

Fair Observer

Monthly



May 2022

Fair Observer^o

Fair Observer Monthly



May 2022

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Appeal to the UN to Protect Hazaras in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's civil society leaders
May 1, 2022

Civil society leaders, human rights activists and public intellectuals write an open letter to the UN, highlighting the persecution of the Hazara Shia community in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan.

30 April 2022

To:

H.E. António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General

CC:

H.E. Ambassador Barbara Woodward, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the UN and President of United Nations Security Council

H.E. Ambassador Federico Villegas, Permanent Representative of Argentina and President of United Nations Human Rights Council

Excellencies,

We are writing this letter to express our grave concern about the escalation of violence targeting the Hazara Shia communities in Afghanistan. We are writing to demand your immediate action to address these targeted attacks, which can amount to crime against humanity, and when taken together, constitute an act of genocide. We believe the persistent and deliberate campaign of violence against the Shia Hazara community in Afghanistan requires an urgent and coordinated response by the United Nations and the international community.

On April 19, 2022, a high school and an education center in a Hazara neighborhood in West of Kabul, Afghanistan were bombed, killing and maiming scores of school children. The next day, an attack on a Shia Hazara mosque in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif was bombed, killing thirty one and injuring eighty seven worshipers attending prayers during the holy month of Ramadan. Local reports, however, indicate a much higher level of casualties. Another mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif was also attacked on the same day and in the same manner, killing and injuring dozens. On April 28, two explosions targeting civilian mini-buses in Mazar-i-Sharif killed at least eleven and wounded at least eighteen Hazaras. On the same day, five Hazara miners traveling in a civilian passenger car were stopped and shot dead in Samangan province.

While terrorist attacks such as the last week's horrific attacks on Sufi Mosques in Kunduz and Kabul provinces continue to affect civilians throughout Afghanistan, the attacks on Hazaras represent a pattern in recent years that target Hazara-Shia mosques, schools, education centers, public gatherings, sports clubs, public transports, and even maternity hospitals. In the first six months of 2021 UNAMA recorded 20 deliberate attacks against the Hazara ethnic group, resulting in around 500 civilian casualties. The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate group of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), claimed responsibility for most attacks, including recent incidents in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, although perpetrators have not claimed responsibility for some attacks.

Residents, observers of Afghanistan, and international human rights groups have raised constant concern about such a growing trend of targeted violence against Hazaras. In October 2021, after a series of attacks on Shia Hazara mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar, that killed and wounded hundreds, Human Rights Watch characterized the attacks as "designed to spread

terror and inflict maximum suffering, particularly on Afghanistan's Hazara community." The statement highlighted that *"the numerous attacks targeting Hazaras amount to crimes against humanity, and those responsible should be brought to justice."*

In May 2021, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) called on the Afghan government and the international community to consider the Hazaras as a "population at risk of war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing or genocide". In July 2021, Genocide Watch issued an emergency warning for Afghanistan, stating, "The Hazara religious minority is a portent of an approaching genocide." In August 2021, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a similar statement underlining the risk of genocide against Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Hazaras have a long history of persecution in Afghanistan at the hands of state and non-state actors such as the Taliban and other extremist groups. This history and recent events align with the warning factors of mass atrocity crimes that the United Nations identified in the 2014 Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes.

The return of the Taliban to power has made the Hazaras more vulnerable and subject to increased violence. On August 19, 2021, Amnesty International released a report documenting the Taliban's targeted attacks against Hazaras and called the group responsible for the *"brutal massacre of Hazara men"* in Ghazni and Daykundi provinces. Since coming to power in August 2021, the Taliban forcibly removed hundreds of Hazara families from their homes and villages in Helmand, Uruzgan, Daykundi, and Balkh provinces. This is compounded by the Taliban history of brutality against the community, including massacring thousands of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif (1998), Bamyán (2001), and Zabul (between 1996 and 2001).

In January 2022, following its report on

Afghanistan, the UK Parliament's House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence established a bi-cameral and cross-party inquiry team on the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The report stated that *"The Hazaras have a long history of suffering state persecution on both ethnic and sectarian grounds."*

Following these most recent attacks targeting Hazaras in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, human rights groups and officials in the international community, including The UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan Richard Bennett, expressed concerns about these "targeted attacks on Hazaras", and called for "immediate investigation and accountability" to "end such human rights violations." Similar statements of condemnation and calls for action have been made by special representatives and Ministers of Foreign Affairs in the EU, Sweden, Norway, and Canada. Afghanistan's diplomatic missions to the UN and in many countries in Europe, North America, and South Asia also expressed concerns and demanded immediate international attention to attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructures in Afghanistan, particularly in Hazaras and Shia communities.

However, more must be done to protect the Hazaras in Afghanistan, especially by the United Nations. Thus, we, the undersigned group of intellectuals, academics, human rights, media, and civil society activists from Afghanistan and around the world, urge the United Nations to take immediate actions addressing human rights situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan, and adopt appropriate measures to protect the community against risks of genocide and crimes against humanity. We urge you to:

- Call a special session of the United Nations Security Council to discuss, as matter of urgency, the situation of the Hazaras and adopt a resolution ensuring that the community will be protected against such heinous targeted attacks;

- Call for a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to discuss and address the ongoing genocidal attacks on Hazaras, and work to prevent such atrocities and bring the perpetrators to justice;
- Launch an immediate investigation into the targeted killing of the Hazara and Shias in Afghanistan, and use instruments under the international law to address and put an end to the perpetual killings of Hazaras;
- Request the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan to collect and publicize substantiated information relating to grave violations of international human rights law, including breaches of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide committed against the Hazaras;
- Request UNAMA and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan to submit a special report on the situation of Hazaras identifying urgent and practical measures to protect the community against targeted attacks and mass atrocities.

Sincerely,

1. Dr. Sima Samar, Former Chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
2. Shaharзад Akbar, Former Chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
3. Dr. Nasir A. Andesha, Ambassador, Afghanistan Mission, Geneva,
4. Naseer A. Faiq, Charge d'Affaires, Afghanistan Permanent Mission to the United Nations, New York
5. Dr. Abbas Farasoo, University of Melbourne, Australia
6. Dr. Ali Karimi, University of Pennsylvania, USA
7. Dr. Arif Sahar, Sheffield University, UK

8. Dr. Dawood Rezai, Legal Scholar, Canada
9. Dr. Elham Gharji, University of Coimbra, Portugal
10. Dr. Farkhondeh Akbari, Monash University, Australia
11. Dr. Hadi Hosainy, Texas Christian University, USA
12. Dr. Hasan Faryaar, Carleton University, Canada
13. Dr. Humaira May Rizayee, Hazara rights activist, UK
14. Dr. Kambaiz Rafi, University College London, UK
15. Dr. Mejgan Massoumi, Lecturer & Fellow, Stanford University, USA
16. Dr. Melissa Chiovenda, Zayed University, UAE.
17. Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimy, La Trobe University, Australia
18. Dr. Omar Sadr, University of Pittsburgh, USA
19. Dr. Omar Sharifi, American University of Afghanistan/University of Minnesota, USA
20. Dr. Qasim Wafayezada, Kanazawa University, Japan
21. Dr. Rabia Latif Khan, SOAS University of London, UK
22. Dr. Sardar Hosseini, University of Ottawa, Canada
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24. Harun Najafizada, Journalist, UK
25. Jalil Benish, PhD Candidate, Ryerson University, Canada
26. Jawad Raha, Former Diplomat, USA
27. Kawa Jobran, University Lecturer, Canada
28. Metra Mehran, Fellow, New York University, USA
29. Mohammad Asif Ehsan, Attorney, USA
30. Mohamad Musa Mahmodi, Fellow, Yale University, USA
31. Munazza Ebtikar, PhD Candidate, Oxford University, UK
32. Musa Zafar, PhD Candidate, Fiji National University, Fiji

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33. Ofran Badakhshani, Chairman of Gilgamesh Foundation, Brussels
 34. Said Sabir Ibrahim, Non-resident Fellow, New York University
 35. Sameer Bedrud, former diplomat, Canada
 36. Sanjar Suhail, Publisher and Founder, Hasht-e-Subh Daily, Afghanistan
 37. Sayed Madadi, Reagan-Fascell Fellow, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
 38. Shoaib Rahim, American University of Afghanistan/The New School, New York
 39. Tabish Forugh, Democracy Activist and Contributing Editor at Fair Observer, USA
 40. Wadood Pedram, Human Rights Activist, Canada
 41. Zaki Daryabi, Publisher and Founder, Daily Etilaat-e- Roz, Afghanistan
 42. Zuhail Salim, Former Diplomat of Afghanistan to the UN, USA.
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***Afghanistan's civil society leaders** is a group of Afghanistan's leading public intellectuals from different walks of life come together to stand up for the rights of the Hazara Shia community.

Is France Ready to Storm a New Bastille?

Peter Isackson
May 10, 2022

A newly united left in France proposes an ambitious program, bridging social justice, ecology and European reform that could challenge Europe's neoliberal establishment.

In case no one has noticed, the world's geopolitical order in 2022 is not only under severe stress, it has actually begun shaking beneath our feet with an acceleration in

the past week. The ongoing Mariupol drama is reaching its final gruesome act, which will likely change everyone's (meaning the media's) perception of the state of the Ukraine war, without pointing in the direction of peace or any kind of possible permanent solution. Whatever the outcome for the people of Ukraine, there will however be long-lasting global consequences, most of them defying anyone's ability to predict.

One of the consequences that is already being felt concerns the status of democracy in many regions of the world. By status I mean not just the attribution of power to different categories of political force, but the idea people hold of what democracy is, whose interests it represents and how it should play out in terms of actual governance. France may be the latest and most interesting example of the challenge to that status.

The American model for democracy

In the West, and more particularly in the US, a nation that has been labeled the birthplace of modern democracy, most youngsters are taught in school that constitutional democracy, unlike other more arbitrary forms of government, aims at being both fair and reasoned. They assume that for the most part it achieves its fair and reasonable goals thanks to a carefully constructed system of checks and balances.

In theory, democratic institutions are designed to reflect a logical pattern by which the population of any political entity, from a township to a nation, elects leaders committed to securing the resources and defining policies that respond flexibly and appropriately to the physical, social and economic environment its citizens live in. Democratic decision-making follows from what people believe to be an open dialogue about actions required for the security and well-being of its citizens.

Democracy produces governments in which all citizens are involved to the extent that they choose leaders who reflect their needs, values

and interests. Decision-making becomes complex at the level of a nation state, particularly in a world that has become increasingly diverse and mobile. Presumably the leaders elected in modern states nevertheless understand the complexity of the balancing act that representing a diverse population requires. Nobody ever believed that would be an easy task.

In a stable world, most capable leaders — and even quite a few incapable ones — manage to juggle with competing forces. On one hand, they respond to powerful private interests that sit often invisibly at the core of the economy. On the other hand, they try to remain sensitive to public pressure that expresses itself in a variety of forms, transmitted notably by the media and omnipresent polls in the periods between elections. This pressure from the undefined masses incites leaders to find ways of keeping most of their citizens reasonably happy, or at least minimally unhappy. In times of relative stability, this to-and-fro occurs within social and economic systems that evolve very slowly, usually by tiny incremental steps.

Most leaders see their job as consisting of managing a slow evolution within a stable historical framework. They have no means of predicting the earthquakes that occasionally shake history itself, suddenly throwing it off kilter. In the typical two-party systems of modern democracies, politicians have learned to master the dynamics of alternating access to power. Essentially, they provide the same product, but with a different label and a different tagline. They are comfortable knowing there are periods when, having lost an election, they may forfeit the reins of power and literally relax as members of the opposition, whose actions will not be criticized. They spend their time in the opposition critiquing their opponents and investing their creativity in plotting their return to power.

Problems, however, arise when history itself becomes unstable, when the equilibrium

of a certain habitual balance of power begins to falter. It was the case in Europe, for example, towards the end of the 18th century (1789) and again in the early 20th century (1914-17). At such times, instability takes the form of highly irrational and uncontrollably complicated wars and revolutions. Leaders accustomed to managing the routine of occasional domestic tension and generally anodyne international rivalries, begin to lose their foothold. They will typically seek to keep their populations in check and avoid revolution. But they lack the means to deal with the chthonic forces of history. We appear to be entering into such a period in 2022.

The psychology of leadership

Leaders see themselves as actors in the scripted play of history. But to act in politics, as opposed to theater or cinema, means not just to follow a script but to observe history and craft appropriate reactions to the unexpected. In democracies, as opposed to autocracies, leaders should think of themselves as “fair observers” and act accordingly. (A fair observer seeks to integrate the widest range not just of information but of sensitivity to the dynamic forces of history that defy the logic of pure information).

Faced with the challenge of a moment in history in which even the values assumed to be shared by people convinced that they represent an evolved form of civilization are called into question, we may legitimately wonder whether it is even possible for any leader to be simultaneously both an actor and an observer of history. In such moments, leaders typically fail to observe, but proceed to act. As soon as they act, they become observed by others. At the same time, the very awareness of being observed may distort their own ability to observe, precipitating actions based on faulty and disastrously incomplete observation. This is one way of accounting for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s actions that have now

spawned a global crisis that extends far beyond the Russian-Ukrainian border.

But the same pattern of failure to observe accompanied by a compulsion to act holds true for other leaders, especially when the degree of instability makes the consequences of any action especially risky. US President Joe Biden appears to be as clueless about where the forces of history are moving as Putin himself. Both have responded to specific pressure points on the system of power they have been charged with maintaining. Both have misjudged some of the forces of history at play in the background.

Putin reacted to three decades of shifting policies in the West, which appeared to him aggressive with regard to his own power and the stability of his system. This ever-increasing pressure was accompanied by an observable decline of the effective power and prestige of the American hegemon following its catastrophic military initiatives in Afghanistan and the Middle East since 2001.

Biden reacted to the growing challenge felt across the globe to the supremacy the US established three quarters of a century ago following the Second World War. Not only has US prestige declined as a consequence of George Bush's Middle Eastern wars and the financial collapse of 2008, but the perception that the official supremacy of the US dollar can now for the first time be effectively challenged has created a growing resolve in the rest of the world to overthrow what is perceived as the tyranny of the dollar over the global economy. That vague but increasingly well-defined perception of fragility is becoming as symbolically real as the French population's perception of the significance of the Bastille prison in 1789.

Will France overthrow the 5th Republic?

Though any fair observer of history should be aware of the providential power of symbols, it is perhaps only a coincidence that France is poised to use its democratic institutions not just

to call into question the system Charles de Gaulle put in place more than six decades ago, the Fifth Republic, but also to send shock waves capable of producing significant cracks in the façade of Western complacency.

For the third time a candidate representing the right or the center-right defeated a far-right candidate with the surname, Le Pen. The first time Jacques Chirac, a direct descendent of the original Gaullist party, defeated Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the xenophobic Front National. Emmanuel Macron has now defeated Jean-Marie's daughter, Marine, twice. It has become a sport of establishment politicians in France to maneuver the electoral processes so as to find themselves opposed to a far-right candidate in the runoff election for president. Victory is practically certain. Legitimacy is claimed at a very low cost.

Macron played the game perfectly to ensure his re-election. The problem he perhaps hadn't anticipated is that, not having the talent or even the inclination to create a well-defined party to back his presidential status, a resurgence of unity on the right or the left could imperil his chances to reign over a fragmented political landscape. He assumed that the egoistical rivalries and the thin skin of representatives of the traditional parties would guarantee the gap in the center that he managed to consolidate into a fragile simulacrum of a political party after his victory in 2017.

Alas, to Macron's consternation, a strong showing in third place during the presidential election in April by the former socialist and resolutely progressive leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon created the conditions that would convince the previously warring parties on the left, including the Green party and the communists, to imagine a program of government they would all adhere to in their quest for a parliamentary majority coming out of June's legislative election. This is bad news for Macron, who can only count on traditional political opportunists from the center-right and

center-left to join forces with him in a movement he has rechristened the Renaissance (formerly, *la République en Marche*). Very few French voters feel inspired by Macron's example. His hope is that just as they preferred electing him to a candidate on the extreme right, they will react similarly to a threat from the left, which they will try to represent as extreme.

There may be a slight problem with the symbolism of the new moniker of his party. By claiming to represent a Renaissance, he may be implicitly suggesting his former term as president was the equivalent of the Dark Ages. And in some sense, it was, marked by the revolt of the Yellow Vests and the black plague of Covid. But the French remember the Renaissance as a period of history dominated by kings that was eventually overturned by the 1789 revolution.

Could the unified left seize effective power over the government? Legally, Macron is in place for five years. But the left has adopted a theme Mélenchon has insisted on for the past five years: replacing the Fifth Republic by a Sixth Republic, which would be less focused on presidential powers. If Macron is forced to nominate a left-wing prime minister — the most likely candidate being Mélenchon himself — pressure could mount towards establishing a new constitution. Though the kind of constitutional regime change a Sixth Republic would represent appears unlikely so long as Macron remains president, the worm is already in the apple. At some point there is likely to be a constitutional crisis with an uncertain outcome, capable of upsetting the supposed stability of what may be called “the European compromise,” a philosophy of governance built on the twin pillars of Anglo-Saxon liberalism and dependency on US leadership in European defense via NATO.

Among the planks of its platform, the left calls specifically for a radical revision of the strategy concerning Europe. While reaffirming France's adherence to the European Union, the

left-wing government coalition has vowed to put pressure on Europe to move away from its traditional neoliberal ideology. This frame of reference has, in the eyes of many Europeans, not just in France, become more and more fragile as the source of shared values. This could eventually lead to fracturing what has become an increasingly fragile consensus between Europe and the United States. With the end of the Fifth Republic one of the main goals of Charles de Gaulle could then be paradoxically fulfilled: releasing France, and possibly Europe itself, from the iron grip of Washington.

What is happening in France is not an isolated event. Brazil will have a new presidential election later this year. Polling shows a profound dissatisfaction with its right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro, who won election five years ago thanks to highly suspect legal maneuvering. The likely winner of the new election is left-wing former president Lula da Silva. One of the promises da Silva has made this time around is to “create a currency in Latin America, because we can't keep depending on the dollar.” Voices in the Beltway are likely to announce, “Them's fightin' words.” This was, after all, the ambition of the late Muammar Gaddafi for the entire African continent. That is, in a brief moment of history before US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton intervened to make sure that she would subsequently have the opportunity to proclaim, “we came, we saw, he died.”

The American sanctions against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine have led to an acceleration of initiatives emanating from various quarters to free the global economy from the enforced dominance of the dollar. For five decades or more it has been a tool not so much of payment for international trade as of political control, allowing the US, either through its own efforts or those of the International Monetary Fund, to have its cake and eat it. The establishment of the dollar as the

world's reserve currency in 1944, followed by President Richard Nixon's decoupling of this currency from the gold standard in 1971, forced other countries to hold their credit in dollars (US Treasury securities), meaning that the wealth thus created abroad was transferred implicitly back to the US economy. Every fluctuation in value — devaluation and revaluation — could be used by Washington to its own political and economic advantage. As economist Michael Hudson explains, “This monetary privilege—dollar seigniorage—has enabled U.S. diplomacy to impose neoliberal policies on the rest of the world.”

In other words, there are indications that a fracturing of the neoliberal economic and political world order initially established at Bretton Woods nearly 80 years ago and then transformed by Nixon in 1971, creating the first theoretical compromise in its integrity, is now taking place. The last three decades have seen two major evolutions. The first is the failure of Europe to achieve its collective hope of acquiring the kind of influence that might redress the balance of power in relation to the United States. The second is the rise of China to a level of economic and political clout that has forced a massive rethinking of global hegemony.

Speculation about the destabilizing impact of the rise of what has been called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) on geopolitical power has been rife the past two decades. China finally emerged as an economic powerhouse unto itself, capable of directly challenging US hegemony. Russia, with a weaker economy, has continued to play an increasingly abrasive political role, culminating with the current war in Ukraine. As the tectonic movement in various latitudes begins to increase, India, Brazil and South Africa will see emerging opportunities to exert their influence on events in a world that is clearly starting to have a very different look from the one people have been accustomed to in recent decades.

Though not quite in the same league, France itself may have a role to play, and as so often in the past, that role will be cultural and intellectual rather than a manifestation of its limited political and economic clout. If the move towards a Sixth Republic actually commences, its symbolic importance for the rest of the world should not be underestimated. Europe will be the first to take notice if an unanticipated French government under Macron begins rowing against the established European current.

Mark it on your speculative calendars. The 21st century's Bastille Day may well be June 19, the date of the second round of next month's legislative elections. Even if the left is successful, its moral victory will not be followed by “impure blood” in the furrows, nor a Reign of Terror, nor the rise of a new Napoleon. But its disruptive message will resonate throughout Europe and beyond mainly because the old order, which Macron still represents, is losing its footing across the globe.

***Peter Isackson** is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer, an author and media producer

The Tories Get a Thumping in Local UK Elections

Al Ghaff and Atul Singh
May 11, 2022

Do the 2022 UK local elections mark the beginning of the end of Boris Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party?

The political tremors of the 2022 local election results will be keenly felt for months and years to come across the United Kingdom with potentially severe consequences for the Union.

As the ballots are counted and results are declared across the country, a clear picture emerges: these local elections are the most consequential local elections in decades.

If the results of the local elections were to be replicated in a general election, we will find ourselves in hung Parliament territory where several scenarios could emerge, primarily based on and dictated by the number of seats secured in the House of Commons by the Labour and Liberal Democrats.

Bumbling Boris

Boris Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party has been a controversial one. The Conservatives and the country have not experienced a leader like Johnson before. His career as a journalist and politician is littered with transgressions and misdemeanors.

Boris Johnson is the ultimate Teflon politician. In the words of his lifelong friend and rival David Cameron, "Boris always been able to get away with things that mere mortals can't". Cameron certainly did not get away with the Brexit referendum that led to his downfall as prime minister. In contrast, Johnson has sailed through one scandal after another and won a thumping majority in the 2019 elections.

Before those elections, Johnson's unconventional leadership of the Tories in its first few months involved unlawfully proroguing Parliament and removing the whip from 21 of his MPs who voted to block a disastrous no-deal Brexit that the prime minister was pursuing at the time. Those MPs included party grandees and bigwigs such as former chancellors of the exchequer Ken Clarke and Phillip Hammond, and former ministers Dominic Grieve, Oliver Letwin, Rory Stewart, Ed Vaizey, and even Nicholas Soames, the grandson of the revered wartime Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Johnson's leadership of the Conservatives involves an implicit pact between himself and his party. His history of transgressions and

misdemeanors, and economic relationship with the truth and facts as well as his antiques are tolerated as long as he wins elections. In the 2019 elections, Johnson upheld his side of the bargain and delivered an 80-seat majority for the Conservatives.

In the wake of the 2019 election results, Tory strategists and spin doctors claimed that Boris' antics and his scandalous personal life were always 'priced in' by large parts of the electorate. Last week's local election results dispute this Tory claim. It turns out that voters repeatedly raised the partygate scandal when campaigners and journalists turned up at their doorsteps.

The Conservative Party is extraordinary at winning elections. They are good at stealing the clothes of other parties and doing what is necessary to win. That involves ruthlessly knifing their leaders when they stop winning. No Tory leader has been exempt from this rule, including Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. Yet Tory knifing is a clinical cold-blooded affair. MPs knife their leader when credible successors lie in wait to mount the saddle.

So far, Johnson has ensured that there is no successor lying in wait. Despite partygate and the cost-of-living crisis, Johnson's position is secure because he has ruthlessly eliminated all potential rivals. Rishi Sunak, the current chancellor of the exchequer, was once touted as a potential prime minister but, like Icarus, he has come down to earth. Johnson is a Balliol classicist who wanted to be "world king" when he was young. Cloak and dagger palace intrigues come naturally to him. Sunak and his wife have been thrown to the wolves by the so-called Bumbling Boris whose team have leaked juicy tales of the couple's domicile, tax and financial affairs, causing outrage among voters. Sunak can now kiss goodbye to prime minister ambitions. A career managing his father-in-law's billions from sunny California seems more probable.

The local elections have been nothing short of disastrous for the Tories. Nearly 2,000 seats were in play. They were voted out in a quarter of the seats they were defending. Losing so many seats should put pressure on Johnson. His fast and loose reputation with the truth has finally come to haunt the Conservative Party. However, the Tories do not have any potential successors in sight and Johnson is secure for now.

Johnson is not like Cameron who resigned after losing the Brexit referendum. He has thick skin and no sense of shame. Johnson is not going to resign because he is found guilty of wrongdoing, misconduct or misjudgment. As one cabinet ally puts it, “He’s not going anywhere, his fingernails have been dug into the Downing Street window frames and he would be taken away kicking and screaming.”

Johnson is certainly in the mood to fight back against any attempt by Conservative MPs to remove him from power. For now, he still has the support of the conservative-leaning press. Tory-sympathizing journalists have gone into overdrive to spin the disastrous local elections as largely inconsequential and irrelevant for the Conservative Party. They take the view that these local elections were not a referendum on Johnson.

There is another key factor to note. The prime minister has a track record of resorting to unconstitutional methods, unlawful actions and top-level deceit to save his skin. At the moment, the only way Johnson will leave 10 Downing Street is through an election defeat.

Starmer Stakes All

Elections are complicated affairs. They are not as simple as one party or candidate beating the other. In general, power changes hands only when the ruling party loses energy, direction or cohesion or any combination of the three and the opposition party gets its act together to emerge as a ruling party in waiting. In the British system, any change in power takes two

to tango. When John Major lost in 1997, the Tories were divided, discredited, exhausted and bereft of new ideas after 18 years in power. In contrast, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown offered fresh energy and projected competence. Like the 1997 elections, other changes in power were also such dual acts involving both ruling and opposition parties.

Currently, Keir Starmer is the leader of the Labour Party. He is a distinguished barrister who headed the Crown Prosecution Service. He took over in April 2020 after two failed leaders. Jeremy Corbyn presided over five turbulent and disastrous years. Before him, the uninspiring Ed Miliband squandered another five years. Starmer seemed like a sane and surefooted choice for the Labour Party. Here was a safe pair of hands who would return competence and order to the office of the Leader of Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition.

Unlike most of his predecessors, Starmer is not a political animal. His approach to politics is measured and forensic. His early performances during the weekly Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) caught Johnson off guard. Starmer’s lawyerly approach and mannerisms were in direct contrast to that of Johnson’s populist, colorful, and theatrical political style. This rattled some Tory nerves in the early days and cheered Labour backbenchers.

Starmer’s star has waned since. His backhanded political operations and communication blunders have not helped. Starmer is comfortable with big decisions but has a blind spot for the minutiae that drive modern politics. Some of these big decisions have long been necessary. Starmer has removed the whip from Corbyn and purged Corbynistas from key offices. Starmer has also worked hard to make

Labour electable again.

On Monday, May 9 — three days after the local elections — Starmer rolled the dice to take the biggest gamble of his political life. The Labour

leader announced that he will step down if found guilty of breaking the stringent lockdown rules when he visited Durham, a historic city in Northeast England, in 2021 during the election campaign.

Starmer's announcement is a very bold move. If he is cleared by the Durham Police, Starmer will stand tall next to a prime minister alleged to have misled parliament over partygate, a resigning matter under 'normal' circumstances. If Starmer's move comes off, it will be the political equivalent of checkmating Boris Johnson. If Starmer is found guilty and resigns, his leadership will come to a premature end and it is unclear if the next Labour leader would benefit from such a move. The fate of British politics lies in balance on the Durham Police investigation.

Old Wine in New Bottle

Regardless of what transpires in Durham, the recent local elections provide a roadmap to toppling Tories from power. Starmer and Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey are carefully treading a path once charted by their charismatic predecessors in the 1990s. Then Blair and Paddy Ashdown forged a Labour-Liberal non-aggression pact to unseat the Tories from power. Starmer and Davey hope this may be a winning model for the next parliamentary elections.

While Starmer only became an MP in 2015, Davey first entered parliament in the historic elections of 1997. He benefits from the advice of Baroness Olly Greener, a veteran of the Ashdown years known for her political nous. Starmer lacks Davey's long history and subconscious memory but the Labour leader is proving to be ruthless and flexible in his pursuit for power.

Starmer and Davey might find it hard to replicate the Blair and Ashdown deal. However, the current leaders are well aware of the dividends such an arrangement could bring. If both their parties can avoid bloodletting, they

could mount a challenge to Tories discredited by Johnson's repeated shenanigans.

If the results of the recent local elections were replicated in the next parliamentary elections, the UK would have a hung parliament with no party having a clear majority. If Labour and Liberal Democrats can build on what they have done, they could oust the Tories. Both opposition parties have a strong incentive to cooperate and their leaders seem to be sensible enough to do so.

Brexit Dividend

Even though Brexit is now fait accompli, it continues to haunt British politics. The Brexit business model championed by hardline Brexiteers is flawed, irrational, contorted and thus bound to malfunction. The so-called Brexit Dividend of their dreams has so far failed to materialize. In fact, the Boris-led Brexit is turning out to be an expensive deal for the country. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has estimated "the decline in trade volumes to bring about 4% reduction in the size of Britain's economy over the long run, in line with its pre-Brexit forecast". Elsewhere, experts have calculated that Brexit is currently costing the economy to the tune of £800 million a week — and counting.

So far, the Tories have managed to hide the economic self-harm caused by Brexit. They argue that the economic downturn is due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the squeeze on household budgets and the cost-of-living crisis is chipping away at this Tory narrative. Voters might not yet be in the mood to punish the Conservative Party for Brexit, but they will certainly punish Tories for the pain they are suffering thanks to economic mismanagement.

For the foreseeable future, the Conservative brand will be intimately associated with Brexit and its economic consequences. The recent elections demonstrate that the national backdrop provides the mood music even for

local voter choices. Westminster and Wandsworth Councils, two historically and symbolically significant Tory councils, were won by the Labour Party in the early hours of the morning of May 6. Safe Tory seats in affluent parts of Southwest England such as Richmond and St Albans fell to the Liberal Democrats. In the words of George W. Bush, the Conservatives have taken a “thumping.”

The Disunited Kingdom

Bush never quite recovered from that 2006 midterm thumping. He left the US divided over Iraq and in the throes of a global financial crisis. Under Bumbling Boris, the Tories have embraced a disastrous Brexit business model and a toxic English ethnonationalism that threatens the integrity of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland itself.

On May 5, Sinn Féin achieved a historic victory in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. This has sent shockwaves through the Unionist Movement that seeks to keep Northern Ireland in the UK. Sinn Féin’s victory has caused further embarrassments, anxiety, and alarm for the Conservative and Unionist Party — the full name of the Tory Party — in London.

The Irish Question dominated British politics a century ago. After World War I, Ireland won its long-cherished independence from the UK and disintegrated into civil war. Northern Ireland remained in the UK but the Troubles broke out in the late 1960s. A violent sectarian conflict between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists caused much tragedy in this picturesque land till the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This period of peace might be coming to an end.

Never before have Catholic nationalists who aim for the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic wielded power in Belfast. The unionists are unlikely to accept the dominance of the republicans in Northern Ireland.

The election results in Northern Ireland have put into stark relief the Northern Ireland Protocol negotiated by Johnson with the EU. It was backed by his unionist allies, especially the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). In these elections, the unionists were divided and Sinn Féin trumped DUP to emerge as the top dog in Northern Irish politics. Together, the unionists have a greater vote share but the specter of a reunion with Ireland looms large.

Even as Northern Ireland threatens to slip out of the UK, so does Scotland. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has campaigned for independence from London before. The SNP is now the natural ruling party of Scotland and is chipping away at the foundations of the union. In the long run, the SNP wants a second referendum and to turn Scotland into an independent nation. In the Brexit referendum, Scots voted to stay in the EU. Leaving the UK and entering the EU is the SNP ambition. Bumbling Boris and political gravity are helping their cause.

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India Looks to Finland for an Effective Educational Model

Peter Isackson
May 11, 2022

A tiny European country may provide the key to elevating the education of the world’s biggest student population.

For some time, the world of education has become aware of the exceptional success of Finland's boldly innovative education system. The ideas that guided the Finnish government were not new or original. They have been debated, applied, experimented and validated by educational reformers in multiple contexts for more than a century. Finland is the only country to have put them into formal practice on a national scale.

The theoretical foundations were pioneered by philosophers and psychologists, with major contributions from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. They produced a philosophy of education generally referred to as "constructivism." Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is holistic, meaning it is constructed non-linearly through the accumulation of varied and interconnected learning experiences. It opposes the standard linear approach practiced everywhere that breaks the process of learning down into the mechanical presentation and assimilation of formally defined facts, rules and principles.

Being Guru sums up the major principles that underlie Finland's vision for educational efficacy.

- Cooperation trumps competition.
- Teaching is a profession respected in the community.
- Research on learning trumps political reasoning.
- Experimentation and diversity of teaching styles are encouraged.
- Playtime is a valuable and necessary part of the learning experience.
- Homework is banned to avoid distorting the emergence of knowledge.
- High-quality pre-school focuses on the preconditions for active, cooperative learning.

Finland is of course a small country of 5.5

million people on the northern edge of Europe. Recently, reformers in many nations have made desultory attempts at applying Finland's success story to their own educational environments. The quest has been elusive, for a number of cultural and political reasons. One American commentator explains, for example, that "Finland's educational system was driven by a culture that supports a strong social contract," something absent in US culture. An even stronger argument is that the educational systems of other nations, with much larger populations, are so entrenched politically and economically that reforming them is a challenge beyond the capacity of their governments.

Al Jazeera reports an initiative in India with the potential to presage a massive cultural revolution. "Schools offering activity-based learning over textbook-based education," the article affirms, "are emerging across India." The article describes a process that represents "a sharp break from the doctrinaire approach that has long dominated Indian education."

How is it then that India, with the largest student population in the world (an estimated 315 million), appears to be moving towards adopting the Finnish philosophy?

European education was once organized around the humanistic principle of "the liberal arts." With the advent of the industrial revolution that transformed European and ultimately the global economy, education moved its focus to the concept of mechanically acquired, compartmentalized knowledge definitively breaking with the more holistic notion of learning conceived as the mastery of multiple arts.

In 1835, Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, an Englishman intent on establishing order in his nation's colony in South Asia, began his campaign to format the idea of education in India in a way that would be consistent with the goals of the colony's new masters. England's imperial industrial economy had evolved into a

tool of global domination. It was time for “civilization” to displace India’s culturally-rooted tradition of “gurus and their shishyas” who “lived together helping each other in day-to-day life.”

Over the past two centuries, Indians have learned to accept and replicate an alien education system built by the British. The recent embrace of Finnish educational philosophy may signal a revolution for education but, paradoxically, also a return to at least the spirit of ancient Indian traditions.

All revolutions encounter resistance. Al Jazeera quotes Pia Jormanainen, a founder of the Finnish school now collaborating with the Indians: “We’ve had schools ask us to craft the syllabus for their teachers. That’s fundamentally against our approach.” Bad habits are always difficult to change.

Today’s Weekly Devil’s Dictionary definition:

Syllabus:

A body of formalized knowledge presented as the sum of all useful information, specifically designed to impose a restricted view of the world consistent with the goals of a ruling elite

Contextual note

Collaboration as opposed to competition plays out even at the level of the composition of teaching staff for the Indian schools adopting the Finnish approach. “At Finland International School, every class will have two trained teachers — one Finnish, the other Indian — and an assistant. The aim is “to deliver the best of the Finnish model in an Indian context.”

The article emphasizes the obvious fact that, for the moment, the adoption and experimentation of Finnish principles of education is limited to private schools. This has led to concern “that Indian private schools — mostly catering to children from privileged backgrounds — will not be able to ensure equal access to quality education and teaching, a

foundational principle of Finland’s public school-based model.” But institutions such as the Jain Heritage School and Nordic High International have not only adopted and successfully applied the Finnish approach, they have been investing in the teacher training required to make the system work and spread. An Indian company, Finland Education Hub provides this definition of its mission: “to create meaningful improvement in India’s school education system by embedding the best educational practices from Finland.”

The real question is whether a significant portion of the population, with no access to expensive private schools, can eventually benefit from the effort now being made. “The education minister of Kerala, arguably home to India’s best government-run schools,” Al Jazeera reports, “announced earlier this month that the state would partner with Finland on teacher training, curriculum reforms and classroom technology.” The population of Kerala is 35 million, seven times larger than Finland’s.

India’s educational needs are massive. Successful educational methods will be the key to India’s future geopolitical positioning, notably with regard to China. Kerala’s experimentation could provide a model for other states in India. The fact that many of the principles of Finnish education resonate with pre-colonial traditions of India provides some hope that India may finally break free from some of the remaining constraints imposed by a stultifying British administrative system that aimed at competitive domination and focused on stifling both personal and collective creativity as well as all forms of spontaneous collaboration (which the British tended to identify with “mutiny” and “revolt”).

Historical note

In 1835, as a member of Parliament, Lord Macaulay, after a visit to India, set himself the task of restructuring Indian education to bring it

up to modern civilized standards. In his famous “Minute” he stated clearly his vision of the role of education as restructured by the British. “We must do our best,” he encouraged Parliament, “to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect.”

19th century India inherited a caste system that established rigid hierarchies within Indian society. Macaulay believed that, under the British Empire, India, like England, deserved a class system. The British colonists tended to be respectful of collaborating local elites, routinely mobilizing their authority for their own economic and military ends. Macaulay was proposing the creation of a class of cultural go-betweens, who would populate an administration destined to govern the mass of laborers producing wealth for the empire. This educated elite would have the benefit of understanding the culture of the illiterate masses but personally identify with the superior European culture that sought to educate them and reward them for their docility.

Most reasonable people today would critique this as an unhealthy, inhuman approach to both education and government. But it represented the deepest logic of an economic empire. Nearly 200 years later, it has left deep traces in Indian society, whose wealthier classes even today identify strongly with Western models of education, despite the fact that education in the West has become crassly commercial and superficial.

One might critique the fascination with the Finnish model as just another case of India’s sense of inferiority that pushes it to seek solutions spawned in Europe. But in many ways this is just the opposite. The Finns have no interest in creating an empire, even a merely educational empire. Finland has produced a model of education that boldly contradicts the dominant philosophy and practices of the

industrial West. One Finnish professor quoted in Al Jazeera’s article “worries that the commercialisation of his country’s schooling approach ‘can hurt the image of Finnish education.’” They appear to resemble Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Clerk of Oxenford” in the *Canterbury Tales*, about whom we learn that “gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche” (“gladly would he learn and gladly teach”). Learning can after all be fun rather than painful.

The Finnish constructivist approach to education, at its core, has many things in common with the oldest traditions in India. It is holistic and draws its energy from human contact and the spirit of seeking to understand rather than being forcefully taught what others consider it convenient to know. In the West, education has become dominated by the rule of managerial efficiency explicitly promulgated by institutions such as the Gates Foundation that had a powerful influence over US education policy under the presidency of Barack Obama. Its goal, widely accepted by the political elite in the US, is standardized knowledge, standardized testing and homogenized but deeply competitive culture. It is a form of education designed to turn successful students into useful and malleable actors in the capitalist economy. It is Macaulay’s system for India perfected thanks to the discovery and elaboration of the rules of scientific management.

The remaining question for India is a difficult one for a nation with a huge percentage of the population living in poverty. Can it afford to make the investment in something that truly bridges the best in both Indian and Western culture and may provide the ultimate key to general prosperity?

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The Old Woman and the QR Code

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
May 14, 2022

A flustered senior citizen channels Hemingway to write of her epic battle against the ubiquitous and often exclusive use of QR codes.

I am not Ernest Hemingway but he did advise “Write hard and clear about what hurts.” There was no big fish involved in my story (just an omelet) but the antagonist was a monster. The setting was not the vast sea but it was a room filled with strangeness and uncertainty. In essence, the battle I write of was epic.

The Exposition

The characters were few. But the characters were memorable. First and foremost, there was me: a woman and recently turned 60 and traveling by air. Second, the dratted QR code. How laughable that QR should stand for ‘quick response’ – but that’s a bit of foreshadowing. Third, the waiter in the lounge. Fourth, my savior.

The time was morning, around 8am. The place was Toronto’s Pearson International Airport. Specifically, an airport lounge. Not the Air Canada one, but the one for the rest of the airlines, the children of lesser gods.

The Front Story

The plot was short. The plot was simple. On a lengthy trip begun very early in the morning, I was transiting through Toronto and I went to the airport lounge to get some breakfast and I sat down at a table and I looked around for the menu. No menus were visible. But there was a sticker on the table with a QR code. So I pulled out my cellphone and I turned on the camera and I tried to scan the code. Zip. Zilch. Nada.

The code and my camera blissfully ignored each other. I looked at my phone’s camera setting but couldn’t figure it out. I was reminded of Ernest’s reflection; “How little we know of what there is to know.”

But I was not going to let such a small thing stop me from getting food. As Ernie counseled, “Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.” So I walked up to a waiter and I politely explained that my camera was not recognizing the QR code and I asked if I could please have a hardcopy menu. The waiter told me they had no hardcopy menus. Then I asked if he could just tell me what they had on offer and I could give him my order. He said he could not and I would have to scan the QR code to find out. I explained again that my camera was not picking up the QR code. To which he replied the equivalent of “Too bad” and left. Fortunately, a fellow traveler who had overheard our exchange stepped in and saved me. “Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her?” ... or rather him. First, he took my phone and tried to scan the QR code ... to no avail. Second, he rapidly flipped through various screens and then resigning, mused aloud that perhaps my phone was old. He said the word as though it was something bad, something distasteful, something to be got rid of. Lastly, using his phone, he ordered breakfast for me. Battle over, bruised, humbled, and thankful, I ate.

The Back Story

My story had a happy ending, but why did there even have to be a story?

I realize that QR codes can be very useful for businesses in providing a lot of information about a product or service to customers while using very little space. I see that QR codes have become ubiquitous – such as in restaurants, the travel industry, and advertising. Ironically, even many services specifically targeted for the elderly have QR codes. QR codes are now often

used to offer information on a variety of health issues – such as how to care for a fracture, the dosage of medication to take, and post-operative care. I also understand that, over the course of covid, businesses have resorted even more to QR codes to offer touchless services and to make up for staff shortages.

But what happens to people who don't have a smartphone or don't have a smartphone advanced enough to pick up QR codes or don't know how to scan a QR code? Does it mean they don't get to eat? Does it mean they can't avail of services they're entitled to? Does it mean they are ostracized from participating in society?

My story was a non-event – a non-serious situation in which I had other easily available options. I could simply have stepped outside the lounge and found a Tim Hortons to satisfy my breakfast needs. But what happens when the needs are more essential and there are no options? Like the elderly man in China who could not use the subway because he could not access his own health QR code. In New Zealand, during a covid outbreak, bus travelers who could not scan the QR code of their bus could not be easily traced later. Even showing the proof of vaccination QR code on their phone when traveling or going to a restaurant can be difficult and stressful for the elderly.

The Epilogue

I wonder if in our unreserved rush into automation and an information society, we are leaving some people behind. A 2021 survey noted that 14% of Americans in general find QR codes hard to use. Amongst the elderly, this number rises to nearly 20%, with 18% never having heard of QR codes. Currently, the over-65s are about 55 million in the US (about 16% of the total country population), 7 million in Canada (over 18%), 100 million in Europe (nearly 20%), 35 million in Japan (over 28%), and over 700 million globally. And the percentage in this age group – along with their

spending power – is expected to only increase in the near future.

The presence of QR codes should not negate the need to present information in other forms. Just because a restaurant has a QR code does not mean it can do away with all hardcopy menus. I get that in the time of covid people want to avoid touching and retouching menus. Then why not also put up the menu on a screen or board? Or have sufficient staff who can take a moment to tell you what's available. Making QR codes the only way customers or clients can access information may actually reduce accessibility for the technically challenged who weren't born with a phone in their hands as well as the economically challenged who may not have the latest smartphone or even a smartphone at all. And yes, possibly also the 'age challenged.' Papa may well have been referring to QR codes when he pondered, "I wonder if you keep on learning or if there is only a certain amount each man [...or woman] can understand."

Hemingway may have taken an earlier and easier way out when he ended his life with his own hands at the age of 61. Perhaps he understood only too well the challenges that lay ahead when he sort-of said: "The QR code kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."

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The Education of Priests and the Future of the Catholic Church in Ireland

John Bruton
May 16, 2022

I was asked to speak at a seminar in St Patrick's Pontifical University in Maynooth County Kildare. The seminar considered plans to develop the seminary for the education of future Catholic priests for Ireland, and for the education of lay people who will play an increasing role in the Catholic life, as the number of priests declines.

It is a great honor to be invited to speak at this important event. I have lived much of my life in sight of the magnificent spire that is the centerpiece of the college.

My father told me he had met a man who sat on the cross which is at the very top of the steeple. He enquired how the man had managed this miraculous feat. The man paused for dramatic effect and then revealed that he had been present when the steeple was being built and the cross was lying on the ground, waiting to be erected. So he sat down on it, so that he would have this tall story to tell for the rest of his life!

Any time I looked at the steeple I thought of my father's story, but I have to admit I did not give a lot of thought to what was going on in the shadow of this magnificent steeple within the walls of the college.

Professor Michael Mullaney and Father Tom Surlis will give you an outline of their plans for the college. I hope the discussion today among people of many diverse backgrounds and generations can enrich the plans Michael and Tom have.

I would like to say why the work here is so important.

We need priests and religious.

We also need an educated Catholic laity capable of spreading the message of Faith confidently.

The Education of Priests Remains Vital

First, let me say something about the core task of this seminary: the formation of priests. What

did Vatican II say in 1965 about the role of priests? It said their "primary duty is the proclamation of the gospel of God to all," and, in the words of St Mark's Gospel, to "go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."

But Vatican II also referred to Catholics as those who "understand or believe little of what they practice" and added that the preaching of the word is needed for the "very administration of the sacraments." If that was an uphill task in 1965, it is even more so today. Families are going through the motions rather than trying to understand what Baptism and First Holy Communion for their children are really about.

Vatican II put the Eucharist at the center of everything the Church does. It said, "The Eucharistic Action is the very heartbeat of the congregation of the faithful, over which the priest presides." The mystery of the Eucharist is central to everything, and that is what makes the education of priests so important, because without priests there can be no Mass. In the words of Vatican II, "priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice"

Building Communities at the Parish Level is Key as in the Early Church

Vatican II also observed: "The office of the pastor is not confined to the care of the faithful as individuals, but is also properly extended to the formation of a genuine Christian Community."

I think Irish priests do the first of those tasks very well. But, unlike churches in the US, I fear they do the second task, the formation of genuine Christian communities in their parishes, less well. Our churches are not even physically designed to encourage people to meet easily after Mass, and to make contacts that help form a "genuine Christian Community", based and centered on the Eucharist as per the wishes of Vatican II. This is an essential first step towards the involvement of lay people in the work of

the Church. Practicing Catholics are a minority in Ireland, and they need to support one another .

The Increasing Responsibilities of Lay Catholics and the Synod

In 1965, Vatican II said that priests should “confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the church, allowing them freedom and room for action.” This will be put to the test, 57 years later, by Irish participation in Synod.

How many sermons have been preached in Irish parishes, explaining what the Synod is about, explaining its opportunities and , of course its limitations? I do not feel that job has really been done adequately in every parish, although I am sure it has been done very well in some.

Moving on from the formation of priests, let me say something about the formation of lay people who will play an increasing role in the Church. As I see it, this college can play a vital part in the moral, spiritual and intellectual life of the Irish people.

Filling a Void in Thinking in Ireland

The college could ask questions that go beyond the temporal and material concerns that occupy most of our waking hours in modern Ireland. It could help people to be comfortable considering deeper questions about life.

For instance, what happens when we die? Is this life all there is? Can we communicate with God? Does he hear us? What constitutes a good life? Does it have meaning beyond doing no harm, and causing as little pain as possible to others and to ourselves? What are the obligations we have to other human beings, to human lives born and soon to be born? How do we best cope with suffering and setbacks in our lives? How do we keep them in proportion in our minds?

Not everyone will answer some of these questions in the same way. Many will never

even ask themselves these questions at all, claiming to be agnostic. I take the view that this type of agnosticism is a form of laziness. It is not to be confused with the residue of doubt that all of us have after we consider these questions, questions to which there is no simple empirical answer.

But if, as a society, we avoid questions like these, we are, in a sense, not living our lives to the full. This college will enable people, lay as well as religious, to become comfortable discussing profound questions, thus helping them to live their lives to the fullest, with all of life’s complications.

There is no doubt Ireland is a very different country now to the one into which I was born in 1947. There is immensely more material wealth now than then. There is less deference now than then. There is less of an obsession with respectability, an obsession that was the cause of many abuses in which society implicated the Church and vice versa.

We have lived through rapid change, a change in what people regard as more or less important. In other words, we have lived through a change in values. Laity and priests can respond to this change either by taking refuge in a past that never really existed, or, alternatively, by just chugging along optimistically and ignoring unpalatable trends, hoping that it will all turn out alright in the end.

In a recent address to priests, The Pope took a very different view. He said we should instead “cast out into the deep” as per the words of St Luke’s Gospel, trusting in our God-given discernment to find the right path. Helping a new generation of Irish people, lay and religious, to find the right path, to learn from mistakes, and to correct their course when necessary will be the task this college will undertake through the priests and laity it educates.

The Limitations of Individualism

In 21st century Ireland, there is a much stronger emphasis than before, on the rights of each individual. These rights are growing in range and scope, and are being litigated through politics and the courts. But the emphasis is heavily on rights, and on the individuals who are to enjoy those rights, rather than on the community as a whole, on shared responsibilities, or on the common good.

Social media has also facilitated the pursuit of celebrity, a desire for personal recognition. This is sometimes accompanied by a desire not to be judged oneself, but to be free to judge others harshly, hastily, and anonymously. “Taking offense” can become a weapon in our culture wars. Feelings can be elevated, above thought, and above careful objective reflection.

The banal truth is that for every right, there must always be a concomitant responsibility. On whose shoulders does the responsibility rest? On the state and the taxpayer, on the family, on the local community or on the courts? Finding a formula to answer such questions was one of the goals of Catholic Social Thinking, which will no doubt be part of the academic activity in this college in the years ahead.

The best antidote to the problems of excessive individualism is a well developed values system. By this I mean a way of evaluating what is more important, and what is less important — without dismissing anything as unimportant. That requires judgment, and we must not be afraid to judge.

It is important to remember that Catholic Social thinking is social. It is about society, rather than just about the individual, and not just about the individual’s desire for self esteem and recognition. Our Church has always emphasized the importance of community, community among believers and community with wider society.

The fact that Ireland has a strong spirit of organized volunteerism still today is due, in no small measure, to the heritage of voluntary organizations formed by, and around, the

Catholic Church. That heritage must be preserved and enhanced. I have no doubt Maynooth, through its programs of part and full time education for lay people will contribute greatly to this.

The college will be continuing, as I said before, its vital core responsibility of educating the priests and the religious laity of the future. As I have said, It will be preparing priests to do their work in a very different world to the one that priests ordained in the 1960’s faced.

There will be radically fewer priests, fewer people going to Mass, and a much more crowded and unsympathetic communications space through which the Church can communicate its message. As far as Catholicism is concerned, Ireland has become a mission territory.

New Skill Sets for Priests

In the past, the priest could do much of the work himself. In the future, he will have to work increasingly through lay people, most of them unpaid. The skill set of a priest of the 2030s will center on motivating others to do the work, rather than doing it all himself.

Motivating and sustaining volunteers is a skilled and demanding job, in which the priests and the religious laity of the future must become expert practitioners. The priest of the future will have to share power, while at the same time, ensuring that the essential doctrines of the church are accurately conveyed.

Indeed, education in the doctrines of the church will become more and more important . This is because we live in a world in which people of faith want to be listened to but also crave clear answers. There is a real tension between the desire to be heard, and the desire to be led. And it is a tension that will be expressed in the Synod. Faith and reason must sit together in the Synod.

In the past, we may have become used to having clear answers provided for us by church teaching. For some of us, controversy between

leading church figures is troubling, even upsetting. We want a clear line we can follow, not a cacophony. That is a feature of politics too, and the church can learn from politics. Parties with too many competing messages do not do well in elections.

And yet we know, from daily life as well as from Scripture, that some situations are hard to fit within a single line of thinking. We need an educated and tolerant laity, educated and tolerant priests, who are willing, as the Pope said, to “cast out into the deep” and have confidence in themselves.

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader.

Do Rumors of Boris Johnson’s Purported Twelfth Child Matter?

Atul Singh
May 21, 2022

Public figures have rights to private lives but these are not absolute and, at times, they indicate both character and judgment, as may be the case yet again for the British prime minister.

I have just flown back from London, a city where history seems to seep through every brick. Over the last five centuries, this has been the city that has defined the destiny of the world. Plaques on houses remind us as to who lived when and where. During this trip, I saw plaques on houses where the painter John Constable and the writer George Orwell once made their homes. Whilst on the way to a dinner with friends, I also saw Hugh Gaitskell’s tomb but more about this Labour Party leader later.

The most striking bit of gossip that I picked

up was that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has knocked up his nanny and is expecting what might be his twelfth child. As rumors go, this might be as fictional as Nessie, the Loch Ness monster. After all, rumors have swirled in London and various capitals around the world for ages about the salacious private lives of the great men of the realm.

Yet I could not help but think that rumors about Johnson are taking this green and pleasant land back to the future. The current prime minister is supremely powerful. All Tory grandees have been defenestrated. The likes of William Hague and Kenneth Clarke may still go around giving speeches but they do not matter anymore. Unlike Winston Churchill or Margaret Thatcher who surrounded herself with big beasts in the cabinet, Johnson is now the only big beast among pygmies. Unlikely though this may sound, such concentration of power harks back to a bygone era.

Falstaffian Churchill-Worshipping Henry VIII

Johnson may play the buffoon but he is a classicist with a keen sense of history. He is one of the great characters of Eton, a great school that produced the likes of the Duke of Wellington and Orwell. As a child, young Johnson wanted to be world king. Later, he downgraded his ambitions and gunned to be prime minister. Not only has Johnson got to 10 Downing Street, he has got there in style and has etched his name in the history books. This Falstaffian figure fond of wine, women and song has delivered Brexit and won a thumping reelection.

In many ways, Big Boris is the modern Henry VIII who has broken with Europe. It may turn out to be a jolly good thing in the future as debt-ridden aging Europe fails to deal with its mounting debts, stubborn unemployment and now rising inflation. In the long run, Brexit might still turn out to be a jolly good thing after all. Johnson might end up like

the historic Henry VIII figure who set England on the path of glory and empire.

Johnson, who is obsessed with Winston Churchill, is doing quite well out of the Russia-Ukraine War. Like his hero, the prime minister is enjoying his finest hour. He has boldly taken on the transparently villainous Vladimir Putin and turned the screws on Russian oligarchs who, until not too long ago, bought houses, yachts and football clubs. A few weeks ago, BoJo (a popular nickname for Johnson in the UK) dashed to Kyiv for a walkabout with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Yet not all has been going well for Big Boris since he moved into 10 Downing Street. Brexit was a long drawn-out affair. The Partygate scandal continues to rumble on. Tory grandees and the notoriously savage British press continue to hammer Johnson. The Economist has claimed “foot-dragging, hard-heartedness, ineptitude and dishonesty” to be typical of BoJo’s government. The venerable 1843 publication has gone on to say repeatedly that the Johnson “government is a fundamentally unserious government led by fundamentally unserious people.”

Most recently, BoJo lost what Al Ghaff and I have called “the most consequential local elections in decades.” Yet he remains firmly in the saddle because this “sly fox disguised as a teddy bear” has chewed up the little rabbit coming out of the Tory hat named Rishi Sunak.

Cummings and Goings

The recent rumors about Johnson’s latest amorous adventure might be much ado about nothing. After all, nothing has stopped BoJo in the past. He is the great survivor of British politics. Nearly 18 years ago, Michael Howard sacked BoJo for lying about an affair. BoJo came roaring back and is still riding high.

Yet there is always a sneaking suspicion that one day BoJo might not be able to manage yet another James Bond-style close shave. As the adage goes, even the canniest of cats have

only nine lives. It is not without reason that Dominic Cummings, once an unlikely ally of Johnson, called him “a shopping trolley smashing from one side of the aisle to the other.” Some of BoJo’s critics point to his private life as proof of Cummings’ observations and Spitting Image has repeatedly taken the mickey out of BoJo for never taking precautions.

Two years ago, when BoJo’s now wife and then girlfriend was expecting their baby, Private Eye mocked Big Boris for fathering what was rumored to be his tenth child. Carrie Johnson has now given birth to another child, bringing that number to 11. BoJo has produced enough progeny to form a football (soccer for Americans) team. Now, rumors emerge that the man advised to “lock up [his] willy” might have failed to do so again. This time, his nanny is the lady in question.

Already, BoJo’s nanny has been in the news. Apparently, Conservative donors have been ponying up the cash to pay for his lifestyle. This allegedly includes the salary of the nanny. Early this month, The Times — the real one in London, not The New York Times that is a target of my learned colleague Peter Isackson — asked, “Can Boris Johnson afford to be prime minister?”

Given BoJo’s posh lifestyle and, presumably, “off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush” payments for his many children, The Times’ question is most pertinent. Another Boris, the blond tennis superstar Boris Becker, once known for his booming serve and partying lifestyle, is in jail over bankruptcy charges. BoJo is unlikely to end up like Becker but he is clearly a prime minister under strain. If rumors of another child with the nanny are not just smoke without fire, then the BoJo shopping trolley might be careening completely out of control.

When is Private Life a Public Issue?

Rumors about BoJo’s child number 12 for the

man in Number 10 raise a key issue about the private lives of public figures. In puritanical America, politicians were and, with the exception of Donald Trump, still are generally damned for what many Europeans might term moments of weakness or mere piffle. Gary Hart's presidential campaign imploded when a lissome model was found on his lap. David Petraeus had to resign as the director of the CIA for an extramarital affair and the ensuing kerfuffle. Such errant behavior is seen to be a reflection of poor character that disqualifies people from public office.

In France, presidents have long had mistresses. It almost seems that it is a prerequisite for the job and perhaps demonstrates nimble management skills required of any inhabitant of the Élysée Palace. BoJo has long maintained that his private life is his private life and that is that. In 2013, a British judge disagreed. He refused BoJo a gagging order concerning an illegitimate child taking the view that the public had a right to know about BoJo's "reckless" conduct.

As my dear Dutch friend Jarst de Jong put it best, BoJo's private life is a matter of public importance. It gives insight into the character and judgment of the British prime minister. A Jarst said pithily, anyone can cheat once because no one is a saint. A second time may be understable as well. But when someone cheats repeatedly and lies about it, then it reveals their lack of trustworthiness. BoJo seems to repeatedly betray those who love and trust him. That might not be the most desirable trait for any leader.

BoJo's repeated scandals also reveal a certain lack of awareness and understanding of risk. Taking risks is part of leadership but taking risks without understanding what consequences they entail is a dangerous habit. BoJo has long had a reputation for recklessness but has got away with the risks he has taken so far. Maybe, the twelfth child might inspire a play like *The Twelfth Night*.

Perhaps the UK could heed the words of Max Hastings, a man who first hired Johnson and packed him off to Brussels. Hastings also gave BoJo the "lock up" advice, which has so far gone unheeded. In 2018, Hastings wrote, "Johnson's glittering intelligence [was] not matched by self-knowledge." Calling BoJo, "Blackadder in a blond wig" with "remarkable gifts," Hastings called Big Boris "flawed by an absence of conscience, principle or scruple." The contrast with Gaitskell whose tombstone says *fortitudo et integritas* could not be starker.

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Colombia Faces Historic Presidential Elections

Christoph Sponsel
May 27, 2022

In highly polarized Colombia, months of intense campaigning will most likely culminate with either the election of a leftist president for the first time in the country's history or another outbreak of mass protests.

Following congressional and primary presidential elections in March, Colombians will turn to the polls to vote for a new president on May 29. South America's second-most populous country now keeps its breath, wondering whether frontrunner Gustavo Petro will become the first left-of-the-center president in Colombia's history.

Petro has been leading the polls for more than two years and was the clear winner of the primaries of the Pacto Histórico, a group of several leftist parties. The group also placed first in the congressional elections, marking the

first time a leftist party performed strongest in the traditionally very conservative country.

Petro was a member of the urban revolutionary guerrilla group M-19, which demobilized in the early 1990s, and later became a senator and mayor of Bogotá, Colombia's capital. His policy proposals are moderate left, not too distinct from the programs of European social democrats. They promise a more redistributive tax system, increased investment into public education and an end to oil extraction.

A Time for Change

According to the World Bank, Colombia is the second-most unequal country in Latin America after Brazil. Almost 40% of the population lives in poverty. So, Petro's proposals resonate with voters. Petro has been a presidential candidate before. He ran in 2010 and 2018, when he lost in the second round to Ivan Duque of the right-wing Centro Democrático party.

Recent congressional elections reveal that the left is more likely to win this time. Many Colombians feel it is time for a political change after decades of right-leaning governments. In 2016, the government of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Juan Manuel Santos signed a peace deal with the FARC, a guerrilla group. FARC had been fighting a Marxist insurgency against the Colombian army and state-aligned right-wing paramilitaries since the 1960s.

During this internal armed conflict, internal security dominated political discussions, leaving little space for socio-economic issues. For years, leftist politicians and activists were discredited for their supposed links to guerrilla organizations. They often faced stigmatization, death threats or executions.

The peace deal in 2016 and the demobilization of large parts of the FARC enabled social issues to come up in political debates. Consequently, two waves of nationwide protests swept the country in 2019 and 2021, demanding wide-reaching social and

economic reforms as well as better state protection of social activists, who have fallen victims to killings.

COVID-19 has boosted the left. "The pandemic hit poor people most severely, and yet the government wanted to put the burden on us," explains Víctor, a 21-old organizer of last year's protests in Bogotá. The government's failure to provide relief and, instead, putting the burden on the poor has caused outrage. Now, a president from the left suddenly does not seem as unlikely anymore even in historically right-leaning Colombia.

What Might Happen in the Elections?

While most observers expect Petro to win the first round of elections, recent polls show that he will likely fall short of the necessary votes to avoid a second round. Then, Petro's likely opponent will be either Federico "Fico" Gutiérrez or Rodolfo Hernández. Fico was the winner of the primary elections of a coalition of several right-wing parties and, in the past, was mayor of Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city. Hernández, an engineer and entrepreneur, who remained outside the primary elections, is a center-right candidate and has only risen in the polls in recent weeks. He is running an anti-corruption campaign despite a corruption scandal of his own from the time when he was mayor of the northern city of Bucaramanga.

As can be expected, the campaign is getting heated. Recently, Fico rhetorically addressed Petro, saying: "What you are proposing is the same thing that Chávez said, and look how Venezuela ended." Fico claims he wants to prevent "castrochavismo," a term the Latin American right frequently uses to link left-wing policy proposals to authoritarian regimes in Cuba and Venezuela. Fico argues that Petro's proposed wealth redistribution would be the starting point for authoritarianism and economic decline, pointing to Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua as examples. Given the presence of almost two million Venezuelan refugees in

the country, such statements trigger alarm bells among many Colombians.

If there were to be a second round of voting, winning the endorsement of the third-placed candidate in the first round for both of the top two candidates would be key. If Fico comes third, he will undoubtedly support Hernández. If Fico comes second, then the scenario is less clear. Hernández and other Colombian centrists might end up supporting none of the leading two candidates. In 2018, after finishing a close third in the first round, Sergio Fajardo refused to endorse any of the two candidates in the second round and announced to spend election day watching whales on Colombia's Pacific Coast. Fajardo won the primaries for the coalition of centrists this year. He is still in the running but his popularity has fallen over the last few months. Regarding his 2018 decision, Fajardo now says, "It took me a while to figure it out, but I admit that was a mistake." He may support someone this year but it is unclear who Fajardo would support in this year's second round.

A Ruthless and Dirty Election Campaign

In the highly polarized country, the last few weeks of campaigning have been intense. Mistrust between the left and the right runs high. Right-wing elites have tried everything to prevent Petro's rise, including frequent transgressions of campaign laws.

Petro and his vice-presidential candidate Francia Márquez, an environmental and human rights activist, have received multiple death threats. This made Petro call off events in his campaign for several days. He is being rightly cautious. Presidential and political candidates have been assassinated frequently in Colombia. Every year, more human rights activists are killed in this country than any other in the world.

The fierce opposition to Petro's victory is compounded by the underhand methods of the Fico campaign. It has exceeded the number of

advertisements allowed to presidential candidates in multiple cities. Right-wing businessmen and entrepreneurs have openly threatened to dismiss employees who vote for Petro.

Duque, the right-wing president who cannot run again because of a constitutional one-term limit, is campaigning vigorously against Petro. In doing so, Duque is breaking a constitutional provision that prohibits officeholders from participating in campaigns. As a result, he faces a lawsuit for speaking out against Petro but it is unlikely Duque will face any consequences for his actions. In contrast, the national attorney suspended Medellín's mayor Daniel Quintero from office for much milder support of Petro's campaign.

The left might be unfairly targeted but it has not been innocent either. Hidden microphones were detected in Fico's campaign headquarters, confirming statements by the Petro campaign that they had infiltrated their rival's campaign team. Petro's team claimed they had done so to detect vote-buying, a common practice in Colombia. Petro's campaign has advised Colombians "to take the money and buy groceries with it but nevertheless vote for Petro."

A Shift to the Center

This election campaign also reveals the waning influence of Uribismo, a right-wing populist political movement named after Alvaro Uribe. He was president of Colombia from 2002 to 2010. During Uribe's presidency, the military regained ground against several leftist guerrilla groups forging alliances with right-wing paramilitary groups that resulted in severe human rights violations.

For decades, Uribe has been the most influential politician in Colombia. He led a strong campaign against the 2016 peace agreement and was a key mentor of Duque. Thanks to Uribe's influence, Duque campaigned in 2018, claiming "to rip the peace

deal to shreds” if he was elected. This year, Uribe did not run again for the senate. He is embroiled in judicial proceedings for bribing witnesses and procedural fraud. Centro Democrático, the political party associated with his movement, came fourth in the recent elections, while in the previous Congress, it was the most powerful party. Its presidential candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga had to call a halt to his campaign and now supports Fico instead.

Critics describe rightist candidate Fico as “Uribe’s guy,” but they are not exactly right. Undoubtedly, Fico is the most status quoist presidential candidate in this year’s election. However, his political program reveals a relatively moderate stance on many issues, highlighting that Colombian politics has already become more centrist than before. Also, in his previous campaigns for elections to the Medellín’s city council and to be mayor, Fico ran against Centro Democrático candidates supported by Uribe.

Unlike Uribe’s politicians, Fico supported the 2016 peace agreement and is open to relaunching negotiations for a peace deal with the ELN, a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group. Fico has chosen Rodrigo Lara Sánchez, a centrist close to the green party, as his running mate. Even though his supporters urged him to, Fico has also declined to openly support a referendum against a recent ruling by Colombia’s highest court that legalizes abortion. The sign that Fico did not do so further underlines the shift to the center in Colombian politics.

Turbulent times ahead

This year, the Colombian elections are historic. If Petro wins, the recent trend of left-wing victories across Latin America will be bolstered in one of the most conservative countries in the region. Since 2018, leftist presidential candidates have won elections in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Peru.

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Tibetan Activist and Writer Tenzin Tsundue Talks to Fair Observer

Roberta Artemisia Campani and
Tenzin Tsundue
May 28, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, an eminent Tibetan activist and writer discusses exile, a protracted freedom struggle, China, Chinese brutal homogenization policies, cultural and philosophical differences between Tibet and China, and China’s tortured relationship with the West.

In October 1950, China’s Red Army invaded Tibet’s eastern province, posing as an army of liberation from Western imperialism. In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled to India where he remains to this day. Many thousands of Tibetan refugees have streamed into India since. Tibet is particularly pertinent even as US President Joe Biden promises support to Taiwan and Ukraine dominates headlines on a daily basis.

For the last 70 years, Tibet has been under China’s thumb even as Hollywood stars swoon at the Dalai Lama’s feet. Many people think of Tibet as a separate nation with a definable history and a specific cultural identity symbolized by the Dalai Lama. Many are unaware of Tibet’s integration into China and its political subjugation by Beijing. In September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear that Tibet was an integral part of China’s “impregnable fortress” as he decried the heresy of “splittism.” The fate of Tibet

shines light on a key issue: can political entities bordering a hegemon exercise sovereignty?

We are living in a world where the 1945 postwar order is ending. The collapse of the Soviet Union has been followed by a bloody war between its two biggest successor states. Oil prices are soaring and inflation is skyrocketing. Fertilizers and food are in short supply because the two big exporters Russia and Ukraine are at war. So, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and many other countries could soon be short of bread, if not oil.

As the current world order breaks down, what will emerge in its place? Will we see a more fragmented world with regional hegemony competing in their spheres of influence? Or will we see a more multipolar world where dispersed power centers will realize there is no way to survive other than mutual respect and creative collaboration?

I spoke to writer and activist Tenzin Tsundue on a range of issues, spanning from his experience as a Tibetan in India to the state of our modern world.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. Words in brackets are my insertions to provide context and clarity to Tsundue's words.

Roberta Campani: How do the Tibetans live in India?

Tenzin Tsundue: There are about 100,000 Tibetan refugees in India, of which three generations are represented: those who left Tibet (as Tsundue's parents did), their children who are now adults (like Tsundue) and a third generation (children of Tsundue's generation) who no longer have direct ties to Tibet. There's also another group, those who came out of Tibet later on, in the early 2000s and up to 2009 and then it became almost impossible to get out of occupied Tibet. There's a law in India as per which someone who was born prior to 1987 in

the country is a citizen regardless of the origin of their parents. (Yet most Tibetans have not applied for citizenship to avoid weakening the Free Tibet Movement.) Like other refugees, Tibetans cannot own property nor vote. In fact, Tibetans don't even have refugee status because India, like most modern nations, does not recognize Tibet as a state or country.

We are considered foreigners, we have to get a document that lasts one year. This makes it hard to plan long-term, build a house or start a family. Some can get the document extended for five years. But it is hard not to have any stability. On the other hand, the positive side of this situation is that it maintains the impetus to keep working towards going back to our homeland.

Even if India granted us 43 settlements where we have built farms, hospitals, and schools where we are self-subsistent, this was a lot of work. And now the young go to cities and have jobs in IT.

Tibet is known for being the home country of Tenzin Gyatso, now known as the Dalai Lama. He is recognized both as a spiritual and political leader. In 2011, the Dalai Lama gave up his political role and passed it on to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).

The CTA was formed in 1959. Some consider it a government in exile. The Dalai Lama's handing over power to the CTA is historic. He wants Tibetans and Tibet to function democratically. The Sikyong, a figure analogous to a prime minister, and a parliament is elected every five years.

Apart from 100,000 Tibetans in India, there are another 50,000 in other countries. All of them can elect members of the parliament and participate in activities of the CTA.

Roberta Campani: What can this impetus achieve given the current situation in China?

Tenzin Tsundue: China looks at Tibetan culture and religion as the biggest obstacle to assimilation. The Chinese want to homogenize

Tibet and reduce it into Beijing's backyard. They see that Tibetans are united over their cause. They are also united with Tibetans in exile.

Tibetan culture is very different from Chinese culture. China believes in bombing mountains, making money out of Tibetan minerals and resources, and damming rivers. In contrast, Tibetans believe that there are gods and goddesses in the mountains, and they are sacred for our living. Our environment is not to serve us. We are part of the environment. Philosophically, we look at land and resources very differently from the Chinese. They also look at people as resources to make them do cheap labor and make money for the capitalists. That is not how we look at life. Tibetan nomads and farmers are "rehabilitated" in reservations, kind of artificial villages so they lose touch and connection with their own land.

Tibet lies north of the Himalayas. It is a large high-altitude plateau inhabited largely by Buddhists who brave bitter winters and lead largely simple lives. Known as the roof of the world, historians speak of a geographical Tibet and a political Tibet. There is also a cultural Tibet associated with meditation, spirituality, esoteric practices, mystique and, in our Hollywoodish times, personified by the beatific Dalai Lama.

In May 1951, the Dalai Lama's envoys were forced to sign a Seventeen Point Agreement with the Chinese. For the first time, an agreement formally recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. This agreement, though, was signed to avoid a brutal military invasion by the Chinese. Beijing has always claimed Tibet to be an autonomous region belonging to the Chinese nation.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims that it has brought progress to benighted and

feudal Tibet. The CCP says that it has bettered the lives of ordinary Tibetans by bringing modern technology and economic growth. The question arises whether this progress was worth it given the decimation of Tibetan culture and the destruction of Tibet's once pristine environment.

Roberta Campani: Can you give us some background about what brought the situation to this point?

Tenzin Tsundue: Tibet had been a free and independent country right from the beginning until China's invasion in 1951. What is called the western romanticization of Shangri-La is Tibet — 2.5 million square kilometers of land, geographically the biggest and highest plateau in the world. Tibetans have lived in isolation, untouched by western influences — they have hardly had any relationship with many other countries. Of course, Tibet had relationships with Mongolia in the north, China in the east, India to the south and by extension with other South Asian countries, like Nepal, Burma, Bhutan and Pakistan. And that's how Tibet lived as an independent country for all these thousands of years.

And this isolation has also created this very unique language, culture, and identity. In the last 2,000 years, we have received Buddhism from India. It wasn't Tibetan, it came from India and today, we are keeping that and Buddhism has become the primary identity for Tibetan people. And that's how we have lived as a free and independent country and that is still existing today.

The Tibetans inside Tibet that are fighting the Chinese attempt to 1. homogenize, and 2. to use Tibet as a colony, which the Chinese mine and make money off. The reason why Tibetans have not been co-opted by Chinese mining and industrialization is because Tibetans have a very different idea of natural resources and the environment and that is a part of Tibetan

identity. We look at nature as a larger universe where human beings are part of. We are servants to nature.

This identity comes from a much larger picture of the Tibetan civilization. That civilization, what we are getting to see, is something many countries have lost. We have not. Our Tibetans in Tibet still believe that the country is more important than the people. We are part of the environment. So the continuity of tradition that we are seeing resists the damming of rivers, mining for resources and clear felling of trees in order to make money through all the cheap made in China products.

China is mining and taking all of these natural resources — lithium, copper, and gold — to make cheap products for the world. See, how China looks at natural resources is very different to Tibet. The China that is emerging today is not even the China of Deng Xiaoping or of Mao Zedong. China has completed a cultural revolution in so many different phases. So many times, China has completely changed. Tibet may have modernized in different ways, but as a civilization, we are continuous.

Roberta Campani: It seems that this view makes even more sense now that we have climate issues: how could your experience be made useful for the world in general?

Tenzin Tsundue: I don't want to be condescending by saying we have the best ideas for the world to copy. We will continue our religion, our culture, we have our very unique civilizational beliefs, and if the world, if the international community see that this is of value, they will anyhow take it.

Roberta Campani: Do you think there is something positive in the “common prosperity” doctrine that China has brought forward these past few years? In particular, if we consider that inequalities and the wider income gap are creating discontent in most of the traditionally democratic countries.

Tenzin Tsundue: You and I know it very well, it's all optics. It's what political parties create to fulfill their own self-interest, like Trump tried to create something for America while pursuing his own interest and Biden is now trying to do that today. The same goes for the propaganda war between Zelensky and Putin. All these optics are for consumption and you cannot just blindly consume that. When China says that it is creating a more equal society by getting rid of the gap between the rich and the poor, we understand it very well. These are political agendas and not social services.

And as I said earlier, homogenization means that China already has what it calls the Chinese identity and Beijing is trying to impose that on the rest of the people. Homogenization does not mean there is no culture. There is a culture but it's the majority culture that they are trying to impose on the minorities or the people that are living under China's occupation. That is homogenization and this is the biggest threat that is happening in Eastern Turkestan, southern Mongolia, and in Manchuria. And the same thing is happening in Hong Kong.

And there is a threat that China may physically, and militarily invade Taiwan in the future. So this homogenization is the main factor why Hong Kong didn't want to become completely Chinese because the Hong Kong people have their own identity, a social and a cultural tradition there. And they say “we are not like the Chinese in mainland China.” So you see, the Hong Kong people resist because they don't want to homogenize. They don't want to be turned into a Chinese backyard.

Of course, physically, Hong Kong is a part of the People's Republic of China. Still, they have lived separately for almost one or two hundred years. They have their ideas, identity, ways of living, and culture. It's much more vibrant and democratic there. Now, they are being homogenized. And the international community did not care much about losing Hong Kong.

Taiwan, Tibet and Hong Kong are not legally recognized as sovereign states. Therefore, other states and the so-called international community cannot take a clear position on them. However, these three geographical and political entities are increasingly in the news.

According to Professor Yeshi Choedon, "Tibet has been an international issue since the 1950s but no serious attempt has been made to address this problem on the main pretext that the status of Tibet was not clear. The lack of clarity on the status of Tibet is not just because of manipulation by the Chinese. The major contributing factor, in fact, was Tibet's own failure to move along with the tide of the change that was sweeping the world in the 20th century."

As per Michael van Walt, lawyer and professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton: "From a legal standpoint, Tibet has to this day not lost its statehood. It is an independent state under illegal occupation."

Roberta Campani: What are your thoughts about how the situation could unfold for Tibet?

Tenzin Tsundue: Today there are many possibilities. I think that the 63 years of exile experience have given us enough sense of resilience and understanding of the world's political scenario and our own existence. The early shock we got after coming out of Tibet to the outside world where there were already so many scientific advances. For example, when my parents came to India, they were unable to understand what is a bus, what is a car and what is a train. From there we have come to a situation where the third generation is working in IT companies in India.

So you see this fast-forward advance and experience has given us the understanding that ultimately our freedom struggle is something we have to do ourselves. And we have created enough cultural resistance and even resilience

that even if no one helps us today we are still able to maintain our resistance and we'll come to a point when China collapses we will go back to our country and we will re-establish a free, independent, democratic Tibet. This much confidence is what we have now.

Today, the Tibetan issue is not isolated. More than ever, the issue of the Dalai Lama, who is the reincarnation (of his predecessor), is now more useful to the United States, to the European countries and to India because China has now evolved from a communist country to an industrial nation and a superpower. China is today a threat to the western countries, India, and many other countries that need to tackle China. Now, we have to work with these other countries that might find the issues of Tibet useful to their causes.

Roberta Campani: How could this happen?

Tenzin Tsundue: Look, when we were protesting in 2008, we were saying that China is killing Tibetans and that there is a genocide happening in Tibet, no one cared. Everyone went to participate in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

This year too, in 2022, when the Winter Olympics are happening, suddenly the United States realizes that there are human rights issues with China. That does not mean that they did not know about human rights violations in Tibet and East Turkestan in 2008. This year, 15 countries boycotted — a diplomatic boycott — these countries are now finding these issues useful for them against China.

This is the understanding we are now getting as Tibetan refugees. Earlier, Tibetans were nothing — oh, these are just nice, good, goodie people — and the Dalai Lama is non-violent. Now they find the issue of Tibet politically useful. So, how do we have to position ourselves with countries that want to deal with China differently? Are we able to do it? Perhaps, we can even work with China's pro-

democracy activists who would want to see their country as a democracy.

Roberta Campani: Are you in touch with people in China who want democracy?

Tenzin Tsundue: Of course, we are in touch with them but they were themselves persecuted in China and they are now living in foreign countries.

Roberta Campani: How could this experience that has given you and the Tibetan communities skills and consciousness be helpful? How can you use that experience to raise awareness about other refugees, as it's a problem all over the world?

Tenzin Tsundue: It is not that the West doesn't know. It is pretending not to know because its interests up until today have been more into trading with China and not with promoting human rights. We are very well aware of this. As much as we would like to work with western countries on human rights and democracy in China and also freedom for Tibet, we are also aware that the West may be using Tibet today. We would like to work with western countries for democracy in China and freedom in Tibet.

Roberta Campani: Do you know there is a fascination with Tibetan culture that is actually not so well known?

Tenzin Tsundue: I am not surprised. The consumerism that has taken over the world has, in a way, homogenized entire production units that have centered on easy production. This has come about with big international corporate companies as producers and the rest of the people are just consumers. This model is a danger to the environment and also to human civilization. (That is why there may be a fascination for Tibetan culture.)

Roberta Campani: What is the mission or role that you have chosen?

Tenzin Tsundue: I am a small activist based here in India. The role I have assigned to myself is that of a writer, I look at certain changing aspects in the Tibetan community, culturally and emotionally, and I write about these aspects. Also, as an activist, an important part of my role is to keep the freedom struggle going, maintaining the restlessness in the movement. And also come up with new ideas on how to deal with the changing political situation in the world and how to guard against certain threats, and, at the same time, look at opportunities that might appear.

So, mine is a very small role. Still, I see it in the larger picture. There is the Tibetan government in exile, there is His Holiness the Dalai Lama, there are members of parliament, there are many other leaders, and as an activist and as a writer, I also play my small role. But in the larger picture, I see that the Tibetan freedom movement up until now has been inspiring both for the international community and us because we have maintained nonviolence as the main thrust of our movement led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

This has inspired many individuals, people in the West, in India and in many other places. They say that this is one peaceful community and a movement that they would like to support, and of course, we have a huge number of sympathizers and supporters, which is how we have maintained the health of the movement. We are hopeful that we will be able to carry on in this way, and when the opportune moment comes about, we can recreate Tibet as a free and independent state and a democracy.

Roberta Campani: How could this happen?

Tenzin Tsundue: There are three important factors.

First and the most important are the Tibetan people themselves. As long as we don't give up, there is always a chance for us to gain freedom.

And if we do give up, no matter even if the entire world comes together to support us, there is no cause to support!

So finally, the ultimate goal, the ultimate authority over the Tibetan freedom movement, is the Tibetan people. This is the most important fact.

The second factor is China, because it is China who, without any provocation, entered Tibet, plundered Tibet, captured Tibet and, for the past 70 years, China has been maintaining a military occupation of Tibet. There should be a new kind of understanding within China. The Chinese must completely change the way they run their government and reform their entire structure. They are no longer able to maintain the occupation of Tibet.

China's superpower status comes from how western countries use the country as an industrial factory floor to make cheap "Made in China" products and ship them to the West. That is how the West created China and made it into a monster. Until 1971, China was not even a member of the United Nations. And American intervention replaced Taiwan with China in the UN. That is how China became a permanent Security Council member at the UN and a superpower. Now, China is trying to throw out the United States from the United Nations. (So, China will not continue to be the workshop of the world and occupy Tibet forever.)

The third factor is how China is going to maintain its relationships with western countries, and, with that, what are the changes that are about to come about. We have seen in the past two years during the pandemic how the West has started to behave very differently towards China. Issues of human rights are coming out for the first time and the western relationship with China is changing. And I think this relationship will undergo dramatic changes in the next five years. All these things will throw up lots of opportunities for us.

Roberta Campani: Thank you! Are you still hopeful?

Tenzin Tsundue: I have to be! There is no option.

***Roberta Campani** looks after business development at Fair Observer.

***Tenzin Tsundue** is a Tibetan writer and activist, born and raised in India.

Time for the US to Rethink Its Failed Cuba Policy

John Elliott

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The US has persisted with cruel sanctions that have hurt the people, not the elites, in Cuba. It is time for a bolder foreign policy that builds upon the goodwill Americans receive among Cubans and aims at long overdue rapprochement.

The United States has for almost six decades pursued an embargo policy toward the government of Cuba with rare resolve. But there are few who would point to any success from this dogged approach. Instead, the specter of a common enemy to the north has entrenched the Communist government and cemented its restrictions on freedoms, while the Cuban people daily and deeply suffer from the economic choke hold of US sanctions.

I began a life-long understanding of the island nation decades ago in my graduate studies. Last December, I spent three weeks there, engaging with Cubans in many cities about their lives. I spoke with a range of demographics, from humble cabbies to senior Communist leaders. I was shocked at the depth of desperation of the people, who have no

alternative but to queue up for exhausting hours each day to buy a few rationed basic foods. Most items are available only to those who receive currency from émigré relatives, and the

US sanctions even block international donations of medical supplies.

Most people I met knew little but deprivation, yet harbored no disdain for US citizens. I never sensed anything but interest in and respect for this Americano. Whether such a charitable response is borne out of the memory of Fidel Castro's legendary approach of brotherhood with Americanos, or the fact that so many must rely on overseas donations, the reality is that there has always been a wide-open door in Cuba for amicable Cuban-American relations.

The Strong Do What They Can and the Weak Suffer What They Must

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN estimated that the US embargo had cost Cuba \$130 billion since 1962. This is a terrible cost for a tiny impoverished island. In last year's UN General Assembly, virtually every one of 184 member countries voted in favor of a resolution to demand the end of the US economic blockade on Cuba. Contrary to its intentions, this de facto blockade does not much impact the government elites in Cuba. In spite of a professed socialist system, there is a small subset of Cubans with political leverage enjoying luxury. But, since the Cuban government can continue to point to a proximate enemy as the cause for suffering — especially since the misplaced policies of the Trump administration — it can avoid blame and the inequities persist.

I have long been familiar with the charity and sacrifices of the Cuban people. I worked alongside many Cubans during Haiti's recovery from the 2010 earthquake. As a US Foreign Service officer, I worked in many Latin American countries and witnessed the incredibly positive impact of the Cuban doctors and medics.

As a counterpoint, I retain insights into the perspective of Cuban-Americans from living in South Florida for many years. My father's

second wife was a Cuban-American who immigrated to the US in the 1960s. I would often listen to her excoriate Fidel Castro and hone my Spanish by tuning into Miami-based radio stations that regularly condemned the Cuban Revolution.

Over the years, Cubans have faced increasing and unhealthy privations. Obesity and diabetes caused by nutritional deficits are a growing cause of premature deaths that well exceeds those caused by COVID-19. Thousands of Cubans find no recourse but to make the life-threatening journey by land or sea to the US as refugees and end up becoming financial burdens to the US taxpayer. The number of Cubans arriving at the US-Mexico border is presently at the highest level in more than a decade.

Because the nation has found itself in a virtual state of war since the early 1960s, the authoritarian government was able to muffle the spontaneous cries for libertad last July by thousands in the streets of key Cuban cities quickly and expeditiously. Dissenters were arrested or exiled. Sham trials have followed since and arbitrary punishments meted out. Subsequent protests have, for the most part, been stymied for fear of reprisals. The Cuban people desperately yearn to be unshackled from both the blockade and their government — yet without bloodshed.

Joe Biden Reaches Out But Not Much

President Joe Biden recently made some helpful but limited removals of US embargo restrictions. The Wall Street Journal was not pleased. Yet the real trouble with Biden's measures was not that they did too little, not too much. This was a huge missed opportunity. Biden could have improved bilateral relations

in the context of Russia's invasion and genocide of the Ukrainian people.

After additional US warfare materials arrived in Ukraine in early February 2021,

Russia threatened to retaliate by moving troops or military equipment to Cuba. The US government could have revisited its approach to the Cuban government and reduced tensions. Innovation and vision were some of the few remaining practical options in this extremely dangerous situation. Removing the counter-productive US embargoes would have signaled to Russia constructive intentions regarding their allies, and the onus might have inclined V. Putin to likewise pull back the troops on Ukraine's borders. Such timely response would not have been a quid pro quo, but rather one of many positive effects of a fresh U.S. policy toward Cuba. Alas, the door was closed in February, tens of thousands have been killed, millions have been uprooted, much of the nation has been leveled, and utter famine from absent wheat crops confronts much of the developing world.

The visions and voices of thousands of long-suffering Cubans I encountered remain fixed in my memory. Yet, in spite of its proximity to the United States, the plight and misery of Cubans somehow remain veiled for most in the West. Cuba, as all marginalized nations throughout the world, must now confront impending famine and even mass starvation given disruption of grain production and exports from Russia and Ukraine.

When it comes to Cuba, I believe the Biden administration is now on the right track. But the administration must urgently implement more common sense political and economic solutions to the grave humanitarian crises caused by a counter productive, decades-long, and devastating US embargo of Cuba.

***John Elliott** recently retired after 11 years with the US Foreign Service, where he served as the Senior Regional Policy Officer for the Western Hemisphere.
