

Fair Observer

Monthly



February 2021

Fair Observer^o

Fair Observer Monthly



February 2021

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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GameStop: Putting Skin Back in the Game

Zachary Propert
February 2, 2021

The GameStop event should be the first manifestation of a new form of financial activism.

Unless you live completely off the grid, you have most likely heard something about the GameStop boom last week. For those unaware, a hedge fund, Melvin Capital, held very large short positions against GameStop, a brick-and-mortar gaming store whose stock has been falling steadily over the past decade due to the rise of e-commerce. An otherwise reasonable bet made a turn for the worst for Melvin as online investors, fueled largely by a sub-Reddit, led to a buying frenzy, leading GameStop's stock to rise from \$76.79/share on Monday, January, to \$347/share on the 27.

As a result, in the course of two days, Melvin faced bankruptcy and needed a larger hedge fund, Citadel, to bail it out. A major trading platform, Robinhood, restricted purchasing GameStop shares, in addition to a few others fueled by activity on Reddit, allowing traders only to sell their stocks — an effort that has led many to conclude that they were trying to push down the stock value. The stock did fall that day from \$347 to \$193/share; it is currently at \$135.

Such an action, however, is potentially illegal, as the stock exchange can only legally restrict the trading of particular stocks under very specific situations of fraud and material evidence. Of course, many people on the Robinhood platform have since filed a class-action lawsuit, and the results are forthcoming. Even more interesting is that Citadel also serves as Robinhood's main shareholder. Regardless of whether or not what happened on Reddit is (il)legal and should be

regulated, we witnessed an extreme event that has profound implications for the financial industry.

Of Swans and Turkeys

Many people are already referring to the GameStop situation as a black swan event. But can we really be surprised that people on social media were able to unite online in a manner that allowed them to manipulate the market, no matter how unexpected or monumental the move was? Shouldn't Melvin have considered certain classes of events that would threaten its positions and created a means of protecting itself should such a rare event occur? It had to have known the potential risks to its investments but didn't care enough to secure it in a classic turkey problem.

Regardless of whether or not this event qualifies as a black swan, Melvin clearly had an extremely fragile investment strategy unprepared to handle random, unexpected turns, as last week's events clearly demonstrated. Many who have taken the side of Melvin and Citadel have been calling for regulation to prevent amateur investors from acting in such a manner, even though many of them are the very same people who have been fighting the regulation of the financial sector since the 1970s — and largely succeeding.

So, what exactly does this entire episode teach us? Although the situation is still unfolding, we've already observed a decades-old pattern: The very people who manufacture fragility into the systems they oversee will be bailed out, forgiven and permitted to continue what they were doing all along. The people at Melvin were willing to make risky bets but did not want to have to face the consequences of their plan going awry — they did not want their skin in the game.

Instead, Melvin's savior intervened and seemingly had Robinhood halt trading to drive down the stock price and save their short bets. Is that really how a free market works? Wouldn't it be best in a free market environment to let those people who gambled so recklessly on certain positions that they bankrupted their entire company to go out of business?

These people are what Nassim Taleb would call “fragilistas” — those who manufacture fragility and never have to face the consequences if their decisions end up being disastrous, instead transferring the negative externalities onto the victims. We have witnessed this with the war on terror in general and in Iraq more specifically, with the 2007-08 financial crisis, and now the economic and public health crises emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the looming threat of climate catastrophe. The Melvin/GameStop situation is just the latest iteration.

Taking on the Fragilistas

None of these monumental mistakes would have happened on the scale they did if the perpetrators had skin in the game. In the case of Melvin, its skin was in the game without the hedge fund even realizing it — or if it did, without seeming to care.

Average investors now have a rather fascinating means of holding Wall Street accountable and redistributing wealth, albeit very modestly. They can and should find companies that have recklessly large short positions and unite to drive up those stocks in an effort to bring the money from the haves to the have nots like a real Robin Hood.

Big business, protected by every US administration since the 1970s, has been able to effectuate an enormous transfer of wealth from the American middle class and the poor to wealthy Americans and poor laborers abroad. The workers never had a say in matters of losing their jobs to automation and outsourcing. Average people also had no recourse during the financial crisis of 2007-08, and they have no recourse now with the multifaceted COVID-19 crisis all while they watch billionaires multiply their net worth.

It's high time those who have been abandoned by society find a way to fight back and put powerful people's skin in the game. We shouldn't see the GameStop situation as just a fluke. It should be the first manifestation of a form of

financial activism. Let's get out there and short squeeze a few more fragilistas.

***Zachary Propert** is a graduate from the University of Pennsylvania grad who continues to study globalization, postcolonialism, semiotics, diaspora and urbanity.

Tunisia: The Pending Goals of the Revolution

Anouar Jamaoui
February 4, 2021

A decade on since the Tunisian Revolution, economic performance remains modest, and many of the rebels' demands are still pending.

A decade after the Arab Spring, Tunisians have made significant progress in the field of democratization with respect to the constitution and the guarantee of public and private freedoms. However, economic performance remains modest, and many of the demands of the Tunisian Revolution are still pending.

Tunisia commemorated the 10th anniversary of the revolution with violent youth protests alongside peaceful demonstrations in major cities like Tunis, Sousse and Nabeul, and inland cities of Siliana, Kasserine and Kairouan. The protesters demanded employment and comprehensive development. They expressed their discontent with high prices, monopolies and the deterioration of the purchasing power of citizens. There was also consternation about the increasing number of COVID-19 victims and the mishandling of the pandemic.

The reality is that the demands for employment are stagnating, ending the isolation of marginalized areas is still a distant dream, and achieving transitional justice is at a stalemate.

While the population of Tunisia suffers, many members of the former regime who opposed the revolutionary struggle are still there at the forefront of the media, clinging to impunity.

The Youth Unemployment Problem

Tunisia has not yet succeeded in developing effective solutions to the unemployment problem that first sparked protests in December 2010. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the unemployment rate in the country during the third quarter of 2020 was 16.2% of the total active population, translating to approximately 6.7 million people. This figure includes no fewer than 225,000 university graduates, with the rate rising to between 30% and 40% in several inland governorates.

The youth population in Tunisia is the most vulnerable to joblessness. The latest field survey on employment by the National Institute of Statistics showed that around 70% of all those unemployed are below 30 years of age. Unemployment is effectively marginalizing youth in Tunisia and is among the main reasons behind both the 2010 revolution and the current protests. The continuing absence of employment opportunities for young people, the spread of favoritism among government and business elites, the rampant administrative and financial corruption and nepotism resulted in a perception of injustice that fueled discontent among many of those who have been unemployed for a long time.

While some impacted by the unemployment crisis attend sit-ins or demonstrate, others risk death on the high seas in search of work that guarantees dignity. In 2020, nearly 10,000 Tunisians arrived in Europe illegally. According to Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for the Tunisian Economic and Social Rights Forum, between 150 and 200 families have left Tunisia to Europe clandestinely over the last year, evading the Tunisian coast guard.

A report by the forum found that “most of the illegal immigrants, aged between 18 and 30, share a fundamental characteristic as they lived the ‘school failure experience’ through early

drop-out. They refer such drop-out to several reasons ranging from economic difficulties, and reluctance to continue to study, because the school, in their view, is no longer useful in light of the high unemployment of high-ranking people.” In addition, many who give up hope either take the path of organized crime or get involved with international terrorist networks.

There is an urgent need to develop inclusive strategies aimed at empowering youth in the labor market. This is possible through the development of educational programs, vocational services and training courses to enhance the social investment role of the state by creating new productive projects directed at the domestic or foreign consumer market that would create jobs for the young.

Marginalized Regions Remain Isolated

A decade after the revolution, the inland and remote governorates have not yet gotten their share of comprehensive development. Rather, they are still suffering from marginalization, the ravages of high rates of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and school dropouts. They lack basic facilities such as infrastructure, health services and educational institutions even though the new constitution stipulates the necessity of implementing a policy of positive discrimination concerning these underprivileged areas. It is not known where the financial allocations and in-kind assistance that the successive governments, the European Union and the Gulf states have allocated to those governorates have gone.

It is worth noting that, according to the European Commission, “Since 2011, EU assistance to Tunisia has amounted to almost €3 billion (over €2 billion in grants and €800 million in macro-financial assistance).” With an average of €300 million (\$360 million) per year between 2017 and 2020, these funds go toward the “Promoting good governance and the rule of law,” “stimulating a sustainable economic growth generating employment” and “Reinforcing social cohesion between generations and regions.” It is likely that these marginalized areas suffer locally

from financial corruption and administrative misbehavior and are dominated by bureaucratic lobbies. Such underprivileged areas are often exploited politically by party and trade union elements to serve as a reservoir of popular protest against government policies.

Likewise, ruling parties only pay attention to these marginalized regions during election campaigns. This has made the residents suffer the brunt of inequality and injustice. It leaves them with a difficult choice: to continue staying in neglected regions despite dire conditions or to leave their lands for major cities or to board migration boats to Europe. There is a definite need to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of these regions, to provide them with resources for a decent living, to encourage greater investment in these regions and to revive the spirit of citizenship that will help regain confidence in the state.

No Truth or Dignity

In another context, the demand for justice for the victims of tyranny that the revolutionaries called for back in 2010 has not yet been fulfilled in an atmosphere where the transitional justice process is still stumbling. This includes the many obstacles that the Truth and Dignity Commission, which carries the mandate of investigating human rights abuses by the state, has faced — a lack of cooperation from state agencies and executive institutions being one of them. Observers have noticed that the perpetrators of violations did not attend the hearings and did not respond to lawsuits by judicial departments.

This failure reinforces the culture of impunity and intensifies the suffering of the victims of the dictatorial regimes of President Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987) and his successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). The state must make use of its authority to bring to justice the perpetrators, apologize to the victims and authorize reparations for their material and mental suffering so that they can resume their lives as part of the Second Republic.

It is true that the revolution has, to some extent, removed the fear of the government and led to a decline in repression and the power of the president, the censors and the police. Critics were also released, the culture of protest spread, politics became a public affair and governance an ordinary exercise in which competing parties maintained an atmosphere of peace and democracy, with no single party having a monopoly.

However, it is evident that some of the revolution's goals have not been implemented. What is required is to make those goals not just promises and slogans, but a reality. The need of the hour for Tunisia is to further reform the judicial and government systems, ensure decentralization and comprehensive development to win citizens' trust in the state, the revolution and the project of democratization.

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Will the US and Iran Meet Jaw to Jaw?

Gary Grappo
February 8, 2021

Joe Biden must contend with many parties and conflicting interests as he ponders his next moves in restarting negotiations with Iran on the nuclear accord.

On February 4, US President Joe Biden visited the US State Department, located down the street from the White House. He went to deliver a foreign policy message much needed by the men and women of that department and the nation. His audience was a

receptive one, not surprising given that nearly all of the hundreds in attendance were career diplomats and civil service employees. He delivered exactly what they wanted to hear, affirming that, “You are the center of all that I intend to do ... the heart of it.” That message dovetailed with his plans for an expansive reassertion of American diplomacy. It was necessary because American diplomacy had been absent for the last four years under the Trump administration.

The foreign policy agenda outlined by Biden variously referred to: fortifying ties with America’s key allies and partners in Europe and Asia; serving notice to Russian President Vladimir Putin that Biden will challenge, “in a manner very different from my predecessor,” Moscow’s cyber threats and authoritarian moves against neighbors; challenging America’s new nemesis, China, on human rights, intellectual property and global governance but also offering cooperation when it serves US interests; calling out Saudi Arabia on Yemen and Myanmar on the recent coup; and recommitting the US to defending democracy and human rights and to upping immigration numbers into the US.

The one major foreign policy challenge staring President Biden directly in the face but not mentioned was Iran. During his election campaign, he had promised to re-enter the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear accord with Iran from which then-President Donald Trump had withdrawn the US in May 2018.

So Many Voices

Not mentioning the subject in this — Biden’s first major foreign policy address of his brief presidency — may have been a wise course of action. First, his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, have promised that the US will consult with America’s P5-plus-1 partners — Britain, France and Germany — as well as regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia before making decisions or taking any action. Moreover, at this

stage, speaking too critically or harshly so soon would only trigger further stubbornness and resistance from an already recalcitrant Iran. And speaking too hopefully would ignite strong pushback from members of Congress resistant to almost anything short of Tehran’s capitulation.

Rejoining the JCPOA is replete with challenges that Biden’s former boss, Barack Obama, also faced but badly mishandled. Both Blinken and Sullivan have indicated that simply re-entering the nuclear agreement cannot be this administration’s sole objective. Any agreement with Iran that lasts into and through the next Republican administration must also address Iran’s growing missile arsenal and its meddling behavior in the Middle East, including in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Just getting these issues on the agenda with Tehran would be an achievement, given the Islamic Republic’s oft-stated opposition to such discussions. Nevertheless, Biden knows that to reach a genuinely enduring agreement that survives his presidency, these issues must be on the table. Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, should also understand that for any agreement to offer his country predictability and stability in its international endeavors into the future, these issues are inescapable.

Iran isn’t the only party with whom the Biden administration will have to negotiate. First, there are America’s allies who are part of the accord and who, for the last four years, have battled to keep the JCPOA on life support. It will be Britain, France and Germany who will run the initial interference for the US before it can meet face to face with the Iranians. Furthermore, the US will have to have their firm support before it can reach out to the other P5-plus-1 members, China and Russia. So, winning their support will be vital to the administration’s success.

Second, there are America’s regional allies, most especially Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, who have a genuine — they might say existential — interest in the outcome of any future talks. There was considerable dissension among these countries in the run-up to the 2015

accord and in its aftermath. Some, most especially Israel, made their objections known publicly and undiplomatically. Nevertheless, their concerns were valid, and President Biden and his team will have to find a way to ensure that these governments' concerns, fears and interests are taken into account.

Moreover, any dialog addressing the regional issues — whether on Iran's malign activity in the Middle East or perhaps even the presence of US forces in the region — will likely have to include these countries. (How that might happen is a mystery, given that states like Saudi Arabia and Iran don't yet officially recognize Israel.) What is essential for the Americans, however, is that these governments are somehow a part of the negotiations and that whatever results from the next round of negotiations is acceptable to the nations of the region most impacted. Blinken and Sullivan, chastened by the experience of 2015 and what came after, undoubtedly understand this.

The Invisible Partner at the Negotiating Table

Then, there is the final and likely most challenging party to future talks. That is the US Congress. Securing congressional approval for a follow-on agreement(s) and ensuring it endures beyond the Biden presidency will depend on winning that body's approval. While Biden probably will not submit any new agreement to the Senate for approval, as the Constitution requires for formal treaties, he will nevertheless need to have at least its implicit support.

Biden cannot afford to make the mistake of Woodrow Wilson in 1918 with the League of Nations and President Obama in 2015 with the JCPOA. He must find a way to bring in key members from both the House and Senate, even if only indirectly, in order to ensure that whatever results reflects their concerns. If Biden and his team can satisfy the concerns of the other two major groups — America's P5-plus-1 partners and regional allies — then they will likely have addressed many of Congress' concerns. But he cannot afford either to take their support for

granted or to neglect Congress. They will have to be engaged throughout the process.

Complexity (Times 100)

Of course, there is also the heart of the issue: the longstanding distrust and animus between the US and Iran. The imperfect deal brokered by Obama and the withdrawal from it by Trump served to exacerbate these feelings among Americans and Iranians, respectively. So, the sides may be starting from a more difficult position than they did in 2012, when they initially began their dialog that culminated with the JCPOA. Hardliners on both sides have further hardened their positions, Republicans (and some Democrats, too) in the US and the all-powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its leadership in Iran. They're not just polar opposites — they live at opposite ends of the galaxy.

Furthermore, the issues have been brought into stark relief as a result of the American exit and subsequent imposition of crushing sanctions on Iran, its leadership, banking institutions and the IRGC. The country's economy is reeling, though it has managed to finally stabilize. But any notion or hope of significant growth that reaches rank-and-file Iranians and businesses is non-existent under US sanctions. In 2021 and beyond, a nation of some 84 million people must be a part of the international community and most especially the global economy. That can't happen as long as US sanctions hang over Iran's head. The choice is stark, albeit hard, for Iran's leadership: continue on the path to nuclear capability or join the rest of the international community.

Despite Iran's early declarations, an immediate US return to the JCPOA and suspension of sanctions prior to some of the aforementioned talks are a chimera. The Biden administration hasn't taken the bait and shouldn't. With sanctions in place, Biden has an advantage, no matter how much he may have opposed them in 2018.

The administration should use this advantage. So, at the very least, before rejoining the JCPOA, it should insist on Tehran's acceptance of follow-on negotiations on: the various time horizons on Iran's nuclear development with weapons implications; the range and numbers of missiles; more comprehensive inspections, including of military sites; and its involvement in countries of the region and support for various militias and groups almost universally viewed as terrorists. Iran's hardliners see some of these issues — like missiles and support for militia groups in the Middle East — as necessary and even existential, but there may be no avoiding talking about them.

Iran doubtlessly has its chronic issues with the Americans, from threats of regime change to menacing military presence throughout the region, including US Navy aircraft carriers off its coast to American Air Force heavy bomber flights near its borders. It will also want some guarantees that whatever is agreed this time has some assurance of continuing. Then there are America's non-nuclear-related sanctions on Iran, e.g., those relating to terrorism, terrorism financing, human rights, religious persecution, etc. These also are likely to become issues in any future talks.

The Main Thing

Hanging over all of this is the justifiably feared nuclearization of the Middle East. There can be no doubt that a nuclear-armed or -capable Iran would inevitably trigger similar strategic moves by Saudi Arabia and perhaps the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Such a development in the world's most volatile region is nightmarish.

Resolving these supremely difficult issues will come down to some hard diplomacy and earnest, patient dialog. There is no military solution. Nuclear weapons can never be one either. And, as the previous administration's "maximum pressure" approach demonstrated, Iran cannot be sanctioned into capitulating.

In the words of Winston Churchill, "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war." It's time for both sides to set their jaws to work.

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Myanmar: What Comes Next for Minority Groups?

Daniel Sullivan
February 10, 2021

Ethnic minority groups in Myanmar know all too well that the military is capable of mass atrocities.

The military coup in Myanmar has been widely denounced as a lethal blow to a fledgling democracy. But it also increases the likelihood of further atrocities and mass displacement. The world cannot forget that the Myanmar military is the same institution that led the campaign of genocide against the Rohingya people.

The coup will negatively affect much of the population in Myanmar, rolling back tentative democratic reforms and freedoms and leading to further mass arrests. But ethnic minority groups, which have long been a target of military abuses, have particular reason to be concerned.

Even with the veil of a quasi-civilian government in recent years, the military has continued to commit atrocities against the Kachin, Karen, Rakhine and other states inside Myanmar. For the 600,000 Rohingya still living in Myanmar, the threat is even clearer. They survived the military's genocidal campaign in August 2017. Indeed, the head of the military and now of the country, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has referred to the Rohingya as a long-standing problem and an "unfinished job."

The coup will also affect refugees outside of the country. The more than 1 million Rohingya

living in Bangladesh now face even greater odds against a safe return to their homeland in Myanmar. In a way, the coup only underscores the reality that conditions for return have been far from safe and sustainable all along.

Rohingya in Bangladesh have told Refugees International that they are alarmed by the coup and worried about the fate of loved ones still in Myanmar. At least with the quasi-civilian government, there was some hope that international pressure could eventually inspire a change. But as long as the military — the entity responsible for the genocide — remains in charge, the idea of a safe return seems inconceivable.

International Pressure on Myanmar

If there is a silver lining, it is that the newly galvanized international outrage about the coup might break the inertia in addressing the military's abuses. In a report released in January 2021, Refugees International laid out critical policy advice for the Biden administration to address the Rohingya crisis. The report recommendations also provide a playbook for responding to the coup.

As a first move, the Biden administration must recognize the crimes committed by Myanmar's military for what they are: crimes against humanity and genocide. Given the ample evidence available, it is perplexing that the United States and many other countries have not yet made this determination. A genocide declaration would not only speak truth to power about what the Myanmar military has done to the Rohingya, but it would also galvanize more urgent global action. It would signal how serious the US and other allies take the threat of the Myanmar military.

Second, the Biden administration should use the urgency of the coup and a genocide determination to engage allies and lead a global response marked by diplomatic pressure and coordinated targeted sanctions. The Biden administration has already said it is considering new sanctions and is reaching out to other

countries to coordinate. Those sanctions should be placed both on Myanmar's military leaders and military-owned enterprises, including, but not limited to, the two large conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL). Future lifting of sanctions should be phased and tied not only to a return to the quasi-civilian government elected in 2020, but also progress on creating conditions conducive to the return of Rohingya refugees.

Third, the US and other allies must push for a multilateral arms embargo. Ideally, this would be done through the action of the UN Security Council. But as long as China and Russia are likely to block such actions, countries like the United States and European Union members that have already ended arms sales to Myanmar should use diplomatic pressure to urge others — including India, Israel and Ukraine — to do the same.

Fourth, countries must revitalize support for international accountability efforts, including at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court. The Gambia's genocide case against Myanmar at the ICJ has the support of the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Canada and the Netherlands have expressed their intent to intervene in the case. The US and other allies should add their support.

Finally, the United States and other allies must push for coordinated high-level diplomatic pressure at the UN Security Council, even with Chinese and Russian reluctance to allow stronger measures. As an important first step, the Security Council did issue a statement that expressed concern about the coup and called for the release of detainees; however, it fell short of outright condemnation of the coup and did not commit to any concrete action. Nonetheless, a discussion at this highest level still adds pressure on Myanmar's military by keeping the possibility of stronger action alive. The fact that there had been no UN Security Council session on the Rohingya

for the past two years is ludicrous and only fueled the Myanmar military's impunity.

Ethnic minority groups in Myanmar know all too well that the military is capable of — and willing to execute — mass atrocities. The US and all states that stand for democracy, and against mass atrocities, must act now while the eyes of the world are on Myanmar.

***Daniel P. Sullivan** is the senior advocate for human rights at Refugees International

Working Together Toward Peace in Yemen

Munir Saeed
February 11, 2021

For President Biden, there can be no successful implementation of the JCPOA without ending the horrendous war in Yemen.

Nothing in recent memory could have possibly done more damage to America's relations with the Yemeni people and to its image in the region than Washington's support for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. The conflict produced the worst manmade catastrophe — one that never had to happen. As US President Joe Biden embarks on that treacherous mission to end his country's involvement and, consequently, end the war itself, the extent to which regional crises are not just difficult to resolve, but intertwined, will become his most formidable adversary. But as the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said a long time ago, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

First, let us understand how we got here why Yemenis have become so very disappointed with and feel betrayed by the United States.

Understanding that is critical to any future US efforts vis-à-vis Yemen.

When in March 2015 the Saudi regime announced, from Washington, the commencement of the military intervention in Yemen, the Obama administration had already given its green light to the regime presided over by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In fact, President Barak Obama went ahead to provide the Saudis with weapons and logistics support, including target-selection advisers and refueling of coalition fighter jets on their bombing raids. Obama's decision effectively made the US a direct member of the Saudi-led coalition in both name and in fact, waging an undeclared war on a nation that never fired a single bullet against the United States.

It's Going to Be Quick

It was going to be quick: a two-week expedition and it's done, with minimum casualties — or so they thought. Granted, we can safely speculate that, despite Saudi Arabia's well-known military incompetence, seen during the First Gulf War, and its total disregard for human life, Obama still could not have guessed how callous and, therefore, catastrophic the Saudi campaign would become. We can also grant that no one in Obama's administration knew that Yemenis are not a people who can be subdued in two weeks or two years or even, as US ally Britain ultimately learned, in 128 years.

No one, it seems, told Obama how crazy the idea was to intervene in a country dubbed the graveyard of foreign invaders nor, it seems, reminded Obama of previous US estimates of quick wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and how those turned out to be. Obama was a man in a hurry, and people in a hurry act fast. Consultations and critical thinking take time.

But why did Obama make this horrible decision that his successor, Joe Biden, is now trying hard to put right? Obama, in 2015, nearing the end of his presidency, was single-mindedly focused on leaving behind a glorious legacy of having achieved a breakthrough with Iran by

signing the nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was going to be a crowning achievement of his foreign policy. It was also a deal that Washington's regional ally, Saudi Arabia, together with Israel and the UAE, were vehemently opposed to, and still oppose.

Obama's decision to support Saudi war efforts was the appeasement gift that he gave the Saudis to quieten their protests in return for signing the JCPOA. For Yemen, the ink that Obama used to sign the JCPOA agreement was made from the blood of its people. Yemenis have been made to sacrifice their lives and livelihoods on the altar of the Iran nuclear deal and the regional and international political expediency and horse-trading that went with it. They have proven to be the most expendable people, both for their own tyrants and their regional and international counterparts.

How Hillary Clinton, had she succeeded Obama, would have dealt with evidence of Saudi-led callousness, or whether she would have taken the decision to end the support for the coalition that Biden announced last week, is useless speculation after the fact. She was not elected. Instead, we had to contend with a disastrous presidency of Donald Trump, whose first order of regional business was to sign a \$110-billion arms deal with Riyadh, progressively building to \$380 billion, and continue to support and arm to the teeth the Saudi war on Yemen.

You Break It, You Own It

After Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, do we still need proof that military interventions, no matter how well-intended the protagonists claim them to be, do not solve but worsen crises? We should be excused for being scared when we hear President Biden promising to spread democracy worldwide, that "America is back." We saw what happened when democracy became the calling card that substituted the weapons of mass destruction. Biden would be well advised to keep those good intentions on the back burner for the time being and instead focus on solving the

destructive consequences of earlier good intentions. As history has repeatedly shown, the road to hell is indeed paved with them.

This will probably go down as Biden's era. He better make it work. His first days in office have been loud and clear. And the sounds were, with some exceptions, mostly good. After earlier skepticism, this author is now becoming cautiously optimistic that Biden is determined to move in the right direction. At his age and time in his career, he has nothing to lose and everything to gain by doing the right thing for America — and eventually, hopefully, become convinced to leave Yemen alone to try to do the right thing on its own. Going forward, the best help the Biden administration can and must provide is not to do too much. Less is definitely more. But for now, the US must be held firmly accountable, applying the Pottery Barn rule: You break it, you own it.

The United States must review its priorities. This brings us to Biden's recent decision to stop arms supplies to the Saudi intervention in Yemen and revoking the Trump administration's labeling of Ansar Allah (as the Houthis are officially known) as a terrorist organization. Biden's administration understands that former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's decision was not aimed at Ansar Allah but was, in fact, one of the last minute mischievous moves that the Trump administration left behind to entrap Biden and tie his hands in a fait accompli. This was a trap that Biden is clearly not willing to fall into. Good for Biden. Good for Yemen. Good for peace.

Away from Trump's and Pompeo's political mischief that has impressed only the gullible, Biden's decision to suspend operational support and intelligence sharing, despite being symbolic in immediate military terms, is nevertheless very serious. Although the Saudi regime — the world's leading arms importer accounting for 12% of the world's arms trade — is able to continue the war from its large stockpiles (the UAE's F35 fighter planes were not intended for delivery until 2027), Biden's decision strongly indicates a very important change of priorities in the region.

Biden doesn't view Iran as the bogeyman used by the Trump administration as an excuse to terminate the JCPOA while continuing arms sales and saber-rattling that created one of the most dangerous periods of continuous regional instability. For the Biden administration, that era has ended. It is now the era of diplomacy and finding solutions to problems, without kicking down doors. But let's not get carried away with euphoria — it won't be easy. Biden has the experience and resources to understand the challenges. That is why he is offering assurances.

But even as Biden is moving toward the realignment of US priorities, with the aim of easing regional tensions, he must also be wary of Benjamin Netanyahu's moves in the Persian Gulf. When it comes to Biden's policies, Israel sees a window of opportunity to muscle in, hoping to replace what Netanyahu predicts to be America's waning regional influence. Netanyahu is regionally encouraged in this mischief-making. Israel and its regional allies on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf are no friends of the JCPOA, which is a lynchpin in the Biden administration realignment. To succeed with the JCPOA partners, Biden will eventually have to confront all of Washington's regional allies.

It will be dangerous for Biden to ignore the threats. Equally dangerous will be any temptation to use Israeli mischief as leverage against Iran. Worse has been tried by the Trump administration; it didn't work. The who-will-blink-first gambit between Tehran and Washington must stop. Perhaps, instead, walking the walk simultaneously could symbolize that unity of purpose that has been missing for four long and traumatic years. With that unity of purpose, the United States and Iran can also work toward finding a solution to the war in Yemen and stopping the misery of a nation that has paid a heavy price for the JCPOA. America and Iran owe it to the Yemenis. Biden has already made the opening moves, both by stopping the arms supplies and by assuring Riyadh that Washington has their back if Yemenis attack.

Decision Time

Yemenis must welcome this Biden assurance. It is not just offered as protection for Saudi Arabia, but useful for Yemen because it is a positive step towards peace. Yemen never had the intention or a plan to attack Saudi Arabia. But it was Saudi Arabia and UAE that sent the first missiles into Yemen's capital city on that infamous night in March 2015. The coalition continued the air strikes relentlessly, despite mounting evidence of high civilian casualties. Yemeni retaliation became necessary to make the coalition slow down its attack — to try to make the pain mutual. The strategy largely worked.

If Biden now wants to assure the Saudis and simultaneously ensure that they suspend the airstrikes, Yemenis must welcome that. It is up to Riyadh and Washington to determine how that protection would look. In any event, American protection for the Saudis is not new. But Yemen must insist that any future resumption of arms supplies to Saudi Arabia or the UAE must be accompanied by US assurances that the weapons will not be used against Yemen, with a reliable verification mechanism in place. For now, Yemenis must focus their energy on securing peace, taking advantage of the opportunity Biden's policy shift offers.

President Biden has made his decision. It is a decision Yemenis have been demanding for a long time. Now it is up to the others involved in this horrendous war to make theirs. This war could not be possible without foreign actors, many of whom are sitting around the JCPOA table, supplying weapons to the regional and domestic parties to this war. The Biden administration should not stop at freezing US arms supplies but should pressure its NATO allies, especially Britain and France, to stop arms sales. Washington should also pressure regional actors to stop their funding and arms supplies to the various domestic forces. This will be an uphill battle, but one that Yemen needs to win.

Before this war, a common estimate of the number of weapons among the Yemeni population was 50 million — a 2:1 ratio. That

figure was more myth than reality. Today, after almost six years of conflict, it will be safe to assume that that figure is no longer mythical and may indeed have increased at the hands of militia groups, whose exact numbers or identities no one knows for sure. All these militias were created, funded and armed by regional actors, who still continue to do so today. The question of how to withdraw these weapons and end the anarchy of lawless militias operating in Yemen will continue to haunt the country for many years to come. The war that was ostensibly intended to restore a legitimate state in Yemen and improve the lives of its people has in reality become a war that has destroyed even a semblance of a state and instead created a humanitarian catastrophe for generations to come.

Ironically, Ansar Allah, whose defeat was the stated objective of the military intervention, has not only gained greater public support inside and outside Yemen, but has emerged as the strongest and most organized group in the country without which no solution is possible. Like Iran, which has emerged as a regional power despite, or perhaps because, of 40 years of political, economic and even military aggression led by the United States, Ansar Allah has found a *raison d'être* from the war waged against it. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Saudi-led military intervention has given Ansar Allah a public relevance and strength it never dreamt of having. This is its war dividend. The question is, how much better can the peace dividend be?

Regardless of any dreams of governing Yemen that some within Ansar Allah may or may not have, the leadership has demonstrated itself to be pragmatic enough to acknowledge the limits of any ambitions of forming a central government in a nation as diverse as Yemen. Centralization has failed several times in the past, and it will fail again. A federation of several states (six are currently proposed) has been the major focus of Yemenis' attention in seeking the creation of a federal state. Strong opposition to the proposed six-state federation might necessitate accepting a union between southern and northern states under

a federal or even a confederal system, which will prevent a total collapse of the current union resulting in continuous wars. Yemenis have painfully lived through that before.

When the war finally comes to an end, finding a working formula acceptable to everyone will be a major challenge. Negotiations leading to successful agreements, by definition, are those that give something — but not everything — to everyone. The alternative to that formula is war. There can be no maximalist or zero-sum solutions that can bring enduring peace to Yemen. The peace dividend for all parties must be found within that formula, led by Yemeni negotiators willing to put everything on the table with no preconditions except ending the war and bringing peace, stability and prosperity to Yemen.

Peace Dividend

Contrary to what the group actually believes, nothing can be more burdensome and exert more pressure on Ansar Allah and the other warring factions than a reopening of Yemen's entry points, especially airports and seaports. People returning to the country seeking opportunities, encouraged to start rebuilding their lives, is a strong *fait accompli*, requiring those in power to measure up to the challenge. Despite current difficulties, Yemenis have the spirit and mindset to return immediately if routes are opened. It is relatively easy to rule a country at war and under a blockade through oppression. It becomes much harder when the world is paying close attention to the evolution of peace as the nation is rebuilding.

Like any group or political party, there are various political viewpoints within Ansar Allah, ranging from ideologically unyielding to politically pragmatic. The challenge is to formulate an approach that can navigate a middle ground within the group as a whole. Attempts to use these divergent political viewpoints as fissures to be exploited will be dangerous for the entire effort and delay or, worse, torpedo the peace process. Spoilers are created by such an approach. We have come to this point, partly

because of those who think they can cleverly do exactly that.

Instead of cleverness, what is needed in these times is wisdom, the ability to work patiently across all divides and a commitment to Yemen as a whole and not to partisan politics or gains. Anger and protests are a necessary tool to bring focus to the problem. Yemenis must continue to agitate and make good trouble for the powers at play, to make them pay attention to the problem. However, solving the problem requires cool heads and a different focus.

As efforts to bring an end to the war are planned, identifying the moving parts and the various components of the war are a must. As much as Ansar Allah's strength is derived from the Saudi intervention, it also benefits to a large extent from the disarray among its adversaries, particularly the government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which itself is divided between his supporters and those of his opponents at the Southern Transitional Council (STC), whose agenda is to secede from the union. Refusing to identify themselves as Yemenis, they have nevertheless failed to come up with an alternative identity. So they call themselves "southerners" — a geographical location rather than a national identity.

Apart from fighting Ansar Allah, the divided Hadi government and the STC are fighting against each other for turf in the south as Ansar Allah quietly watches from the sidelines, probably waiting to pick up the pieces. The coalition, now comprising only of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is expressively committed to restoring legitimacy (meaning Hadi's government) and supporting opposing parties in the battles between Hadi's government (supported by Saudi Arabia) and the STC (supported by the UAE). Effectively, the Saudi-UAE coalition, despite all claims of unity, is in fact locked in a proxy war for influence in south Yemen.

And if all that is not bizarre enough, there is the Islah Party, Yemen's Muslim Brothers, declared as a terrorist organization by both Saudi

Arabia and the UAE. Despite the designation, the party is a member of the Hadi government, which Saudi Arabia and the UAE are committed to restoring to power after defeating Ansar Allah.

However, domestic factions will not decide the peace in Yemen. They can, to a certain extent, for a certain period, act as spoilers of the peace process, but that's as far as they can go if their sponsors and external actors decide to end the war. And most of those who can, in fact, those who must decide are sitting around the JCPOA table. That's where the center of power is for the war in Yemen. Should those trying to move ahead with the JCPOA fail to bring peace to Yemen as a prerequisite of the implementation of the nuclear deal, there are enough possibilities to wreck the JCPOA itself, irreparably. It should be remembered that Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not friends of the JCPOA. The three are also involved in the war in Yemen. One doesn't need to be a genius to see how the lines crisscross.

If Yemen gets help to find postwar peace and stability and is then left alone, the Biden administration and others in the region will find it a better partner to engage with, going forward. Yemen must move on from the era of leadership that continuously seeks external support and interference to compensate for its incompetence, corruption and failures. The country needs young energetic leaders who are invested in its future prosperity. A nation of 30 million with tremendous resources does not need charity. Instead, Yemenis must seek partnerships. Regional players who wasted billions seeking unfair geopolitical advantages through destructive war could have achieved greater benefits through partnerships with Yemen — for much less.

Yemen's hope is in its youth, despite, or perhaps because of a painful but educational 6-year war. There is still time to develop that mindset for the future. In as far as regional neighbors (and beyond) are concerned, Yemenis are a forgiving people. Yet lest future generations risk repeating it, we must never allow this Nakba

to be forgotten. Yemen can and must forgive, and then move on.

Nothing is more sustainable than the need to get things done, no matter how misguided it might be at times. Generosity of the heart is whimsical. It was not generosity that induced President Obama to support Mohammed bin Salman's war on Yemen. It was political expediency born from a misguided notion of need. Today, it is not the generosity of President Biden's heart that will stop the war in Yemen but political expediency born from a real need. Both are related to the JCPOA.

In 2015, for Barack Obama, the horrendous war in Yemen was a vehicle toward the Iran nuclear deal. For Obama's former right hand, now President Biden, in 2021, there can be no successful implementation of the JCPOA without ending that horrendous war. Call it irony, or call it divine intervention to set the record straight. But now, let's work together to win the peace.

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How QAnon Followers Saw the US Inauguration

Jaclyn Fox
February 12, 2021

QAnon followers are split between feelings of inaugural disappointment and the need to chart a path for the future.

In the days leading up to the inauguration of US President Joe Biden, followers of the QAnon movement were jubilant — not because they were looking forward to the incoming administration; rather, they believed the military was moments away from intervening,

arresting Biden and the rest of the deep state cabal on so-called charges of treason, pedophilia and various other offenses.

The thousands of National Guard members securing the Capitol and the barricades surrounding Washington verified their belief in swift military-led retribution. The fact that these elements were in place to secure the incoming administration — as opposed to dismantling it — was viewed derisively as the mainstream media's narrative.

From “prison buses” invading the US capital to transport scores of deep state officials for trial, to Vice President Kamala Harris' formal resignation from the Senate that opened her up for arrest, QAnon adherents discussed the “signs” foretelling success of “the plan” on an online forum.

Inauguration Day and Its Aftermath

The day of inauguration was prophesized as a moment of reckoning when Q adherents would finally be vindicated or, as some members acknowledged, when Q would be proven as a “LARP” (live action role play), a “psyop” or a troll. Adherents spoke out in the early hours of January 20 against “moving the goalposts” — that is, changing the terms under which Q would be proven correct. Stating that whether or not Biden was inaugurated, they must accept that as proof — or lack thereof — of Q's legitimacy.

While most QAnons imbued the 20th with this importance, others speculated that no one really knew what the plan required. This ambiguity left adherents open to continuing to follow Q even if Biden was sworn in. Donald Trump's silence — enforced through social media blackouts — also increased uncertainty for these individuals as the hour quickly approached inauguration. Regardless of the outlook, QAnon followers across the globe waited with bated breath for noon on that Wednesday morning.

On January 20, 2021, at 12:00 pm on the National Mall, Biden took his oath of office. Immediately after on the QAnon forum, feelings of disappointment, shame and grief took center

stage. Although a few QAnons had hedged their bets prior to the inauguration, stating that no one really knew what the plan was or that maybe Biden being sworn in was necessary to “complete the crime,” most saw that moment as the answer to whether or not Q was legitimate.

Tension arose on the forum between those who felt betrayed, let down and convinced of Q’s falsehood against those who declared that they must “hold the line” and “trust the plan.” “Nothing can stop what is coming” (NCSWIC) was a frequent refrain, with many forum users turning toward religious allegories and symbolism for comfort.

Some posters commented that Biden’s inauguration would mean them leaving the movement — calling the turn of events a “con.” Others echoed Trump’s language and referred to Q as a “bigly” troll after the lack of military intervention. Overall, users argued with one another and despaired when the promise of mass arrests did not materialize. A few hours later, and with the help of moderators and long-time Q supporters “deporting” “shills” (i.e., blocking accounts that spoke negatively about Trump and/or Q), the mood of the forum took a decidedly more optimistic turn.

What Happened?

Far from being over, discourse on the QAnon forum evolved in ways that incorporated the events of the 20th while continuing to push conspiracies involving the deep state. Three major narratives erupted as QAnons struggled to reconcile the events of the day with their belief system.

The first narrative held that regardless of Biden’s inauguration, the plan itself was still going strong. This position acknowledged people’s frustration but implored them to have faith and was often couched in religious terms. Posters stated that QAnon followers needed to keep looking for clues and trust the military was truly in control. Over and over, adherents turned toward religious allegories in order to comfort their distressed fellows.

The second major conspiratorial narrative was that Biden was not actually president. Some supported this belief through the supposed dismantling of the “USA Inc.” Biden was “president” over the “fake” United States, while Trump continued to lead the “real” American Republic. Others found “evidence” of the military rejecting Biden, which proved that they did not see him as the president and suggested that either the military or Trump were truly in charge. In addition, posters posited that the inauguration was pre-recorded (or a “deepfake”) and did not actually occur live on January 20. Some took this to mean that mass arrests had already taken place in Washington and the country was under military control.

The third narrative held that regardless of anything else — Q’s existence or the truth of a master plan — the conspiracies were true. The election was stolen, the democrats were part of a pedophilic, satanic cabal, and China was controlling Biden’s actions. Articles from popular conservative publications were shared on the forums, which continued to push the election fraud conspiracy.

This narrative — the splitting of Q belief from support for conspiracies — is essential to keep in mind. Through Trump and the Republican Party, these conspiracies have become so mainstream that they are now fully operational outside of a conspiratorial fringe. Thus, the “fringe” can be marginalized, i.e., those who still believe in the Q figure, while those who believe in conspiracies are incorporated into the mainstream of Trump supporters — growing the movement. One user puts this cleavage succinctly, deriding both the “deep state” for stealing the election and the false nature of “Q”: “Fuck the Deep state for stealing the election and Fuck Q for brainwashing gullible fools.”

Where We Go From Here

As the days wore on, posters continued to dissect clues in order to determine which of the above narratives made the most sense. In particular, the military’s behavior was scrutinized as this was

seen to lend credence to the idea that they did not support Biden as the legitimate president. In addition, the media's increased attention on Q and QAnon followers fueled the notion that Q was legitimate. If it was a "LARP," why would mainstream media be trying so hard to discredit them?

Finally, members sought out official statements from trusted figures like Trump, General Michael Flynn, Lin Wood, Mike Pompeo and others, asking what their official statements (or silence) told followers, with the aim of finding guidance as to what would happen next.

As the first month of 2021 drew to a close, QAnon adherents who initially spurned the movement after Biden's inauguration shifted back toward the group, seeking narratives that would allow them to continue believing. Perhaps the future of QAnon is best summed up in the following quote: "I said if Biden was inaugurated I would give up hope — Sorry I lied."

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Why Are India's Farmers Protesting?

Atul Singh & Manu Sharma
February 17, 2021

India is adopting a market-based system to replace a Soviet-inspired model that benefited a limited number of farmers who fear losing their advantages.

Indian farmers have lately made international headlines. Popstar Rihanna, actor Susan Sarandon and activist Greta Thunberg have taken up their cause. Ozy, a glitzy Silicon Valley publication posed a provocative question: "Will the World Step In?"

The story playing out in international media appears to be a simple one. Indian farmers are the noble David standing up to an evil Goliath-like government beholden to greedy billionaires. In an era of increasing inequality and decreasing social mobility, this narrative resonates. The fact that elite journalists in New Delhi or New York see the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a Hindu fascist party adds to its appeal.

Publications such as Ozy convey that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brought in agricultural reforms solely to benefit large corporations. As per this narrative, the government is in thrall to big business and against poor farmers. Is this narrative true, or is there something more complicated going on?

The Burden of History

Ever since the British Raj, Indian farmers have led tough lives. The colonial power imposed extortionate taxes on farmers, taking away at least 45% of harvests, often confiscating the whole yield. British imperialists took Niccolo Machiavelli's advice to heart and patronized a new feudal class of landlords to act as their middlemen. They did the dirty work of squeezing farmers, enabling them to escape much of the blame. The British also created an extractive colonial bureaucracy to suck wealth out from India. Few realize that the primary job of the now-glamorous district collector — an elite civil servant who does the job elected mayors do in western democracies — was to collect taxes from poor Indian farmers.

Writing in *The World Financial Review* last year, Kalim Siddiqui explained in some detail why famine stalked British India. Great Britain industrialized and became a great power partly through ruthless exploitation of farmers in what are now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which then comprised British India. As a result, millions died of starvation, and those who survived the famines suffered constant malnourishment.

The first priority for independent India was feeding its people. Indian farmers were dirt poor with no access to credit, reliable irrigation or

modern agricultural tools and farming methods. They were often in the clutches of predatory moneylenders. Yet farmers had experience of mass movements. Mahatma Gandhi led his first satyagraha in Champaran against exploitation by British landlords, mobilizing thousands of poor farmers. In India's new democracy, farmers might have been poor but, for the first time in centuries, they wielded real political power.

That power has carried over to today. Even as India has urbanized, farmers disproportionately decide elections. A staggering 83.5% of seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, still primarily comprise rural areas. The political power of farmers has given them many benefits. Since 1947, governments have formulated multiple economic policies to overcome India's colonial-era rural poverty. India abolished zamindari, an indigenous form of landlordship, immediately after independence. It overturned centuries of tradition by abolishing income tax for farmers. A key purpose of the 1969 bank nationalization was to provide cash-starved farmers access to credit.

The Green Revolution

In the 1960s, India launched its famous Green Revolution, which subsidized farmers in India's northwest region, comprising the states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. This part of the country is a flat fertile plain irrigated by Himalayan snow-fed perennial rivers and with relatively large landholdings. Inspired by the American agronomist Norman Borlaug, India's government encouraged farmers in this region to grow high-yield varieties of wheat, rice and cotton. It also gave farmers massive subsidies for fertilizers, seeds and equipment, investing large sums of capital to build dams and a network of canals and giving farmers access to easy credit. As a result, the farmers of landholding communities in northwest India became the most prosperous in the country.

The Green Revolution ended India's ship-to-mouth existence. India's population had exploded after independence in 1947. In a poor country,

agriculture was inefficient and rain-fed. A bad monsoon meant poor harvests. Demand would outstrip supply and the specter of famine was never far off. Until production took off in India, the US supplied grains to Indian masses under the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, commonly known as PL-480 or Food for Peace. Lyndon B. Johnson limited even critical famine aid to India, demanding the country implement agricultural reforms and temper criticism of US intervention in Vietnam. The Green Revolution provided India with food security after two centuries of rapacious British rule.

Yet like any policy, the Green Revolution had unintended consequences. In 2009, Daniel Zwerdling chronicled how this fabled revolution was "heading for collapse." With an emphasis on high-yield varieties, the traditional mix of crops grown in the region for centuries has been abandoned. Yields increased dramatically but only through an insatiable thirst for water. Groundwater levels have fallen by 75%-85% over the decade. In Punjab and Haryana, farmers are boring deeper and deeper for water. In 2018, 61% of wells were dug deeper than 10 meters. In a land crisscrossed by rivers fed by Himalayan snow, such water levels mark historic lows. India might have achieved food security at the cost of water security.

Parts of India are not just running out of water. The soil itself is turning toxic. Intense use of fertilizers and pesticides over decades has pumped harmful chemicals into the soil. More than 10 years ago, astute journalists like Daniel Pepper were reporting on villagers who spoke about rising cases of cancer, renal failure, stillborn babies and birth defects. These health problems have increased since. Researchers attribute these conditions to the "overuse and misuse of pesticides and herbicides." As Pepper reported in 2008, Punjab comprised 1.5% of India's area but accounted for nearly 20% of the country's pesticide consumption. Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh suffer similarly high soil pollution and consequent health problems.

Another consequence of the Green Revolution has been the overproduction of cereals. So much wheat and rice are produced that a storage crisis has ensued. India now lacks the capacity to store grains, with millions of tons are stockpiled in poor conditions. In particular, India lacks cold storage facilities for fruits and vegetables because of restrictions on farmers, the stranglehold of Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) and a lack of incentives for the private sector to invest in the rural economy.

A Soviet Procurement System

After independence, India opted for the Soviet economic model. Five-year plans set out ambitious targets for a command-and-control economy. The so-called quota-permit-license raj emerged, with bureaucrats dictating “which company would produce what, but also the amount of production, as well as the price of commodities.” Agriculture was no different. In a top-down, command-and-control system, the government set targets that farmers had to meet.

In an indigenous twist to the Soviet system, India created the institution of the Agricultural Produce Market Committee. Thousands of APMCs were to run local agricultural markets, known as mandis. Farmers could only sell to APMC-controlled mandis and only at fixed prices. Unlike their American or European counterparts, Indian farmers could not sell wheat or rice on the open market. This prohibition had two reasons. First, APMCs allowed the government to control both production and price in its planned economy model. Second, APMCs were meant to protect farmers from the vagaries of the free market and save them from exploitation.

Over time, APMCs become the new oppressors. Local politicians and special interest groups came to control APMCs. Since they were the only buyers by law, APMC mandis began to set ceilings on what farmers received for their produce, offering precipitously low prices. Commission agents started taking greater cuts. APMCs delayed payments to farmers, forcing

them to borrow from “[commission agents], local money lenders and savings for their daily expenses.” In addition, APMCs rarely gave receipts to farmers. This meant that they were denied the option of applying to banks for much cheaper credit. Instead, they were pushed into India’s infamous informal economy and became prey to exploitative lending. Tragically, inevitable and unbearable debt burdens have led to thousands of farmer suicides.

Apart from the APMCs, the government instituted a minimum price support mechanism as part of its planned economy model. New Delhi wanted high and stable production of key crops. Farmers wanted, and still want, stable income. In a pure market system, too much production leads to falling prices. This is not ideal for farmers. Therefore, they are careful to avoid overproduction. So, India’s economic planners instituted a system that provided a floor below which prices would not fall, encouraging farmers to grow crops deemed essential for food security and economic interests.

Over time, powerful lobbies in northwestern India, the heartland of the Green Revolution, pressured the government to put the minimum support price well above the price the market would have otherwise set. What began as limited support to ensure price and production stability eventually morphed into a substantial taxpayer-funded direct subsidy.

Support prices differed widely from one state to another. At the same time, restrictive laws compelled farmers to sell to designated APMCs within their districts. Crossing state and even district boundaries to get a better price for their produce was illegal and could land farmers in jail. For instance, Punjab’s support prices have been higher than those in Bihar. Therefore, Bihari farmers have been illegally selling paddy to markets in Punjab at a price lower than the minimum support price but higher than what they would get back home. A flourishing black market and widespread corruption emerged as a result.

New Agricultural Reforms

In December 2019, the parliamentary standing committee on agriculture published a major report. It concluded that APMC markets were not working in the interest of farmers. Instead, they were reducing competition, causing cartelization of traders and unduly deducting money due to farmers through market fees and commission charges. Corruption and malpractices in APMCs were rife. The committee observed that “there [was] urgent need for radical reform” and asked the government to inform parliament “about steps taken in this direction within three months.” It is noteworthy that the opposition and farmers’ unions agreed with the committee’s observations.

Last year, the government finally instituted long overdue agricultural reforms. Several economists and policy wonks welcomed them, arguing that these reforms would “unshackle farmers from the restrictive marketing regime that has managed the marketing of agriculture produce for decades.” In their view, these reforms promised “to bring the entire world of farming technology, post-harvest management and marketing channels at the doorstep of the farmer.”

The reforms have three key aspects. First, farmers will be able to sell their produce to anyone, including agricultural businesses, supermarket chains, online grocers or, as before, APMC mandis. The key difference from the status quo is that farmers are no longer required to sell only to APMC mandis. A Bihari farmer would now have the legal right to sell in Punjab and vice versa without fear of arrest.

Second, the reforms have created a framework for agricultural commercial agreements. When farmers engage directly with processors, agri-business firms and large retailers, their counterparties will have to guarantee a price and make timely payments. Third, regulations on farm produce have been simplified and eased. The command-and-control system that determined the crops or quantities farmers would grow is being dismantled. Only in extraordinary circumstances such as war, famine, a natural calamity or an extraordinary price rise will the

government have the right to direct production of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, potatoes or any other crops.

In 2020, agricultural reforms became inevitable because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A nationwide lockdown caused a massive migration of urban workers back to their villages. This increased pressure on already scarce land — something needed to be done. Restrictive laws on sale, pricing and storage of produce had to go. Therefore, after two decades of endless discussion, reforms finally transpired. They seek to increase investment in agriculture, boost farmer incomes and create a national agricultural market to emerge for the first time since India’s independence.

Who Is Protesting and Why?

From the outset, the reforms have proved controversial. In September, the BBC wondered whether they were a “death warrant” for farmers. Some farmers worry whether the reforms might lead to the end of wholesale markets and guaranteed prices. Currently, the government offers a minimum support price that acts as a safety net for farmers. Even though the government has promised to retain such a price, farmers fear its withdrawal over time.

There is an added fear that big private players will offer good money to farmers in the beginning, kill off their competition and then pay little for agricultural produce. Farmers might go from the local monopsonies of the APMCs to the national oligopoly of Amazon-like behemoths. It is important to remember that the government offers price support only for the staple crops of the Green Revolution. Other crops do not qualify, nor do fruits and vegetables.

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming number of protesters are farmers from India’s northwest, the region that has benefited most from the old system. In particular, they belong to Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the birthplace of the Green Revolution. In 2018-19, APMCs procured 73% and 80% of the total wheat production in Punjab and Haryana

respectively at a minimum support price. This was higher than the market price, but a hefty chunk of the support price ends up in the hands of middlemen through various fees and charges. Unknown to most, price support does not necessarily mean income support in the current system.

Farmers in the Himalayas, the Nilgiris or most other parts of India never benefited from the status quo. As a result, farmers in 25 of India's 28 states and all eight union territories have not taken to the streets. The Shetkari Sanghatana, a Maharashtra-based farmers' union founded by the economist-turned-farmer leader Sharad Joshi, and other unions support the government's agricultural reforms.

The late Joshi was convinced that "the root cause of farmers' problems lay in their limited access to the market." As per this farmer leader, open and competitive markets, instead of a top-down command-and-control agricultural economy, served farmer interests better. Joshi opposed the APMCs, and his organization naturally supports recent reforms. In fact, it wants to go much further. It wants the government to remove the ban on the export of onions and threatened to pelt BJP MPs with onion bulbs if the government fails to do so.

Journalists unfamiliar with rural India, including those working for the market-friendly Financial Times, have failed to capture this nuance. Not all farmers are protesting. Protests are largely confined to Punjab, Haryana and Jat strongholds in western Uttar Pradesh. This northwest region around Delhi comprises less than 8% of the Indian population. It elects 38 out of 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha, but its proximity to the capital gives it disproportionate power. Home to the Green Revolution, it has benefited from massive government spending for decades.

As per the managing editor of the Financial Express, farming households in Punjab get an average of \$2,385 per year in fertilizer and electricity subsidies alone. Irrigation subsidies account for another \$190 per year. Households in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh

benefit from other subsidies as well. To put these figures into context, in 2019, GDP per capita in India was less than \$2,100, with most farmers earning a much lower figure.

Many of those protesting are large farmers from northwestern India. Some of their family members are part of the Indian diaspora in Australia, Canada, the UK, the US and elsewhere. Some of them continue to be absentee landlords. They have petitioned their representatives to raise the issue with the Indian government, organized demonstrations and raised the matter with the press. As a result, a narrative has emerged in the English-speaking press that is not entirely unbiased.

On January 26, India's Republic Day, protesting farmers marched through New Delhi. Some attacked the police, destroyed public property and flew flags on the Mughal-built Red Fort from where prime ministers address the nation. This caused outrage and weakened the movement. However, Rakesh Tikait, a farmer leader, rallied his protesters with an emotive appeal. He broke down in tears and threatened to hang himself if the BJP government did not repeal its reforms. Tikait is the son of the late farmer leader Mahendra Singh Tikait who took over the nation's capital with nearly 500,000 farmers in 1988. Per the Indian press, Rakesh Tikait is a former policeman with assets worth 80 crore rupees (\$11 million), a significant sum for a farmer in India.

It is clear that the likes of Tikait are not poor, helpless farmers crushed by debt, contemplating suicide. They form part of the almost feudal elite that has dominated the APMCs and the rural economy for decades. Many media outlets fail to realize that such farmers have enjoyed price support, subsidies on agricultural inputs, free electricity, waived water charges, cheap credit from the state-led banking sector and no tax on farm income. They are the winners of the old system and are desperate not to lose what they have.

Small farmers in northwestern India have joined large farmers too. They fear the unknown.

Since British rule, agrarian distress has been persistent in India. Well-meaning measures like APMCs have backfired. The Indian countryside faces the unique challenge of extreme overpopulation. Low productivity, fragmented landholdings, lack of storage infrastructure, high indebtedness, strangulating red tape and entrenched corruption have held rural India back and caused simmering discontent. Leaders like Tikait are tapping into this discontent much like Donald Trump harnessed the rage of those left behind.

What Lies Ahead?

The government has clearly been shaken by the duration and intensity of the protests. Sustained negative media coverage in the West has rattled New Delhi. For decades, the West in general and the US in particular criticized India's agricultural subsidies. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), the US consistently argued that Indian subsidies distort trade. The WTO has been a hostile place for India. Over the last three years, Canada raised 65 questions against India's farm policies. Australia has complained against India's sugar subsidies. Yet reform has led to brickbats, not plaudits, in Western capitals.

In fact, contrary to many press reports, the government has behaved with remarkable restraint. It did not act against protesters even when they blocked highways and hindered railway traffic. Swarajya, a center-right publication, called for the government to "demonstrate it [meant] business when it comes to law and order." Yet it did nothing. When British coal miners challenged Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's authority, she used mounted police to crack down on them.

In contrast, the Modi government has been rather conciliatory, engaging in 11 rounds of talks with protesters. The government offered key concessions and proposed amendments to its reforms. In the final round, the government even offered to suspend the implementation of its reforms for 18 months. Protest leaders rejected this offer and demanded nothing less than a

complete repeal of all reforms. No government was likely to accept such an intemperate demand, especially one that was reelected with a thumping majority in 2019.

The Economist, a longtime critic of Modi and the BJP, takes the view that "agronomists and economists are in nearly uniform agreement" with India's agricultural reforms. It attributes protests to the "trust deficit" of the BJP government. The publication sees large-scale cold storage as the most obvious benefit of the reforms. Such storage would involve removing limits on stockpiling commodities for future sale. Farmers fear that this could give large companies too much power and undue advantage. They could buy large quantities of produce from farmers within a few days of harvest, hoard this produce and sell it when the price was high.

Such fears of change are only natural. No entrenched system changes without upheaval even when the status quo is untenable. The Indian agricultural system no longer works, economically, environmentally or ethically. Agriculture needs investment. Neither the government nor the farmers have the ability to provide this investment. In the post-1991 world, India's private sector has been a success. It is the only player in the Indian economy with the ability to invest in the villages. Hence, Modi has called for a greater role for the private sector in an unexpectedly candid parliamentary speech.

Despite the current sound and fury, India's farmer protests will simmer down. Like the Green Revolution, India's agricultural reforms will have intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative.

Finally, it may be prudent to think about agriculture in the global context. Most countries subsidize agriculture in one way or another for reasons ranging from food security to cultural preservation. The country of Jean Jacques Rousseau has championed the Common Agricultural Policy. Even the free-market US is generous with its farm subsidies. If either France or the United States were to implement agricultural reforms, demonstrations would

ensue, legislators would face pressure from electors and sections of the media would accuse them of one sin or another. India is doing something that both the EU and the US may need — but have not yet dared — to do.

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Football Is Ready for Openly Gay Players

Ellis Cashmore, Jamie Cleland & Kevin Dixon
February 24, 2021

Why are professional sportsmen still reluctant to come out as gay?

As last year's British Social Attitudes survey indicates, 66% approve of same-sex couples, meaning about a third do not. Our newest research suggests that, with 95% of fans saying they favor openly gay players, football crowds are more welcoming of gay people than the rest of the UK population. It may sound a counterintuitive argument, but it is based on the results of an online research project comprising the detailed accounts of 2,665 fans, the vast majority of whom are embarrassed that football is continually characterized as a homophobic environment that prohibits gay players from revealing their sexual identity — at least until their playing career is over.

For example, Thomas Beattie, an English ex-professional footballer who retired in 2015, recently declared, "I wouldn't have come out if I was still playing now." He was reflecting on football culture but without understanding how he and other gay players who disclose their sexuality only in retirement are contributing toward the very problem they seek to resolve.

Football and some other sports like basketball are oddly out of sync with other areas of society. When it comes to American football, for instance, just last week, 29-year-old Ryan Russell came out as bisexual, hoping to change the fact that no openly gay or bisexual players ever took part in a regular season game in the National Football League's 101-year existence.

In politics, showbusiness and other spheres of public life, being gay has not been nearly as ruinous as it might have been 30 years ago, when the late Justin Fashanu came out after a national newspaper was about to break a story about him. Fashanu remains the only professional footballer from the major leagues to have publicly pronounced that he was gay during his active playing days. Yet football's reputation as being rabidly homophobic and riven with bigotry is ill-founded.

Be Honest

A decade ago, we pursued research to investigate the extent of homophobia in football. The research was promoted on UK-based fans' online forums, but, as with other digital projects, the project migrated, and several responses came from participants in countries where there are prohibitions on gay relationships. While it was widely assumed the absence of openly gay footballers was due to the fear of open hostility from crowds, no one had actually tested this.

Surprisingly, at the time, 93% of respondents decried homophobia and expressed a wish that gay players would be honest. Last year, we revisited the subject, again using an online research platform, this time asking a new sample to discuss changes over the previous decade. In 2010, it was generally expected that a gay player would make his sexuality public, probably within the next two or three years. This still hasn't happened. Gay players like Thomas Hitzlsperger, a former midfield player for Aston Villa and the German national team, have waited until they reach the comfort of retirement before making their sexuality known.

So why is there such a mismatch between what players, the media and practically everyone else thinks about football fans, and reality? Football fans may be narrow-minded, partisan, in some parts of the country even sectarian, in every part jingoistic and perhaps — we will return to this later in the article — racist. But they are not homophobic, at least not in the sense of having or expressing a dislike of people who are homosexual. As far as they are concerned, there is only one salient feature of a footballer's make-up: playing ability. If a footballer plays well, his sexuality is irrelevant. This was the case 10 years ago and it remains true today.

While the comparisons with rugby are not exact, they are serviceable. Gareth Thomas, the former Welsh captain, came out in 2009, aged 35, becoming one of the first professional athletes to do so. He was married to a woman at the time and divorced in 2010. It was thought the macho world of rugby would be unforgiving and that Thomas would endure hell on earth for the remainder of his career.

But nothing happened. Rugby fans were more grown-up than anyone suspected, and Thomas, far from being condemned as a symbol of moral decay, was lauded as a hero. Why would anyone suppose association football would be much different? There is an answer, and everyone is involved, especially gay players themselves.

If you like playing and enjoy the plentiful fruits of your labor — the average Premier League salary is estimated at £60,000 (\$85,000) per week — then there is an understandable reluctance to disturb a satisfactory state of affairs, especially if you have an agent who captures well-paying endorsement deals for you. You are in control of what is, in many respects, a volatile career. Who knows what might happen if you decide to reveal that you have lived a fraudulent life thus far, disguising your sexual proclivities and putting on a cosmetic show of being heterosexual?

Now, the agent: You make your money as a commission, taking, say, 10% of everything your client earns. Mino Raiola, one of the world's top

agents, earned \$84.7 million last year, according to Forbes. If one of your players wishes to come out, do you really want to risk a possible change in his marketability? It's perfectly possible that he could become a gay icon, like so many rock and movie stars. But he may not. So, your advice is probably going to be: leave it until you retire.

Football club owners are, by definition, prosperous people; none are known to be gay. All of them are known to be conservative in the sense that they favor free enterprise and private ownership and, probably, the traditional values that have stood them in good stead. You may be an exception and think progressively enough to encourage your club's gay players to open up, though you will probably warn them that hell hath no fury like a fan whose standards have been forged on the football terrace.

Media Mistrust

Football fans themselves know all this; they realize they are fingered as the culprits and are alert enough to know why. Over 40% have heard chants, shouts or just odd remarks about gay people and they know that in today's woke milieu, they count as homophobic. They also realize something is lost — or gained — in translation. Football has a lively jocular tradition: Often, the banter heard at football games is regarded as a variant of some more sinister custom. But usually, these are fans' attempts to cause rival players to lose concentration. Players with unusual surnames, thinning hair, unbeauteous faces or practically anything that distinguishes them can expect to be barracked mercilessly. An openly gay player would be too, but there would be no malevolence intended.

Football fans are not choirboys and choirgirls; their prejudices are rarely latent. In recent years, football racism has been made abundantly clear by the media. Racism has been identified as a major problem and publicized extensively. No one actually knows the extent of this form of racism because it is largely confined to social media. One person can generate a zillion memes

and conjure the impression of a behemoth where there is, in fact, a sprite.

This helps explain why football fans are so mistrustful of the media. As our research shows, 48% believe gay players are intimidated by the prospect of a media reaction should they come out. All the evidence of recent years suggests the media are nowhere near as hysterical about homosexuality as they were when Fashanu came out and are, in fact, supportive.

It is a surprising, though not inconsistent, finding. Fans have been depicted by the media in caricatured terms, and few have challenged the popular stereotype of the rabid homophobe, ready to persecute the first player with the audacity to announce his gay credentials. Even in 2010, when reports of the original research circulated in the media, there was little inclination to rehabilitate the popular conception. It seems the stereotype is stuck in the media's esophagus for a decade. Time for the Heimlich maneuver.

Ask yourself this question: If football fans are genuinely homophobic, why do they come over all sweet-natured when they watch women's football? There are several out gay players, and the game itself has become something of a symbol for LGBTQ+ rights. Admittedly, the history of the distaff game is very different to its male counterpart, but that does nothing to explain the presumed difference. That's because there really is no difference — at least in the West, or at least for British fans. Football fans are not too good to be true, but they are not nearly so bad as everyone else, including the players they cheer, suspect.

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Divide and Rule: What Drives Anti-Asian Resentment in America?

Hans-Georg Betz
February 24, 2021

On the surface, the recent wave of anti-Asian hostility might easily be explained as being directly related to COVID-19. The reality is more complex.

Donald Trump might have left the White House. His nefarious legacy, however, lingers on. A prominent case in point is the dramatic rise in the number of attacks on Asian Americans, ranging from verbal insults and harassment to physical assault to deadly acts of violence that has gone hand in hand with the pandemic.

Correlation does not necessarily imply causation. It stands to reason, however, that Trump's repeated characterization of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" significantly contributed to the mobilization of anti-Asian resentment, particularly among his most ardent supporters. Trump had started to blame China as early as mid-March last year, when the pandemic was starting to spread in the United States. The results of an Ipsos survey from April 2020 suggests that it had a considerable impact on public opinion. Among other things, the survey found that 60% of Republican respondents believed that "people or organizations" were responsible for the virus, most prominently the Chinese government and the Chinese people in general. In short, large numbers of Americans blamed China and the Chinese for spreading the virus — with sometimes fatal consequences.

In mid-March, a man attacked the members of an Asian American family with a knife at a retail store in Midland, Texas. Only the intervention of a courageous bystander prevented a bloodbath. Nevertheless, several persons suffered serious injuries, among them two children aged 2 and 6.

When interrogated, the perpetrator stated that he had thought “the family was Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus.” They were actually Burmese.

A report published in early April recorded over 1,000 incidents of anti-Asian cases of various types of aggression and discrimination associated with COVID-19 in the last week of March alone. Among them were individuals reporting having been verbally assaulted, spat on and shunned in grocery stores, supermarkets and pharmacies. Most of the incidences occurred in California, New York and Texas.

Divide and Rule

In the meantime, a year has passed, information available about the virus has dramatically increased, yet Asian Americans continue to be scapegoated and victimized. The dramatic increase in conspiracy thinking over the past several months, promoted by right-wing media and politicians alike, has done its part to fuel the flames of anti-Asian prejudice and hatred. The most recent cases that have caught widespread attention have been deadly assaults on elderly Asian Americans in California. One victim, an 84-year-old man, was knocked to the ground in a San Francisco street by a young man. The victim died two days later of his injuries, with the perpetrator now facing murder and elder abuse charges. The other victim was a 91-year-old man, pushed to the ground by a young man wearing a mask and a hoodie in Oakland’s Chinatown. The victim survived the attack.

On the surface, the recent wave of anti-Asian hostility might easily be explained as being directly related to COVID-19. On second thought, however, things are significantly more complex and intricate. What might appear to be spontaneous outbursts of violence, verbal or physical — as, for instance against refugees in Germany and other Western European countries — are, in reality, the result of deep-seated diffuse resentments. What COVID-19 has done is to provide something like an excuse allowing these resentments to get out into the open.

To a large extent, as has been frequently pointed out these days, anti-Asian resentment is intimately tied to the myth of Asian Americans as the “model minority.” In this narrative, what accounts for the success of Asian Americans is intact family structures and a high priority accorded to education and traditional values such as thriftiness and discipline. This explains why, on average, Asian American household incomes have been higher than those of white households. As has also been noted, this narrative has been primarily used not to celebrate the achievements of Asian Americans but to blunt charges of racism and privilege. As Bill O’Reilly, the disgraced former Fox News star, asked rhetorically during a debate on the “truth of white privilege,” “Do we have Asian privilege in America?”

For O’Reilly and other prominent figures on the American right, the success of Asian Americans was a convenient occasion to bolster a rhetoric that blames blacks, Hispanics as well as the poor (independent of color) for their plight. If only they followed the example of Asian Americans, worked hard, kept their families together, and lived within their means — or so the charge goes — they too would be able to achieve the American dream. In short, individual flaws, rather than racism and discrimination, are to blame if some Americans fail “to make it.”

In order to bolster their case even further, right-wing “thought leaders” such as Charles Murray, the author, together with Richard Herrnstein, of the 1994 bestseller “The Bell Curve,” had no qualms to note that with regard to IQs, Asian Americans came out on top, ahead of whites. More recently, Murray wrote a short blog entry on the state of American education, charging that high schools were “going to hell” — unless “you’re Asian.” Analyzing SAT test scores over the past decade or so, Murry pointed out that the scores had declined for all major ethnic groups, except for Asians. Their scores had actually increased, and this not only in math, but also in verbal skills, where Asians had trailed whites in the past.

It should not entirely come as a surprise if comments like these and similar remarks provoke resentment, particularly on the part of minorities that are constantly subjected to this kind of comparison. One might suspect that this was exactly what was intended. By suggesting that Asian Americans might be “privileged” or pointing out, as Murray does, that Asian Americans constitute “the unprotected minority” they drove a wedge between minorities that share a common, if differentiated, history of oppression, discrimination and structural violence directed against them. In Roman times, they used to call this strategy of safeguarding one’s hegemonic position *divide et impera* — divide and rule.

A History of Migration

The history of Asian migration to the West Coast in the 19th and early 20th century is replete with episodes of anti-Asian mobilization. The arguably best-known case was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers — but only after they helped build the nation’s railway system. It came at the heel of intense anti-Chinese agitation, both “on the ground” in California and Oregon and in the US Congress. The rhetoric was highly charged, inflammatory — and meant to be so. In a speech on Chinese immigration, Senator Mitchell from Oregon, for instance, in 1876 characterized Chinese immigrants as a “festering sore which, like a plague-spot, has fastened itself upon the very vitals of our western civilization and which to day threatens to destroy it.”

Two years later, Representative Davis from California, in a speech in the House, warned that Chinese immigrants posed a fundamental threat to the institutions of the republic. The Chinese of California, Davis charged, clung to their nationality and separated themselves from other men; they were incapable “to change their ways and adapt themselves to their surroundings.” This alone rendered them “most undesirable immigrants.” Arrested in their development as a result of “ages of uniformity” that had “fixed the

type,” they had “nothing in sympathy with the social and political thoughts of a free people.” Instead, their “political aspirations” were limited to a “paternal despotism, with no conceptions of a popular government.”

This meant that the Chinese were unfit for life in the United States. Exclusion was the logical consequence, as were various measures adopted in the decades that followed targeting Asians. In the decades that followed, western states and territories passed various pieces of legislation that prevented aliens from acquiring land. Although general in nature, they were primarily directed against Chinese and particularly Japanese aliens.

One of the more ludicrous exclusionary measures was San Francisco’s Cubic Air Ordinance of 1870. Disguised as a sanitary measure, it was designed to expel Chinese workers from their crowded tenement quarters in the city’s Chinatown and thus “persuade” them to return to China. The ordinance led to the incarceration of thousands of Chinese from 1873 to 1886 “under a public health law driven by anti-Chinese sentiment.”

Even the populists, arguably the most progressive political force at the end of the 19th century, adopted nativist rhetoric directed against the Chinese. In the early 1890s, several state populist platforms included a passage calling for the exclusion of Chinese and/or Asian immigration. The passage appealed particularly to women who felt threatened by competition from Chinese men for domestic services and laundry jobs. Anti-Chinese agitators seized the opportunity and charged Chinese workers with threatening the job opportunities of working women. Anti-Asian exclusion and discrimination were also reflected in anti-miscegenation and naturalization laws. The first anti-miscegenation law, which derived its justification from views on racial distinctions and barred marriages between whites and Asians, was passed in 1861 by Nevada. In the decades that followed, 14 more states passed similar laws. It was not until the middle of the 20th century to miscegenation laws were abolished.

This was also the case when it came to naturalization, the right to which was established in the Naturalization Act of 1875 that restricted American citizenship to whites and blacks. Whenever Asian immigrants in subsequent decades petitioned for naturalization, American courts ruled that Asians belonged to the “Mongolian race.” Ergo, they were not white and, therefore, not eligible for citizenship. In response to these court cases, Congress passed a law in 1917 banning immigration from most parts of Asia. Seven years later, Congress passed a further measure, excluding foreign-born Asians from citizenship “because they no longer were able to enter the country, and they could no longer enter the country because they were ineligible for citizenship.” It was not until 1952 that race-based naturalization was formally abolished.

A Privileged Minority?

Given this background, the suggestion that Asian Americans somehow constitute a privileged minority so dear to right-wing apologists of white privilege rings more than hollow — as does the myth of the model minority. The reality is quite different. The narrative of Asian American success obscures, for instance, the fact that over the past decade or so, inequality has risen most dramatically among Asian Americans. According to Pew Research, between 1970 to 2016, the gap between Asians near the top and the bottom of the income ladder “nearly doubled, and the distribution of income among Asians transformed from being one of the most equal to being the most unequal among America’s major racial and ethnic groups.”

Poverty rates among Asian Americans have been slightly higher than among whites, with some groups, such as Hmong and Burmese, far above the national average. This underscores the fact that Asian Americans constitute a community that is ethnically, socioeconomically and, in particular, culturally highly diverse.

The dominant narrative of the model minority, largely promulgated by the white right, largely ignores these subtleties. Instead, it creates the

image of the privileged minority — singled out by the white majority compared over other minorities — and, in the process, sows discord among America’s subordinate communities. The resulting resentment goes a long way to explain the recent wave of anti-Asian hatred. It is hardly a coincidence that both recent hate crimes against Asian Americans in northern California were committed by blacks.

It is also hardly a coincidence that the two attacks put Asian American activists into a quandary. As one of them noted, “If addressing violence against Asian Americans entails furthering stereotypes about Black criminality and the policies associated with those stereotypes ... we’ve misdiagnosed the problem.” The problem, of course, is the widespread disgruntlement toward Asian Americans, wrongfully seen as constituting an “honorable white” minority bent on defending its privileges.

A case in point is the lawsuit launched against Harvard University in 2014 charging it with discriminating against Asian American applicants in favor of less-qualified black and Hispanic students. Hardly surprising, the Trump administration, ever eager to stir the resentment pot, sided with the plaintiffs. The administration’s brief argued that the evidence showed that “Harvard’s process has repeatedly penalized one particular racial group: Asian Americans. Indeed, Harvard concedes that eliminating consideration of race would increase Asian-American admissions while decreasing those of Harvard’s favored racial groups.”

For those in the know, the language echoed Murray’s notion of “protected groups.” Once again, divide et impera was in action. Courts finally rejected the plaintiffs’ case. But ill feelings are likely to linger on, feeding into extant resentments that appear to have poisoned the Asian American community’s relations with other visible minorities in the United States. Under the circumstances, anti-Asian hostility, hatred and violence are unlikely to fade out in the near future.

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Georgia's Democracy Is on the Brink of Chaos

Sebastian Schäffer & Jack Gill
February 26, 2021

If Georgia's latest political crisis cannot be solved, authoritarianism will emerge as the only winner in the situation.

The ongoing political crisis in Georgia has been ramped up a notch over the last few days. The polarization of Georgian society, which is reflected at the political level, has reached a new high after the parliamentary elections last October, but especially so since the arrest and imprisonment of opposition leader Nika Melia and the raid on his United National Movement (UNM) headquarters on February 23. In a gesture of defiance, Melia threw away his police tracking bracelet, which he had to wear due to the charges of inciting violence during protests in 2019, when the opposition accused the governing Georgian Dream party of being pro-Moscow and demonstrated against what they believe is Russian occupation.

Following the charges being brought against Melia, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned in protest. This has led to a situation now being described by people in Georgia as “hate being in the air,” drawing protesters into the streets in support of the opposition. While this has been a gradual development over the past decade, penetrating deep into the social fabric of Georgia, there is a looming danger of escalation today.

Turbulent Road to Democracy

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia has been on a road to real reform and European integration. In January 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili

became president and initiated, among other things, significant and wide-ranging reforms in justice and policing. Real change was visible and also felt by the population. Saakashvili's UNM stayed in power until 2012, when it was voted out and replaced by the populist billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition, which continues to run the country. Even though Ivanishvili withdrew from politics last month, he has a history of pulling the strings from the shadows — an impression reinforced by the recent appointment of Irakli Garibashvili, former defense minister and close ally of Ivanishvili, as Gakharia's replacement.

Nevertheless, even today, Saakashvili exerts influence on the politics of the UNM, despite having left the country in 2013 and having only stepped down as party leader in 2019. Saakashvili currently leads the executive committee of Ukraine's National Reform Council, and his recent inflammatory comments mentioning civil war are clearly unhelpful and serve to further division in Georgian society. As is the case in most political crises, there seems to be no option for neutrality within Georgia at the moment. Even a new election, which the UNM is calling for, would most likely result in nothing but another 50/50 split.

While the governing Georgian Dream coalition has certainly acted irrationally in case of Melia's arrest, to a certain extent, the events have been provoked by the UNM to further deepen the divide. These events come alongside accusations of Georgian Dream being too pro-Russian. Ivanishvili, the former prime minister the country's richest man, made his nearly \$5-billion fortune in the Russian Federation — a feat clearly only possible with close ties to the Kremlin. Yet the current government follows the approach of European integration and has even, rather optimistically, set a goal to apply for EU membership in 2024. This apparent disconnect can be explained by Georgian Dream trying to remain the party of the economy by maintaining open trade with Russia while embracing deeper European integration.

On the other hand, although the pro-European agenda of the UNM is beyond doubt, by undermining certain European values during its time in power, the party has shown its willingness to use authoritarian methods of governance, including human rights violations such as the Gldani prison scandal, which strongly contributed to its electoral downfall in 2012. It has since remained in opposition.

Volatility and Opportunity

The South Caucasus is becoming increasingly volatile. In September 2020, the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted once again in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to a six-week war between the two countries. In the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement signed on November 9, Azerbaijan gained control over the territories captured during the fighting, and beyond. Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power via peaceful protests in 2018 — the so-called Velvet Revolution — has now had to face protests himself. On February 25, the Armenian army demanded his resignation, which he refused, calling it an attempted coup.

Political instability in Georgia and Armenia, the persisting unsolved issue of breakaway territories and continued Russian involvement in the region, on top of the current COVID-19 crisis, make the region uncomfortably unstable at present. The pandemic has hit Georgia especially hard. As a country reliant on foreign tourism, many thousands in the industry have lost their jobs. With proportionally little government aid compared to Western European countries and with Georgian society only recently beginning to come out of a lockdown, societal tensions are running high and patience is wearing thin.

However, with woeful tidings comes an opportunity for the European Union's regional policy in Georgia. On March 3, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, will visit Georgia. Once again, this will be a delicate mission, as the main task must be to call on all parties to calm down, and the EU will need to

take the lead in facilitating that process. While the recent attack on the opposition should be condemned, it is possible that this could be interpreted by supporters of Georgian Dream as Brussels backing the UNM. Such a scenario needs to be avoided at all costs in order to prevent further escalating the conflict.

The EU finds itself in a uniquely advantageous position in Georgian politics. Both the UNM and Georgian Dream are committed pro-European political parties and actively seek EU membership for Georgia. If the EU were to engage both sides bilaterally, it could calm political nerves and potentially lead to it mediating a dialogue. Georgia has long looked to Brussels as a democratic role model to fulfill its European aspirations. In offering to mediate, the EU could incentivize both sides to come to the table and demonstrate their political maturity.

Although EU foreign policy has often struggled to find a common approach supported by all member states — still the dominant players in the external relations of the bloc — Michel might just be the right person. As Belgium's former prime minister, he has at least some experience in mediating internal political and societal polarization. And while Georgian politics is a far cry from the halls of Brussels, Michel can make use of the fact that both the UNM and Georgian Dream would bolster their pro-European credentials significantly if they were to heed Brussels' advice in this matter.

Staying on Course

Ultimately, if this political crisis cannot be solved, authoritarianism will be the only winner in this situation. Georgia's authoritarian neighbors — Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey — have made it through the pandemic politically unscathed, while Azerbaijan's recent victory in Nagorno-Karabakh has strengthened the Aliyev dynasty and left Armenia's extremely vulnerable democracy in peril. If Georgia's dwindling beacon of democracy, human rights and the rule of law were to falter, there may be little hope in

salvaging its remarkable advancements the country made over the last 20 years.

If the EU truly values the Eastern Partnership and shares Georgia's vision for eventual EU membership, more than warm gestures will be necessary on its part in this crisis. In order to save democracy in the Caucasus, the EU may have to show its mettle and get creative, for only it can provide the necessary incentives, be they political or economic, to inspire Georgia to stay on course.

In order to remind ourselves why events in this lesser-known region carry a wider significance, it is worth looking at its history. Almost to the day 100 years ago, the Red Army entered Tbilisi and Georgia lost its independence. Although the Soviet Union is long gone, there is a real danger that Georgia may lose its political independence if all parties involved do not find a way for a real dialogue.

Another conflict in the South Caucasus might just set the necessary precedent for another regional power play. We should not forget that the Russian army has been present on Georgian territory since the five-day war of 2008, with Moscow supporting Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's declaration of independence. The Kremlin has always been quick to seize an arising opportunity. It will surely be ready to reassert itself over Georgia and to restore fully its sphere of influence in the Caucasus.

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