealing the conviction. The cultural shift inducted by the scope of the Weinstein allegations was crucial in determining the different outcomes. In the #MeToo era, jurors are less likely to defer to traditional forms of authority or uncritically accept the testimonies of powerful men.

There are a few differences worth noting, though. While Cosby was comparably rich, better known and had several friends in high places, he couldn't boast the interconnected



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circles of contacts in international politics, global finance, philanthropy and academia. And, of course, Cosby is African-American. Epstein is white — a factor that may, or may not, be significant. One of the consequences of #MeToo is that it has challenged everyone to criticize historical assumptions, not just about men's *droit du seigneur*, but about an erroneous white moral superiority.

Doubters are waiting for #MeToo to run out of steam. A favorable verdict for Epstein will be a reliable indication that they're right. But can he possibly get a light sentence? It would be extraordinary, though not impossible. Epstein has not helped his own case with his acknowledgment that he does lust after women, even after pleading guilty in 2008 to state charges of soliciting prostitution; nor by his astonishing claim that his sexual behavior was not merely motivated by carnality. In a plan he might have lifted from "The Boys From Brazil," he apparently wanted to impregnate up to 20 women at a time in order to enrich the human race with his genes, according to The New York Times.

How the association with Trump plays out is anybody's guess. Previously, the 45th president of the United States was effusive about Epstein: "He's a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side. No doubt about it — Jeffrey enjoys his social life." This now seems sickening, and Trump may yet be forced to explain his tribute, even if it was long ago.

There is a point in any cultural movement's life where you want to stop the clock and examine what is happening here and think about what comes next. This is that point. #MeToo has transfigured the landscape, changing not only attitudes and perspectives, but entire institutions and the behavior of people who operate those institutions. Its

effects radiate through societies, almost everywhere in the world.

The question remains about what comes next. Much turns on the Epstein case. Here we have an overprivileged white male who appears to have indulged his taste for underage women with relative impunity. He has been able to do so, we learn, not just because he is a man who happens to be white and wealthy, but because he has the best kind of friends — ones that can grant favors.

If he succeeds in securing a softish verdict, it will remind us that, for all the advances initiated by #MeToo, conservative forces can overpower anything and keep the status quo intact. If he receives the punishment the available evidence suggests he should, #MeToo will gain fresh impetus and restore the belief that genuine change has happened and will continue to happen.

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## **What Lies Behind India's Bold Bet on Kashmir?**

Atul Singh & Manu Sharma

August 10, 2019

**A mix of political opportunism and aggressive strategy have led India to concentrate power in New Delhi, winning over Ladakh and Jammu while upsetting Kashmir and Pakistan.**

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On August 5, the press around the world noted that India had ended special status for Jammu and Kashmir. The media in the Muslim world

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such as Dawn and Al Jazeera shone the light only on Kashmir. So did the BBC and The New York Times. This is understandable. Given that India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers, Deutsche Welle has rightly called the conflict over Kashmir the most dangerous in the world.

Yet it makes sense to take a deep breath and examine key facts to make sense of what is going on. Many journalists forget that there is no state in India named Kashmir. The state of Jammu and Kashmir includes three distinct regions: Buddhist Ladakh, Hindu Jammu and Muslim Kashmir. These comprise 62.3%, 22.7% and 15% of the area of the state. This means that Kashmir is merely 15% of the total area of the state. The tables are turned when it comes to demographics. Kashmir is most populous, comprising 53.9% of the state population with Jammu forming 43.7% and Ladakh a mere 2.3% share.

The statistics above reveal an important point that the Indian, Pakistani and international media almost invariably miss. Kashmir is just one of the three regions of a highly diverse state. Conflating Ladakh and Jammu with Kashmir is sloppy, inexact and misleading. So, why do most journalists do it? Ignorance rather than ill will is the most probable answer.

### **The Roots of Conflict**

Like many a political entity, the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir is a historical accident. During the dying days of the Mughal Empire, the revolting Sikhs established their own short-lived empire. They first conquered Jammu and then expanded to Kashmir. Starting in 1834, Zorawar Singh Kahluria, the Dogra general of the Sikhs, led audacious campaigns in high altitude to conquer Buddhist Ladakh and Shia Baltistan. In 1841, Kahluria ended up with a lance in his chest when he attempted to conquer western Tibet, but the Dogras now

controlled a swathe of territory, which is currently shared between India, Pakistan and China.

In the 1840s, the Sikh Empire disintegrated. The Dogras led by Gulab Singh seized their chance. In 1846, the Sikhs and the British came to recognize Dogra sovereignty and they became one of the 584 princely states of British India. Singh and his progeny ruled over a Muslim-majority kingdom while paying obeisance to the British. Hari Singh, the last Dogra ruler, was portly, extravagant and worthless. This former page boy to Lord Curzon was blackmailed by a Parisian prostitute for a princely sum of £300,000 in 1921, or \$16 million in today's terms. Needless to say, such debauchery did not enamor Singh to his subjects.

While most royal families joined newly independent India or Pakistan, Hari Singh had illusions and delusions of grandeur. He wanted to rule a Himalayan Switzerland. Pakistan saw Muslim-majority Kashmir as a natural part of its nation-building project and dispatched Pashtun tribesmen to wrest it. In a panic, the Dogra ruler signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947, and Indian troops landed in Srinagar. Even as Indian troops were pushing back Pashtun tribesmen, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, took the matter to the United Nations on January 1, 1948.

Nearly four months later, the UN Security Council called for a plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir. First, Pakistan was supposed to withdraw Pashtun tribesmen and its nationals. Second, India would then reduce its forces "progressively to the minimum strength required for the support of the civil power in the maintenance of law and order." Then, there would be a plebiscite that would decide where the state would go. The resolution remains stillborn till this date because neither party has followed it.

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Instead of troops decreasing in Kashmir as per the resolution, they have only increased over the years. The reason is simple: Neither Pakistan nor India trust each other. Besides, for each of them, the Kashmir Valley is an essential part of its nation-building project. For Pakistan, Muslim-majority Kashmir must be a part of its territory. For multicultural India, Kashmir as a part of its nation proves this is home to diverse communities who are all part of an exquisite mosaic. Kashmir is an existential issue that is tied to the very identity of both nations.

Since independence, India and Pakistan have clashed repeatedly over Kashmir. The first war began in October 1947 and ended in January 1949. It led to the de facto division of the region along the so-called Line of Control (LoC), the unofficial borderline that has lasted until today. The two countries fought two full-scale wars in 1965 and 1971. The second of the wars led to the creation of Bangladesh. They also clashed over Siachen and Kargil in 1985 and 1999 respectively. There have been numerous other occasions when tensions have run high.

Today, the former Dogra state of Jammu and Kashmir is divided between India, Pakistan and China. Pakistan controls the northern special province of Gilgit-Baltistan and the sickle-shaped Azad Kashmir sub-region since 1949. It is well recorded that Pakistan with its tradition of military dictatorships has gradually changed the demography of both these regions. It has also ceded Shaksgam Valley to China in 1963 in an effort to seal an alliance with the Middle Kingdom in the aftermath of the 1962 Indo-China War.

After its resounding victory in 1962, China took control of Aksai Chin from India. Until then, this had been a part of Ladakh. Culturally, this part of India had deep relations with Tibet for centuries. China first invaded Tibet in 1950 and the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959. In the dispute over the state of Jammu and Kashmir,

China remains an oft-forgotten but integral member of a messy ménage à trois.

### **Ladakh, Jammu, Kashmir and India**

India's policy on the state of Jammu and Kashmir is a lot more complex than the Indian, Pakistani or foreign press make it out to be. In the early days, there were close relations between Sheikh Abdullah, the Kashmiri leader campaigning against Dogra autocratic rule, and Nehru. Once the last Dogra ruler acceded to India, Abdullah took over as the elected leader of the state. His relations with Nehru soured soon.

Part of the reason was a visit by Adlai Stevenson, who had just lost the presidential election to Dwight Eisenhower. This Democrat met Abdullah twice and Indians suspected him of instigating Kashmiri independence. A newspaper reported that the US would give Kashmir a loan of \$15 million, at least 5,000 American families would stay in hotels or houseboats, Americans would buy Kashmiri crafts and help to electrify all villages within three years. Like Hari Singh before him, Abdullah was supposedly swayed by visions of being the big boss of the Switzerland of the Himalayas. As per rumors, he was planning to declare independence on August 21, 1953, the auspicious day of Eid. Instead, Abdullah was arrested on August 8 and Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed took charge.

In 1949, Nehru directed the drafters of the Constitution of India to give the state of Jammu and Kashmir special autonomy. They drafted Article 370 to govern India's relations with the state. Many declare that this provision is the basis of the state's entry into India. In fact, this article was in Part XXI titled, "Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions." Louise Tillin maintains that "Article 370 was a temporary expediency designed to govern the

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state's relations with India before the military conflict over its status could be resolved."

Right from the outset, this article proved controversial. People in Jammu, Ladakh and the rest of the country bitterly opposed Article 370 while Kashmiris passionately supported it. The article allowed the state to have a separate constitution, a state flag and administrative autonomy. Only defense, foreign affairs and communications were to remain in New Delhi's hands. A constituent assembly was elected in 1951 and dissolved in 1956 that drafted a separate constitution for Jammu and Kashmir, a privilege not allowed to any other Indian state.

Even as Nehru threw Abdullah into jail, his government imposed only part of the constitution in Jammu and Kashmir. In particular, Nehru's government issued Article 35A into the constitution under a presidential order under Article 370. Article 35A gave the state government of Jammu and Kashmir the power to decide who can purchase land, vote, contest elections, get government employment, and avail educational or health care benefits. They decided to give these rights only to permanent residents of the state.

Kashmiris have feared that India would emulate Pakistan and change its demography. They were terrified of losing the demographic advantage in the state. So, they defined permanent residency very restrictively. Hindus and Sikhs who immigrated from modern-day Pakistan during or after the partition of 1947 were denied permanent residency and still do not have the right to vote in state elections. Women who married men from another state no longer qualified as permanent residents. Nor do their children.

Over the years, India whittled down provisions of Article 370, but Jammu and Kashmir's politicians retained more power than their counterparts in other states. Yet the state

remained restive. Over the decades, many hoist the Pakistani flag, sing its anthem and, in recent years, wear its cricket jersey. In 2007, a poll found that 87% Kashmiris wanted independence while 90% Jammuites wanted to stay in India.

There is an argument to be made that New Delhi has erred egregiously in dealing with Kashmiris. In 1987, Rajiv Gandhi, Nehru's grandson, reportedly rigged the elections a bit too blatantly in favor of Farooq Abdullah, Sheikh Abdullah's son. The losers of that election formed the All Party Hurriyat Conference, which has been campaigning for self-determination since. More importantly, most analysts blame Gandhi's decision for the insurgency that broke out in 1989 and has lasted ever since.

For the last 30 years, India has thrown money and men to solve the problem. New Delhi gives Jammu and Kashmir 14,225 rupees (\$200) per capita as a central grant, as compared to the national average of 3,681 rupees (\$52). Most of this money has ended up in the pockets of corrupt dynasties of whom the Abdullahs are said to take pole position. Yet some of it certainly goes to Kashmiris who enjoy subsidized food, fuel and other benefits denied to other Indians. New Delhi hopes it can bribe them into being loyal Indians. At the same time, army, paramilitary and police swarm all over the tiny Kashmir Valley to keep insurgency in check.

The United Nations has concluded that both Indian and Pakistani forces have committed human rights violations on both sides of the border. Violations on the Indian side have been covered widely in The New York Times, Al Jazeera and other news organizations. What has not been covered is how the oppressed have turned oppressors. Furious at the loyalty of Jammuites and Ladakhis to India, Kashmiris have systematically denied them money,

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marginalized them politically and neglected their infrastructure. They have also engaged in the ethnic cleansing of the minority Kashmiri Pandits. In 2016, the BBC reported that between 3,000 to 5,000 Pandits were left in Kashmir Valley, “a far cry from the 300,000 who used to live there.”

The suffering of Buddhist Ladakhis has practically gone unchronicled. These simple mountain folk are kindred spirits to Tibetans. They have similar language, customs, cuisine, culture and way of life to the people of the Dalai Lama. Along with Sikkim, Ladakh is one of the two Buddhist enclaves left in the land of the Buddha. Terrified of what China has done to their brethren and what the Taliban did to Bamiyan, Ladakhis have yearned for protection from New Delhi for decades but have been treated like stepchildren. In India’s rambunctious democracy, they have been too few in number to swing national elections and hence have been largely ignored.

In one of India’s great parliamentary performances that has gone utterly unreported in the international press, Jamyang Namgyal, the 34-year-old MP representing Ladakh, welcomed the measure to repeal Article 370. His reasoning was simple: Kashmiris have discriminated against Ladakhis on all fronts. They force Ladakhis to learn Urdu. Their own language is not taught in schools. Urdu is a glorious language but is alien to Ladakhis and they find its Persian script daunting. When Ladakhis struggle in Urdu, Kashmiris mock them as unintelligent child-like people. When it comes to schools, hospitals, roads, drinking water or jobs, Ladakhis come last. Just as many Kashmiris want independence from India, most Ladakhis want freedom from Kashmir.

### **Why has India Scrapped Article 370?**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was reelected earlier this year. His Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) promised unambiguously that it would remove Article 370. It has done so for decades. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the founder of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh — the first avatar of the BJP — died in a Kashmiri prison. Mukherjee had gone to Jammu and Kashmir to protest a law that prohibited Indian citizens from settling within the state and mandated that they carry visitor permits. Sheikh Abdullah arrested Mukherjee and, to this day, many suspect Nehru and Abdullah plotted his death. The fact that Nehru did not order an independent inquiry into Mukherjee’s death feeds this suspicion.

For the BJP, removing Article 370 has long been a matter of faith. In contrast, the Congress manifesto held that dialogue was the only way forward. The party declared that it would reduce the number of security forces in Kashmir Valley, eschew muscular militarism, look for an innovative federal solution and hold talks with the people of Jammu and Kashmir without any preconditions. Prima facie, the Congress party’s promises seem eminently reasonable, but it has long had a history of flip-flopping on Kashmir. It instituted Article 370 but then whittled it down. The Nehru dynasty flirted with the Abdullah clan but jilted them repeatedly. And many suspected Rahul Gandhi, the half-Italian fifth-generation scion of the Nehru clan, was sounding conciliatory to win seats in Kashmir and secure the Muslim vote.

Modi and Amit Shah, the current home minister, had no option but to deliver on one of their big promises. In January, the authors argued on Fair Observer that the Modi government’s economic policies were failing. Investment, consumption and employment were all plummeting. In such a scenario, Modi and Shah needed to deliver on an issue Indians care deeply about. Kashmir was the obvious choice.

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External factors may have precipitated this decision. First, US President Donald Trump offered to mediate in the dispute over Kashmir when Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Washington, DC. As per the Shimla Agreement signed in 1972, India returned 90,000 prisoners of war and Pakistan agreed that Kashmir was henceforth a bilateral decision. Since then, Pakistan has tried to internationalize the Kashmir issue while India treats it as an internal matter. Trump's offer might have made India act speedily to snuff out the candle of any mediation offer.

Second, the US is in talks with the Taliban to pull out of Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union left Afghanistan and the Taliban took over, Pashtun tribesmen started showing up in Kashmir. Calling themselves mujahideen, they unleashed mayhem in the state. It was only the US-led intervention in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks that kept the Pashtuns fighting at home instead of coming over to Kashmir. With the Americans gone, India has decided to tighten its grip on Kashmir.

Third, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Indian foreign minister, is a retired diplomat and an astute strategist. According to sources within the government, he estimated the iron was hot enough to strike. India's timing could not be better. The US is busy with China and Iran as well as internal turmoil. China is targeting Uighurs in Xinjiang and crushing protests in Hong Kong. Pakistan has been begging both China and the International Monetary Fund for money. Besides, India has purchased S400 missiles from Russia for \$5.43 billion, Rafael jets from France for \$8.9 billion and signed contracts for military equipment from the US for \$17 billion. As a result, no major power is likely to oppose Indian action on Kashmir.

## **What Happens Now?**

Modi has finally slayed the ghost of Nehru. Many Indians have blamed Nehru for the Kashmir problem and defeat against China. Nehru inaugurated a policy that focused on taking the moral high ground, not Himalayan heights. He rushed to the UN even when India had an overwhelming military advantage. Modi has already engaged in cross-border airstrikes earlier this year. He has stiffened India's spine and inaugurated a new era of muscular militarism.

For the first time, a state — the only one with a separate constitution — has been demoted to a union territory. Revoking Article 370 will allow Indians from other parts of the country to settle not only in Jammu and Kashmir but also in Ladakh. The demographic advantage of Kashmiri Muslims will decrease. In the short run, protests, disturbances and violence will increase. On August 9, Friday prayers were followed by an outpouring of emotion and mass demonstrations that led to Indian troops firing tear gas. Kashmiris are seething with rage with many promising to "pick up a gun." India has moved 38,000 extra security forces in anticipation, locked up key leaders and blocked communications with the outside world. The stage is set for a rather tense Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival that follows the hajj pilgrimage.

While discontent simmers in Kashmir, jubilation reigns in Jammu and Ladakh. The union territory of Jammu will certainly see immigrants from the rest of India pour in. Home to the hugely popular pilgrimage site of Vaishno Devi, Jammu has long been a destination for millions of Indians. Now, those who settle there will have full voting rights in the new union territory. If Kashmir remains violent while Jammu's economy sees an uptick, then Jammu and Kashmir could be bifurcated into two different entities.

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Ladakh is the real winner of this reorganization. Ladakhis see the removal of Article 370 and the achievement of union territory status as liberation. Ladakh will emerge as the preeminent Buddhist enclave of India. Tibetan refugees from the rest of the country and Indians seeking cleaner air or cooler climes will make it their home. A greater number of tourists, both Indian and foreign, will visit this barren but beautiful region. The fact that Ladakh is no longer within the map of Jammu and Kashmir will take away the fear factor of visiting the area. The new union territory will soon get visitors of another kind. Soldiers and engineers will start work in Ladakh as New Delhi builds more military and economic infrastructure in this remote but strategic region.

Some analysts assert that the Indian judiciary might block the revocation of Article 370. That is almost impossible. The Modi government has relied on some rather clever legal advice to push this measure through. In the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's Parliament, 125 MPs voted to remove Article 370 while 61 wanted to retain it. In the Lok Sabha, the lower house, the majority was overwhelming with 370 voting for the Modi government's motion with only 70 opposing it. The government had the two-thirds majority required for a constitutional amendment in both houses even though this measure only required a simple, not special majority. In any democracy, judges keep their eyes on the electorate too and the Indian judiciary is not in a position to challenge parliamentary sovereignty or go against national fervor.

Like Kashmir, the Congress party has lost out too. Many of its leaders have broken ranks with Rahul Gandhi and Shashi Tharoor to support Modi. The chief whip of the Congress in the upper house of the parliament resigned in protest. Jyotiraditya Scindia, an influential

political scion, has surprisingly supported Modi as have rustic socialists like Janardhan Dwivedi. This dynastic party is finally seeing dissension and will weaken further as a result.

Even as India has tightened the screws on Kashmir, Pakistan has turned apoplectic. It has rushed to the United Nations, expelled the Indian ambassador and broken off trade relations. Prime Minister Khan has called Indian action illegal and painted the specter of ethnic cleansing of fellow Muslims. Pakistani politicians have set out visions of fire and brimstone. They compare Kashmir to Palestine and many promise to fight to the bitter nuclear end. In this outpouring of competitive jingoism, emotions are running riot.

For decades now, Pakistan has been turning to Islamic extremism. It is home to many terrorist groups. Since the 1980s, it has followed a policy of bleeding India with a thousand cuts. It involves asymmetric warfare through proxy terrorist or insurgent groups who attack Indian security forces, sensitive locations and civilian populations. There are charismatic clerics who regularly preach the gospel of jihad. Comments on Facebook and Twitter have been incendiary. People are shouting slogans on the street. Pakistan feels it has lost face and is itching to strike back.

Christophe Jaffrelot, a French political scientist, says there is no risk of a military operation at the moment. The authors disagree. Conflict is likely.

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## **Kashmir Reaches a New and Dangerous Level**

Nadeem Kazmi

August 19, 2019

**Kashmir, one of the world's most volatile regions, faces a new and dangerous situation. The move by the Modi government could have unintended consequences.**

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In a regional environment where the slightest miscalculated move on one side can trigger an equally miscalculated reaction from the other, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's actions on August 5 over Jammu and Kashmir are simply bizarre.

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution had effectively given semi-autonomous status to

Jammu and Kashmir in the aftermath of India's partition in 1947. Modi's abrogation of this essential constitutional principle, upon which regional peace (of a kind) has relied since partition, illustrates what in both Hindi and Urdu is commonly described as a zidd, or obstinate posturing. This zidd is maintained by both India and Pakistan at the expense of their own populations, and at the expense of Kashmiris. While it might be tempting to view Modi's unilateralism as just a facet of his populist politics, at the heart of it he is simply acting in accordance with the demands of the zidd.

### **Kashmir Is More Than a Pawn**

Kashmir is more than just a pawn that is subject to the power play of two regional rivals, both of whom are equipped with nuclear arsenals ready to go at a moment's notice. It is also a sword of Damocles, wittingly hung by each other's successive administrations over the heads of both countries, to use whenever the occasion desires. In the middle of the muddle is Kashmir, a land of outstanding natural beauty and home to a people of indefatigable patience and endurance.

Modi's gamble, "temporarily" moving all decision-making to the central government in New Delhi, is the latest test of Kashmiri endurance. If his actions are partly due to frustrations over a lack of leadership in Kashmir, it still does not explain, or excuse, the continuation of draconian laws against Kashmiri civilians.

These measures, notably the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1990 and the Public Safety Act of 1978, are reinforced by a suppressive military presence, denial of basic freedoms and a blanket ban on access for both media and human rights groups. Although human rights violations in Kashmir — torture, disappearances, rape — have been well-



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documented, and despite a fairly damning UN report in 2018, there has been an absence of outrage from people other than Kashmiris themselves.

In the zidd scenario, it is usually Pakistan that is accused of having an obsession with India over Kashmir. But Modi's move, which follows hot on the heels of another disastrous adventure by him only a few months earlier, where he dispatched fighter jets into Pakistani territory in alleged hot pursuit of terrorists, indicates that India is perhaps equally as obsessed with Pakistan. That previous incident, which occurred in February, is now widely regarded as a debacle and Modi's first significant miscalculation as head of the world's largest democracy. It also gave Pakistan a rare opportunity to prove its own diplomatic mettle and up the ante in the zidd, when its forces downed an Indian fighter jet and then returned — amid much gloating — its pilot.

Whilst acknowledging Pakistan's vested interest in keeping India on its toes vis-à-vis Kashmir, these recent events are entirely relevant in what it tells us about Modi's own disregard for mutually accepted standards of behavior according to international law and India's own constitution. Article 51 of that constitution commits him "to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations ... and, encourage settlement of international disputes by arbitration." His current posture is nothing less than an egotistical affront to India's honor.

Pakistan's posture, on the other hand, has been progressive and relatively consistent. This is a testament to Prime Minister Imran Khan's determination to change the way Pakistan does business, at home and abroad. His emphasis on finding "political and legal" solutions rather than military ones reflects a wider change of attitude in Pakistan's political culture.

## **Involving the UN**

In this context, it makes sense for Pakistan to reiterate its call, perhaps naive but again consistent, for UN intervention. That might be more idealism than realpolitik, and relate more to Pakistan's longer-term aims, but it reveals how India's internal shift has broader, external implications. Pakistan's diplomatic maneuvering, therefore, should not be dismissed entirely.

In 2003, Prince Hassan of Jordan described the United Nations as "a necessary institution that plays a constructive role in post-conflict arenas." If Pakistan is genuine about finding a resolution through the UN, it too must show meaningful movement toward effectively dealing with the problem of Islamist militancy in Kashmir and within its own borders.

Resolution 39 (1948) gives the UN authority to "investigate any dispute or any situation which might, by its continuance, endanger the maintenance of international peace and security." Resolution 38 (1948) calls on both India and Pakistan to refrain "from doing ... or permitting any acts which might aggravate the situation."

If the UN considers itself relevant to the South Asian quagmire, it should seek to play a preventive role as a historical mediator. Modi's incursion into Pakistani territory earlier this year and the subsequent abrogation of Article 370 arguably aggravate "the situation," which in turn should warrant attention.

UN involvement could also help identify a united and effective leadership among Kashmiris, both within the region and among the diaspora. Such an outcome — an empowered Kashmiri civic leadership that is finally taken seriously by the international community in the same way, perhaps, as the Kurds are today — would prevent both sides of the belligerent divide to behave differently.

In the meantime, Modi's ziddi moves over Kashmir, illustrating his personal failure to

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address both what is going on in Kashmir and how to handle the relationship with Pakistan, may be a taste of similar things to come. Choosing to so pertinaciously rattle the delicate web of bilateral understanding in the world's hottest hotspot takes the zidd to a new and dangerous level, and can only increase the possibility of unintended consequences.

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## **The Unabated Bombardment of Idlib in Syria**

Sophia Akram  
August 22, 2019

**Syria is now enduring its ninth year of war, marred throughout by some of the most egregious harms.**

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Over the last few weeks, the northwestern area of Idlib province in Syria has come under constant bombardment from regime forces and its allies. With a disturbing civilian casualty count mounting and a nation in upheaval after years of civil war, waning global attention is causing concern that one of the biggest emergencies in recent history could be bearing one of the worst crises of the century.

On August 17, escalation in the offensive on Idlib left seven people in one family dead, including six children, as an air raid hit their home in a village in the south of the

governorate. The casualties were recorded a day after 13 other people were killed in a displacement camp in the village of al-Haas and following the displacement of hundreds and thousands of civilians as Syrian forces have advanced on the last opposition stronghold in the country.

The UN has said at least 400,000 people have been uprooted, some for the fourth or fifth time, as a military campaign — reportedly assisted by Russian forces — has continued “unabated” since late April, as one spokesperson for the multilateral body put it. Turkish media say the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) could rise to 1 million if operations expand.

The current humanitarian decline in the province has occurred despite a ceasefire being declared at the recent Astana peace talks as well as past efforts for Idlib to become a de-escalation zone. The regime blamed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaeda affiliated group that controls Idlib, for not fully complying with the ceasefire and for carrying out attacks on civilian objects. Human rights groups say the Syrian regime and its allies have been responsible for killing a least 781 civilians, including 208 children, in raids between April 26 and July 27. By August 5, the ceasefire was declared officially over.

Stark warnings have been ushered by the United Nations, with the situation triggering “total panic.” Mark Lowcock, the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, has warned that it could create the “worst humanitarian disaster” of the century.

Consider that Idlib has, over the last few years, acted as a reception area for civilians fleeing government advances elsewhere, and without other opposition-held territories to flee to, most displacement has been contained

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within the province, with a proportion fleeing northward to Aleppo.

While horror unfolds under the rain of mortar and fire, already densely-populated areas of Idlib province suffer overcrowding, impacting the humanitarian situation and precarity among displaced communities. Strained resources also mean more support is needed from aid agencies, although the sector concedes that aid alone is not a sustainable solution. At the same time, child labor among displaced communities is now becoming more prevalent, lending concern that children are being exposed to abuse and exploitation.

On August 22, the Syrian government announced it was opening a “humanitarian corridor” to allow civilians to leave Idlib province and the neighboring Hama. Yet without the current offensive relenting, the humanitarian situation is only expected to worsen, while overall in Syria some 5 million people remain in acute need. Furthermore, those who have returned from cross-border displacement have been subject to abuse and persecution by the regime, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). The organization has also documented that at least 426 IDPs returning to regime-controlled areas have been detained, including 13 children — 284 of whom were forcibly disappeared.

With Idlib in crisis, the international response has been wanting. In July, UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet aired frustration at the lack of acknowledgment from the international community, poignantly saying: “Airstrikes kill and maim significant numbers of civilians several times a week, and the response seems to be a collective shrug.” Othman Mokbel, chief executive of Syria Relief, recently noted in an opinion piece for The Independent that the country no longer forms part of the national conversation anymore and

much of the British public are not even aware there is still a conflict there.

### **A Safe Zone in Syria**

Meanwhile, the US and Turkey agreed on August 7 to put in place a 32-kilometer-deep safe zone in northern Syria, something that has been in Turkish sights for a while now. This is in addition to a “peace corridor” running between the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border in order to help the safe passage of Syrian refugees in Turkey back into Syria as well as facilitating securitization needs.

However, with the US using the People’s Protection Units (YPG) — which Turkey sees as a terrorist group — as a proxy to fight Islamic State militants in the region, there remain sticking points in the deal. In particular, Ankara wants to clear the area of forces from the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and remove administrative autonomy in any of the Kurdish-run towns. With reference to a previously stalled deal over the northern city of Manbij, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has made it clear Turkey was not prepared to wait this time.

There is also the fact that, several years ago, there were serious question marks over the establishment of a safe zone and how secure it might be for civilians.

Syria is now enduring its ninth year of war, marred throughout by some of the most egregious harms — barrel bombs, disappearances, chemical weapons and conscription — while proxies, non-state actors and parties to the conflict compete for their own interests, convoluting the theater of war. Now, the worst could be yet to come while the world fails to register the devastation.

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## **The Puerto Rico Crisis: A Reflection of a Flawed US Democracy**

Carlos Figueroa

August 27, 2019

**The recent resignation of Governor Rosselló should be understood within the larger framework of a flawed US democratic state that continues its economic stranglehold over Puerto Rico.**

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On August 2, Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló of the New Progressive Party (NPP) — nominally affiliated with the Democrats, although once linked to the Republicans under Governor Luis Ferré Aguayo — finally resigned. The decision came after weeks of mass protests over the island's fiscal instability, alleged political corruption and most recent scandalous chats on the Telegram messaging app.

His resignation will go down as one of the most important in Puerto Rico's political history because it signified a victory for the island's varied and creative activist community. Even some Puerto Rican celebrities, including singer-songwriter Ricky Martin and actor Benicio Del Toro, joined the mass protests against Rosselló and his administration.

Yet Puerto Rico's problems are closely aligned to its colonial relationship with a

supposed US democratic state. In 1950-52, the US established the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico/Free Associated State of Puerto Rico. Since this political-constitutional arrangement, many US citizens in Puerto Rico expected to fare much better than its Caribbean neighbors that would later experience their own postcolonial and political-economic transitions. These expectations for a thriving social, political and economic life were based on Puerto Rico's relative autonomy under an expansive US federal constitutional system or what others may call American imperialism that dates back to 1898.

Puerto Rico was supposed to thrive under the protection of the US Constitution and its underlying liberal democratic ethos. However, the reality has been that Puerto Rico's autonomy is more than ever before inextricably captured by the colonial tentacles of a US democratic system recently deemed dysfunctional or flawed.

In other words, Puerto Rico's social and political problems are rooted in the territorial government's dependency on the economic policies of the US federal government. These economic ties between the US and Puerto Rico are reflected in the more recent corrupt politics on the island and the befallen Governor Rosselló, as well as the subsequent politics of succession to power that followed his resignation.

### **Dependent Puerto Rico**

Most people forget, or perhaps do not know, that Puerto Rico is not an independent country but rather an unincorporated territory under the plenary power of the US Congress. This fact alone should place doubts on the minds of those who maintain the position that the US is a democratic state. Nevertheless, all the major news outlets, some online sites, and even elected officials and well-intentioned political

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and social activists often treat Puerto Rico as a sovereign entity that is solely to blame for its social, political and economic problems.

There may be some truth to this claim, considering the recent revelations made public by the leaked Telegram chats surrounding Rosselló's regime. Still, as an unincorporated territory, and although considered "autonomous," Puerto Rico is under the absolute sovereign control of the US federal government for its financial and economic viability, which directly affects its political and social life.

Most recently, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), in its annual review of countries adhering to democratic values around the world, found US democracy to be flawed even without considering its vast overseas territorial possessions. The review shows that most Americans — this author would include those US citizens in Puerto Rico — have lost "confidence in the functioning of public institutions." Mistrust in US political institutions extends to not only Congress and President Donald Trump, but also to the federal agencies responsible for post-hurricane recovery efforts.

For example, between mid-September and early October 2017, the category 4 Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, which at that time was recovering from Hurricane Irma. As this author previously argued, the policy response of the Trump administration after Maria hit was wrongheaded, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) efforts were ineffective at the time. Yet these two major storms revealed much about the disorganized and corrupt nature of Puerto Rican politics, alongside the flawed US federal system as both inappropriately dealt with these national disasters.

## **Post-Hurricane Maria**

Post-Hurricane Maria brought out the best and the worst in the US and Puerto Rico. The politics of blame took center stage, especially on Twitter. US President Donald Trump stated that Governor Rosselló's administration was solely to blame for the lack of leadership in mismanaging, quite ineptly, the so-called humanitarian aid provided by both FEMA and, later, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), among others after both Hurricanes Irma and Maria. More recently, Trump tweeted that "Congress foolishly gave 92 Billion Dollars for hurricane relief, much of which was squandered away or wasted, never to be seen again ... much of their leadership is corrupt, & robbing the U.S. Government blind!"

Rosselló, in turn, claimed the federal government under Trump failed to uphold its constitutional and ethical responsibilities to US citizens in Puerto Rico. The governor expected the US government to allocate comparable resources similar to what it had already provided Texas and Florida after their own hurricane disasters, and not allow for questionable contracts to be handed out to inexperienced construction companies.

Both Trump and Rosselló were, nevertheless, complicit for allowing thousands of fellow US citizens in Puerto Rico to perish — as this author has previously stated — amid social scandals, political corruption and overall incompetence. This public blaming between two equally ineffective political administrations shows the deep-rooted colonial ties between Puerto Rico and the supposed US democratic government.

## **The US Jones Act of 1920**

Another example of a flawed US democracy is the enduring Jones Act (or Merchant Marine Act) of 1920. This is a federal law regulating maritime commerce in the US, including its non-contiguous and unincorporated territories

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such as Puerto Rico. This measure says that any goods shipped between US ports are supposed to be transported by US-built, owned and operated ships. Although President Trump temporarily waived these requirements several weeks after Hurricane Maria for supposed short-term relief, retaining and reapplying this law to the island's ports places long-term burdens on Puerto Rico's economy.

Even the conservative Cato Institute recognizes the antiquated and undemocratic nature of the Jones Act and its negative impact upon Puerto Rico's economy: "Puerto Rico's recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria has reinvigorated debate about a relatively unknown law that has hampered its recovery efforts and bogged down its economy. Since 1920, maritime commerce between Puerto Rico and the rest of the United States has been governed by the Jones Act, a law that mandates that vessels transporting goods domestically be U.S.-crewed, U.S.-flagged, U.S.-owned, and U.S.-built. While defenders of the law have argued that the Jones Act provides reliable shipping services from the mainland to Puerto Rico, critics have pointed out that such restrictions significantly raise the cost of domestic imports, placing an added burden on the already economically struggling island."

This law fundamentally serves as a stranglehold over Puerto Rico's economy in the long- and short-runs, leading to other undemocratic alternative approaches for dealing with present and future financial instabilities on the island. As Nelson A. Denis recently reported, two "University of Puerto Rico economists found that the Jones Act caused a \$17 billion loss to the island's economy from 1990 through 2010. Other studies have estimated the Jones Act's damage to Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Alaska to be \$2.8 billion to \$9.8 billion per year."

## **Congress Control**

In 2016, then-US President Barack Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), a measure responsible for "restructuring [the island's] debt, and [expediting] procedures for approving critical infrastructure projects" in Puerto Rico. Ironically, or perhaps euphemistically, the word *promesa* in Spanish means promise. In this case, the US federal government expected Puerto Rico to keep its promise of paying "back" its loans on time and with interest. Unfortunately, Rosselló's government defaulted on about \$2 million, exacerbating further the spiraling fiscal instability of the island.

Prior to these climate change-induced hurricane disasters, Puerto Rico had been in the midst of a long-time financial crisis (see the "Krueger Report" that pre-dates Rosselló's regime). This led the much-maligned Governor Rosselló to announce the privatization of the Commonwealth-owned Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), which is one of the largest public power suppliers in the US.

However, the federal Fiscal Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico established by PROMESA devised its own fiscal plan to deal with the crisis. The board's plan was vehemently opposed by the governor because it recommended "steep cuts in government spending and pensions." This has been a long-running dispute between the US territorial government and the US-controlled Fiscal Board. For instance, Rosselló, in May 2017, filed for what amounts to federal bankruptcy protection in order to "restructure about \$120 billion of debt and pension obligations," despite opposition within and outside his own party.

In April 2018, the Professors Self-Assembled in Solidarity Resistance (PAREs) group put out a

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clear statement against these types of top-down plans to dealing with the fiscal crisis impacting the island's political and social life. The statement read: "[The] Financial Oversight and Management Board, an unelected body pushing for the privatization of electricity and schools, increased costs of basic services, massive cuts in public education, pensions, vacation time, and other rights — all in order to pay bondholders a \$73 billion debt that was patently unpayable, illegal and illegitimate. The net result was to leave the majority of people in Puerto Rico without a hopeful future, and that was all before Hurricane Maria hit our shores."

There were other related protests after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, as well as debt crisis management struggles that have been ignored by the US mainstream media. For instance, the Puerto Rico Teachers Union had been fighting against the closure of hundreds of public schools and the privatization of education for years.

### **Governor Rosselló's Telegram Chats**

What turned the tide, where the beleaguered governor was forced to step down, was the leaked offensive Telegram chats that were made public by the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI) in Puerto Rico, an organization that should be recognized more often for its superb, independent, investigative reporting. CPI revealed almost 900 pages of vulgar email exchanges between high-ranking NPP members, including Rosselló himself showing misogynistic, homophobic and immoral statements about political opponents, the Puerto Rican LGBTQ+ community, and victims of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The mostly, if not exclusively, male-dominated Telegram chats also reveal how out of touch Rosselló's administration and the larger NPP have been with the various social

and political movements, such as the anti-harassment #MeToo collective. Rosselló's actions are similar to the kinds of insalubrious and hateful mocking President Trump has engaged in for years over social media.

As Rosselló stepped down in defeat, he appointed Pedro Pierluisi as secretary of state and thus next in line for the governorship. Pierluisi previously served as Puerto Rico's non-voting resident commissioner in the US Congress, among other positions for the NPP. His eventual swearing-in as the new governor also came under fire because of his potential conflicts of interest. He is currently employed with the law firm O'Neill & Borges (San Juan), which represents the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board.

Pierluisi's appointment was immediately challenged by the Puerto Rico Senate. At the forefront was Rosselló's rival, Senate President Thomas Rivera Schatz — acting president of the NPP and long-time party operative dating back to Governor Pedro Rosselló Gonzalez, Ricardo's father — although the House had approved the governor's decision. Rivera Schatz, who in the past expressed interest in the governorship, asked the Puerto Rico Supreme Court to intercede in this constitutional crisis, which it did, overturning the appointment on August 7 with a unanimous 9-0 vote. The Supreme Court declared the swearing-in of Pierluisi unconstitutional since he had not been confirmed by both chambers of the Puerto Rico legislature, as required by the island's constitution.

Subsequently, Puerto Rico Justice Secretary Wanda Vázquez — also of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party — was sworn in on August 7 as a replacement for both Rosselló and Pierluisi. She has become only the second woman to serve as governor in the island's history.

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Yet Vázquez is sitting under a cloud of suspicion as well because of her clashes with various feminist groups over women's rights, her own history of alleged corrupt activities, numerous fund mismanagements post-Hurricane Maria and her long-term strained relationship with Rivera Schatz. These rapid transitions are a consequence of the century-long colonial relationship between a supposed US democratic state and its pseudo-autonomous territory where the US Congress maintains economic sovereignty, leading to a never-ending cycle of corruption and political instability in Puerto Rico.

To be clear: This author is not suggesting that Rosselló and his ilk are not corrupt and incompetent, something they have repeatedly demonstrated over several years. Rather, that the larger and structural problems (especially the political and social ones) in Puerto Rico stem from the problematic constitutional arrangement and deep-rooted economic dependency the island has with the US despite its increased autonomy since 1952.

### **The Stranglehold Over Puerto Rico**

There are at least two reasons Puerto Rico's political problems persist. First, the so-called PROMESA Act of 2016, the anti-democratic austerity measure signed by Democratic President Barack Obama to oversee Puerto Rico's debt crisis, basically dictates what the US territorial government can and cannot do. Second, the 2017 post-Hurricane Maria devastation and lack-luster recovery efforts under Republican President Donald Trump and the equally complicit Governor Rosselló eventually resulted in at least 2,950 casualties, as per a George Washington University study, or more according to other reports.

Thus, the recent resignation of Governor Rosselló based on his corrupt and degenerate behavior — as exposed by the leaked Telegram

chats — should be understood within the larger framework of a flawed US democratic state that continues its economic stranglehold over Puerto Rico. This dual dependency must end for the sake of ever achieving any kind of real democratic future in either Puerto Rico or the US.

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