

# THE PERSPECTIVE

Nº 02

MARCH • 2021

## AN ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL(S)

The Predicament of  
Indonesia's Sinking City

## ON DISPLACED AND FORSAKEN PEOPLE

Georgia's Occupied Lands

# DISSECTING DEVELOPMENT



# EDITORS' NOTE

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Dear reader,

We're back! Proudly presenting our "third charm." Time really does fly when you're enjoying yourself, doesn't it? Especially when you get to understand more of what's actually going on in the world while being part of an incredibly dedicated group of people devoting their free time to make this magazine happen, growing to become better journalists and leaving their comfort zones. And, we're not going to lie, late-night-sleep-over-editing-marathons are actually a lot of fun!

But, alas, you're not here to hear us brag about our fantastic co-workers. We've got something up our sleeves for you: this time, we're **DISSECTING DEVELOPMENT**. Attempting to delve in, dissect and develop the understanding of contemporary struggles and challenges rolling through the globe.

From Taiwan's digital democracy, Georgia's Internally Displaced Persons, the sinking Indonesian Capital, Big Tech, Cuban economic affairs, a Portuguese sex work movement to Swedish feminist foreign policy and even... Chinese panda diplomacy. Our reporters spoke to those directly affected by recent world developments, in exclusive interviews with

politicians, NGO representatives and entrepreneurs—with Paata Zakareishvili, Georgia's former State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, Maja Åberg, Senior Policy Adviser at Amnesty International Sweden and Colin Megill, Co-Founder of Pol.is among them.

With that said, now go read!

Yours truly,

Victoria & Agnieszka  
Editors-in-Chief



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## TRAVEL

The travel committee is doing its first digital trip this semester! We are going to visit Chile and Singapore and, through digital meetings and workshops, we will learn more about these countries and their cultures. The dates when we will digitally travel are from 19th to 23rd of April. During these days, we will produce some podcast content and hopefully be able to share what we are learning to the entirety of the UPF members. So, keep an eye out for the travel committee's reporting in April.

## ACTIVITY

Save the date!

On the 24th of April, the Activity Committee will welcome you to the annual UPF ball! In spite of the current situation, we want to bring to you an amazing evening filled with entertainment, music, fantastic food and above all—a great time! This time our ball will take place digitally, with small groups of people being connected via Zoom. The theme for the ball is spring carnival, so get ready to have a fantastic night with lots of vibrant colours, glitter and fun! For more information please check out our event on Facebook.

## POD & RADIO

If you want to take in foreign affairs news via audio, please have a look at THE PERSPECTIVE Pod&Radio Committee! We publish podcasts on a number of subjects related to foreign affairs such as climate policy, extremism, international diplomacy, war crimes and many more. You can find our podcasts on Spotify as well as on our website [theperspective.se](http://theperspective.se).

## LECTURES

In line with current recommendations and the UPF regulations, the lectures will be held digitally until further notice. You can find the events on Facebook. See you there!

### MARCH 30 CHALLENGES FOR A SMALL OPEN ECONOMY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Lecture with the Governor of the Sweden's Central Bank, Stefan Ingves, moderated by Mats Benner, the Dean of the School of Economics and Management.

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# UPCOMING UPF EVENTS

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## APRIL 7 RIGHT TO HEALTH

Lecture with the Secretary-General of Doctors of the World Sweden, Eliot Wieslander. Médecins du monde or Doctors of the World, provides emergency and long-term medical care to the world's most vulnerable people & advocates to end health inequities.

## APRIL 14 US RELATIONS TO SWEDEN

Lecture with Her Excellency Ambassador of Sweden to United States, Karin Olofsdotter. Prior to assuming the role as Ambassador, she served as Director-General for Trade at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

## APRIL 21 SWEDEN AS THE NEW CHAIR OF OSCE

Lecture with the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Sweden and Chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Ann Linde. Linde previously served as Minister for Foreign Trade and Minister for Nordic Cooperation.

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## APRIL 28 TITLE TO BE ANNOUNCED

Lecture with Carl Middleton, Deputy Director for Research Affairs on the MA in International Development Studies (MAIDS) Program and Director of the Center for Social Development Studies (CSDS), in the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

## MAY 12 SWEDEN AS THE NEW CHAIR OF OSCE

Lecture with the Head of the Permanent Delegation of Sweden to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ulrika Funered. Ulrika has previously held the post of Deputy Head of the Swedish Embassy in London and served at the International Department of the Swedish Riksdag.

## MAY 19 ACADEMIC FREEDOM SCHOLARS AT RISK

Panel with the Scholars at Risk (SOR) network and Lund University representatives. SAR is a network of over 500 member universities in 42 countries that supports and defends the principles of academic freedom and defends human rights for researchers around the world.

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## DO YOU WANT TO BECOME A MEMBER?

Memberships are FREE for the 2020/2021 operational year.

You will get:

- Access to all lectures
- 4x THE PERSPECTIVE
- Access to opportunities e.g. the Prep Course and Mentorship Programme
- Right to vote in meetings

You will also be able to join and participate in any one of our committees.

Requirements:

Studentlund membership

If you are not a member yet, you can register online or sign up at a nation or student union (Studentkår).

The only exception are Swedish gymnasium students (Secondary School).

Joining UPF Lund means you will become a part of a student association that will help make your time at Lund University the time of your life!

## MAY 26 EU COMMISSION AND ENVIRONMENT

Lecture with the Head of Representation of the European Commission's Representation in Sweden, Christian Danielsson.

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## OFFICE HOURS

Do you want to learn more about UPF? Drop in on Zoom between 15-17 on Thursdays. Find the link on our Facebook page.

Pacific Island Countries and Territories

### Coke-Tiki—On Drug Trade in the Pacific

Drug trade throughout the Pacific region—especially among the PICTs (Pacific Island Countries and Territories)—has grown quickly and steadily over the last ten to fifteen years. Why, and why is it important now?

There are a lot of possible explanations to the expanding trade through the PICTs. For starters, the region is a geographical dream for would-be-drug traffickers, a collection of micro-states consisting of tens to hundreds of islands in the world's largest ocean. The PICTs are also stuck in-between Australia, which according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has one of the highest per-capita use of a multitude of illegal drugs, such as cocaine and amphetamines, and the major producers in Latin America and SE Asia.

The tenacious work of law agencies in the Caribbean has also forced the South-to-North America-trade to use the Pacific as primary region for trafficking, which may explain why Latin American cocaine is increasingly being exported to Australia, as trafficking resources are now concentrated on the Pacific side of the Americas.

The UNODC has also pointed to increasing tourism in the Pacific region as an explanation to the increased use of the Pacific route, arguing that the increase in private and commercial vessels further complicates the already difficult task of patrolling the Pacific islands.

The PICTs may also prove to be especially vulnerable to the dangers associated with drug trafficking. Rising sea-levels and an aggressive campaign for influence in the region by the Chinese Communist Party could be exacerbated by the negative effects of transnational crime, such as corruption and strained communal relations.

That drug-traders from both SE-Asia and Latin America are both using the PICTs whilst vying for influence in the same market could potentially risk conflict between actors from two markets that would otherwise not interact, which poses another risk for the region's stability.

Transnational crime organisations also have large resources at their disposal to facilitate drug trafficking, compared to the small economies of most PICTs. Spillover of substance abuse from the Australia and New Zealand bound is another risk-factor, with signs already seen of rising addiction problems in the major hubs such as Fiji.

OSSIAN HAMBERG



Northeast Nigeria

### Attacks on Dikwa Lead to “Rethinking” of Aid

On March 1, the town of Dikwa, a vital defensive stronghold and humanitarian hub, was attacked by an infiltration squad of the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP). More specifically, a hospital and aid agency's premises were burned and damaged and 25 aid workers trapped in a shelter under siege, AFP reported. The workers were later rescued by the Nigerian military and handed over to the government.

It marked the fourth attack this year, and the second one within 24 hours. Located in Borno state, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates the Dikwa Local Government population at around 114,000, including more than 75,000 internally displaced persons.

Residents were reportedly handed cash to stay in town as they were not the main target, which was the military and anti-Islam forces. The jihadist group split from Boko Haram in 2016, both widely regarded as a deadly threat in the region as well as neighboring states Chad, Niger and Cameroon.

© Clker/Pixabay





Myint and several of the country's senior officials. Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Min Aung Hlaing, has seized power as the country's de facto leader as a result of the coup—a move that drew subsequent condemnation of the European Union, the United States and the United Nations. The Tatmadaw announced a year-long state of emergency in response to an alleged election fraud that took place on November 8, 2020. Mass protests followed, with hundreds of thousands of citizens calling for the return of democracy. During a virtual press conference held on March 3, the UN Special Envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, warned that the chain of events in Myanmar could lead to a “real war” and called upon the Security Council to unite its front against the violence.

Despite protesters employing non-violent methods, their resistance was met with raging reactions of both the military forces and its supporters, which resulted in more than 60 deaths and a total of 2008 individuals being “arrested, charged or sentenced” in relation to the coup, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported on March 10. The same day, an exclusive report by Reuters disclosed the case of Tha Peng, one of Burmese police lance corporals who refused to comply with the “shoot to kill” order issued by a superior police officer. According to a “senior Indian official” quoted by Reuters, “around 100 people from Myanmar, mostly policemen and their families” have fled to India to avoid shooting at the peaceful protesters. Research published by Amnesty International on March 11 described the military response as a “killing spree,” with the Tatmadaw utilizing “weapons that are only appropriate for the battlefield, not for policing actions.”

The rapidly accelerating chain of events prompted the UN Security Council to unanimously condemn violence against the protesters. Issued on March 10 by Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US Ambassador to the UN, the statement stressed that “It is vital that the rights of minorities are fully protected.” The declaration drew voices of criticism describing it as “a predictable compromise” and yet, “a minor miracle”—as Richard Gowan, the International Crisis Group's UN liaison, told CNN—referring to the clashing objectives of China and the West that in the past resulted in decision-making deadlocks.

**AGNIESZKA GRYZ**

In a decade of Boko Haram's terrorist activities in the country, more than 37,500 people have been killed and an estimated 2.5 million people have been displaced; 12.5 million are in need of humanitarian aid in the Lake Chad Basin region and levels of malnutrition are critically high, according to the UN Refugee Agency.

“Fresh attacks in Dikwa on 18 February and 1 March further reduced the humanitarian footprint and increased security threats,” states Reliefweb, OCHA's humanitarian information service, latching on to reports of the UN withdrawing aid workers from Northern Borno.

**VICTORIA BECKER**

Myanmar

### **Domestic Democracy Setback Provokes International Media and Diplomatic Response**

February 1, 2021: A military coup launched by the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, deposed numerous members of Myanmar's ruling party, the National League for Democracy. The detainees included the country's effective leader, State Counsellor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi—as well as President Win

# GOOD NEWS IS GOOD FOR YOU

March 2021

As part of UPF's Mental Health Week, THE PERSPECTIVE dedicates a section of the magazine exclusively to good news related to International Affairs and Politics. Why? Consuming the news can be dreadful and overwhelming—because “good” things make the news a lot less often than the “bad” stuff. Lots of people actively decide not to consume news anymore because it takes a toll on their mental health and outlets dedicating their space to good news have seen rapid growth.

## Syria Torture Verdict: A Historic First in Fighting Crimes Against Humanity Committed During the Country's War

**E**x-Syrian intelligence officer Eyad al-Gharib has been convicted on charges of aiding and abetting torture of civilians: crimes committed while working within the security apparatus of the Bashar al-Assad regime. He was sentenced to four and a half years in prison by a German court on 24 February, marking the world's first verdict in a landmark trial against those linked to the Damascus government. It is hoped to pave the way to further trials related to the decade-long Syrian War.

The trial was held under Germany's universal jurisdiction laws allowing for prosecution of crimes against humanity committed anywhere in the world. The verdict of main defendant Anwar Raslan is expected in October.

Al-Gharib was granted asylum in Germany in 2018 after defecting from the regime in 2012. Most of the evidence used to make the case was based on what he shared with German immigration authorities and police during his asylum application process,

states Reuters. He said to have knowingly sent at least 30 anti-government protestors to facilities implementing torture in 2011.

“This is an important step forward in the process of securing accountability for the Syrian government's systematic use of torture against civilians,” stated lawyer Steve Kostas who works with the Open Society Foundation's Justice Initiative, representing Syrian plaintiffs. The German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas described the ruling in a

## “A historic verdict”

Heiko Maas

## European Union Becomes “LGBTIQ-Freedom” Zone

**I**n November 2020, the European Commission presented its first-ever strategy on LGBTIQ equality with aims to tackle discrimination—43% of LGBTIQ people felt discriminated against. It should further ensure safety, build inclusive societies and lead the call for LGBTIQ equality around the world. Acknowledging that there is still a long way to go, the

strategy is planned from 2020-2025. “We are still a long way away from the full inclusion and acceptance that LGBTIQ people deserve,” said Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli.

On March 10, EU lawmakers debated a resolution to make the whole European Union a “freedom zone.” This is seen as a direct response to conservative Polish communities which implemented so-called “LGBT free zones” to protect their Catholic values and to declare themselves free from what conservative authorities call “LGBT ideology.”

After gaining widespread media coverage in 2020—and tainting Poland's international image—EU members and Norway started withdrawing funds. Another country, Hungary, banned legal gender recognition for trans and intersex persons, furthering discrimination and the devaluation of human rights.

The resolution of the European Parliament shall increase pressure to implement concrete measures to halt the discriminatory measures and improve quality of life for millions of people.

© Isabelle Logi/Pixabay



## Mexico Passes Marijuana Legalization Bill, Hoping to Tackle Drug Cartels

**H**ugs, not bullets: On March 10, the lower house of Congress passed a legislation that would legalize the use of cannabis for recreational, medical and scientific use. Advocates for the law hope this will help decrease the influence of drug cartels.

The country has been a smuggling route for decades, due to its geographic location between Latin America and the USA. Major-scale narcotics trafficking by Mexican smugglers started in the late 1960s and by 2006, the country started its War on Drugs.

With a primary focus on dismantling powerful drug cartels and aiming at prevention of drug trafficking, then-president Felipe Calderón deployed around 20,000 troops to fight the cartels and capture leading figures. The deadly toll on human life attributed to the drug

war is estimated to be around 300,000.

Since 2018, Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is following the strategy of *Abrazos, no balazos*, meaning Hugs, not bullets. It focuses on tackling poverty and social inequality as a means to de-

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### "A big step in the right direction"

Zara Snapp

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crease violence related to drugs, latching onto his predecessor's, Enrique Peña Nieto, attempt toward a more holistic way of reducing violence. In early 2019, Obrador declared the war on drugs to be over. Those backing the legislation think that it may lead to a loss of influence of the cartels controlling the country's drug trade.

"If we successfully regulate cannabis with a social justice focus and are able to excarcerate people who are in jail for cannabis

charges, and if the campesinos [rural producers] are involved, that will already be a big step in the right direction," Zara Snapp, co-founder of Instituto RIA, a research group focusing on justice and drug policy, told Foreign Policy.

The next step for the legislation is the Senate. Even though there are opponents, the bill is estimated to become the law and would create the Mexican Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis, able to issue "five types of licenses for the cultivation, transformation, sale, research and export or import of marijuana," as Reuters reported. This could mean a major impact on Mexico's economic landscape.

"Much of Mexico's cannabis has been black market and the resulting war on drugs has proven to be a huge failure. The right solution: legalize, tax and regulate this market," said Medical Marijuana, Inc. chief executive Stuart Titus from California to Reuters, one of many expressing business interests.

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## Sustainable Swaps: Surplus Oranges for Electricity in Spain

**S**evilla, a sunny town in Southern Spain, is home to more than 45,000 orange trees, making it the record-holder in Europe. The downside: Many of the estimated 15,000 tonnes of those bitter oranges produced in the region go to the landfill. Bitter oranges are used to make *vino de naranja*, or are used in cooking and aromatherapy—and some go to the UK to be turned into marmalade.

Approximately 5.7 million kilos are collected by the city with

200 people on the job.

The city and a municipal water company, Emasesa, started a pilot project attempting to reduce that waste, using oranges from streets, parks and public spaces: The company needs large amounts of electricity to run its water treatment facilities. It is currently running on a system fermenting organic matter which creates methane gas; this, in turn, powers the generator producing the needed electricity.

"Apparently the bacteria that we use to produce methane really like the juice of our oranges, which works very well," stated Enrique Vaquerizo, head of the Emasesa Wastewater Depart-

ment in a Sevilla newspaper.

During the first pilot, 35 tonnes of oranges will be used, generating 1,500 kWh which would be enough electricity for 150 households. Should the pilot work, plans are to scale up the use of oranges to process 1,700 tons—enough power for 73,000 households. Sevilla aims to lower its greenhouse emissions as well as push the circular economy. ¡Viva la naranja!







## DEVELOPING ENHANCED SOLDIERS

# THE FUTURE OF WAR BETWEEN RESEARCH AND ETHICS?

ENHANCED SOLDIER: A TERM THAT LETS OUR IMAGINATION RUN WILD AND IS PROBABLY NOT SHORT OF WHAT IS KNOWN FROM THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES. WILL THEY BE AS FLEXIBLE AS SPIDERMAN, OR STRONG LIKE IRON MAN? THE PERSPECTIVE REVIEWED GENERAL LITERATURE ON THE TOPIC AND SPOKE TO AN ACADEMIC EXPERT IN THE FIELD, PROF. NAYEF AL-RODHAN, A NEURO-PHILOSOPHER AND HEAD OF THE GENEVA CENTRE FOR SECURITY POLICY'S GEOPOLITICS AND GLOBAL FUTURES PROGRAM, ABOUT HIS VIEWS ON WHAT WARFARE OF THE FUTURE MAY LOOK LIKE.

© Israel Palacio/Unsplash



## Between Biological Modification of Spiderman and Technological Armor of Ironman: What Is An Enhanced Soldier?

Let's start at the beginning: generally, an enhanced person is someone whose cognitive and physical abilities have been strengthened through biology or technology.

Not reserved for the military field, physical improvements can already be found among civilians. Neil Harbisson, a Catalan artist, is equipped with an antenna connected to his brain which permits him to "hear colors." Convinced that the future of humans is in enhancement, in 2010 he created The Cyborg Foundation—an international organisation supposed to help people become cyborgs. Elon Musk, also convinced by the idea of connecting a human to a machine, created Neuralink, a start-up developing implantable brain-machine interfaces—technology that has so far been tested on pigs. But the cyborg future is not here—yet.—Today, technological body modifications are limited to implantable NFC and RFID microchips intended for everyday convenience, gaming, artistic performance and—in some cases—scientific challenge. But only a handful of futurists lobby for further development of body hacking. With research being continuously conducted by private and public organisations—some states—namely the US, France and Russia—also see enhanced technology as potential gain for military purposes.

### A New Wave of Enhancement?

The notion of cognitive enhancement is not new—and the use of drugs in times of war is no secret. Today, French military openly uses caffeine capsules to boost soldiers' dynamism—while back in the 1940s, amphetamines were wildly popular among British, American, Japanese and German WW2 forces. Intoxicants targeting the central nervous system, however, are still far away from the human body enhancements that we can imagine—and that can raise ethical questions.

In soldiers, the "new wave" of enhancement may take on different shapes and forms—but the objective remains unchanged: to improve their efficiency for military use. Principally, two forms of



Neil Harbisson, the world's first officially recognized cyborg, can hear colors with an implanted antenna.  
© Campus Party Europe in Berlin/Flickr

improvement are deemed possible: a non-intrusive and an (all-)intrusive—possibly irreversible—one.

The arrival of enhanced soldiers may reform modern warfare: efficient soldiers, boosted by technology, would create new challenges—as did the development of drones. Conflicts may become even more unequal and unfair between soldiers: the army's hierarchy may be reorganised to include strengthened soldiers without resentment and discrimination. Furthermore, for the soldier, improvement can be linked to risks—but the safety of people should be the main objective. In addition, responsibility may be redefined again: who can be held accountable in case of a blunder made by an enhanced soldier thanks to their enhancement? And, if the technology is out of control, what guarantees can states and other entities provide? The topic of "enhanced soldier" raises many questions, which states have tried to answer. France, for example, has an ethical committee deciding what kind of innovations the French army can develop and use while remaining moral.

### Beyond the Myth: What is the Current State-of-the-Art?

Forget the genetically modified soldier who has

lasers instead of eyes—our future army won't be a remake of Professor Xavier's School from X-Men. On the one hand, scientific advances in this field seem somewhat shy; on the other, this research is highly sensitive so it is impossible to know what is *really* out there.

However, there are some developments—mostly in the non-intrusive enhancement area—that are worth noting, such as the exoskeleton which is researched by the US, France and Russia. An exoskeleton is an external supportive cover inspired by the natural world. The most promising one seems to be the American ONYX developed by Lockheed Martin, an American private company predominantly focused on developing aerospace, arms, defense and security. The exoskeleton is motorized and uses artificial intelligence. Equipped with knee sensors, it anticipates the needs of the soldier to help them climb steep slopes, and assists in lifting and carrying heavy loads while being mounted on the soldier's back. Translating this into war context, it would make the soldier more endurable to distance and weight. Exoskeletons are not intrusive and totally reversible.

Enhancement is already possible with, for example, corneal operation that increases a soldier's visual acuity—technology which, however, is not yet used on the battlefield. Intrusive technology is more secret and sensitive. Still, some states don't conceal their quest for this kind of enhancement.



The exoskeleton Onyx, developed by Lockheed Martin Company, which improves the soldier's endurance and capacities. © 2021 Lockheed Martin Corporation

The US army is currently conducting research on an implant that allows the human brain to communicate with a computer. The US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has announced a budget of \$62 million for this project. Other ambitions pursued by DARPA include an internal electronic device composed of modified cells and biochemicals with which the soldier could control their own physiology.

Furthermore, the sensitive nature and the lack of information create tensions: accusations are made. In 2020, John Ratcliffe, the former Director of National Intelligence in the Trump administration, has accused China of conducting biological tests on humans—an allegation shot down by China.

Despite enhanced technology still being in its infancy, Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan believes that “enhancements [cognitive and physical] are inevitable—even if controversial—because they will almost certainly compromise dignity, authenticity, fairness and meritocracy.”

### **The Bet on an Ethical Committee: Thinking About What is Morally Acceptable**

In January 2020, Florence Parly, the French Minister of Armed Forces, announced the establishment of a multi-disciplinary ethics committee that aims to tackle new ethical challenges of war, including the “enhanced soldier.” The 18-member task group for months investigated questions surrounding intrusive technology through lenses of military, medicine, history, law and science.

In their final report, the committee expressed their concerns regarding intrusive enhancements of soldiers with a threefold objective: to maintain the superiority of the French army while complying with the values of civilization, respect for human dignity and the laws governing war and humanitarian action.

### **A “Do Not Cross” Barrier**

The committee has made a few things very clear: an enhancement shall not dehumanize the soldier, affect their free will—specifically their capacity to



distinguish between good and evil—as well as meddle with their capability of carrying out military obligations. Eugenic and genetic manipulation of the human body is strictly prohibited and, additionally, the modification shall not jeopardize a return to a “normal life” after their deployment.

France is the first state implementing an ethical committee on the enhanced soldier but the debates have spread all across the world. Prof. Al-Rodhan insists on the risks of enhancement for soldiers “being significant with the potential to negatively impact neuropsychological and molecular consequences, various pathologies, longevity & other sustainable issues of overall well-being.”

#### Just Recommendations?

For the time being, the report seems to be merely a recommendation. Yet, Henri Bentégat, a committee member and the former Chief

of Staff of the Armed Forces (CEMA), is looking forward to implementing those findings into military law.

In addition, the report of the committee is not a permanent one and its advice—not definitive: the members are supposed to meet regularly to question the limits and assess developments. Armed Forces Minister Parly precised that this report is only valid until new evolutions and innovations appear. Therefore, research on enhancement is encouraged even if the French army chooses to prioritize non-intrusive technology over intrusive one—as long as the need of cyborgs is not accurate.

Minister Parly summarized the endeavour at the Digital Forum innovation defense: “These so-called ‘invasive’ developments are not on the agenda

of the French armed forces. But we need to be lucid, not everyone has our scruples, and this is a future for which we need to prepare. In summary, we say yes to the armor of Iron Man and no to the increase and genetic mutation of Spiderman.”

#### A New Field of Law?

At the time of the publication, there is no international law that regulates “enhanced soldiers.” However, Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan considers the question of a harmonized legislation on the en-

hanced soldier important. According to him, “Various UN agencies could be the obvious platforms for doing this, but it is not likely to happen any time soon due to the sensitive nature of the question.”

On top of that, Emmanuel Goffi, former French military captain and the director of the Ethics & Artificial Intelligence Observatory at the Sapiens Institute, raises the problem of

non-state actors in an interview for France Culture, a French radio. Even if at the moment they do not possess this kind of technology, they “will not be constrained by the law.” The regulation of this kind of technology seems even more complicated.

The question of the enhanced soldier raises many problems and discussions though the technology is still in its infancy—from legal to ethical and philosophical ones: should the compromise of one’s identity in the name of national defense be accepted?

Prof. Al-Rodhan concludes: “Free-will, individual choice and dignity of everyone must be sacredly guarded. Otherwise, we risk losing too much in our brave, innovative, yet brutal, unequal, unregulated and uncertain future.”

**"Free-will, individual choice and dignity of everyone must be sacredly guarded. Otherwise, we risk losing too much in our brave, innovative, yet brutal, unequal, unregulated and uncertain future."**

Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan to THE PERSPECTIVE

# THE AGE OF RELATIVISM

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE "POST-TRUTH ERA"

WE SEEM TO BE ENTERING AN ERA WHERE FACTS ARE BECOMING UNNECESSARY, OR EVEN TRIVIAL—WHERE THE ELECTORATE IS INDIFFERENT TO STATISTICS AND INCREASINGLY APPEALS TO PERSONAL EMOTION AND BELIEFS. THE RECENT EVENTS AT THE US CAPITOL AND THE ONGOING DENIAL OF CLIMATE CHANGE REFLECT THIS TREND AS WE PROGRESSIVELY ENTER A DYSTOPIAN-LIKE EPOCH WHERE TRUTH APPEARS TO NO LONGER MATTER.

You may be asking yourself: what is relativism? In the context of media and politics it is the withdrawal from factual evidence and objective truth. Evidence grounded on proven facts and statistics becomes strikingly obsolete, leaving the door open to emotions, beliefs and personal assertions as the new premises of truth. This feeling of what is true and what is not then emerges as the force of influence in the formation of our opinions and could sway our preferences at the polls or our choice to wear surgical masks to the supermarket or not.

Recently, mostly due to the rising role of social media, there has been a growing appeal towards relativism, as facts and knowledge increasingly become second actors to opinion, one in which evidence is often neglected. This could be a danger to democratic values and even journalism. Particularly, the rise of these new outlets has transformed the latter and the way it operates. Before the internet, citizens relied exclusively on the traditional channels of media to gather political information, whereas now there is an overflow of information 24 hours a day, every day of the week.

We have witnessed through the prominent examples of the former US president Donald Trump and the rise of populism that whoever wishes to influence public opinion no longer refers to solid evidence. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the discourse that will most powerfully satisfy the emotions and beliefs of the audience, regardless of the validity and sincerity of its words.

Why is this an issue? Politics has always entailed differences in the views we hold of society and the arguments we employ to describe them. That in itself is not the problem. The problem is that relativism causes the loss of a common ground

on which these differences are constructed and discussed. Relativism affects the foundations of thought to the point that citizens may no longer distinguish, or simply do not care about, honest and objective truth. For instance, according to Statista, in 2019 at least 52% of the US adult population shared fake news, of which 10% knew these were false before sharing.

The appearance of social media, through platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, has given rise to new ways in which citizens, which were previously excluded from political debates in the mainstream media, can voice their opinions. Activists, who may have been previously ignored by the media and politicians, may now create huge participation webs via interactive digital media and easy-to-personalize engaging posts. For instance, the easy-to-engage slogan, “We are the 99 percent” that was born from the US Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011, became rapidly known all around the globe via shared stories, tweets, posts, and images. Modern technology has therefore massively increased the scope to which news can travel, to the point that the “public sphere” is no longer national, but rather global.

Yet, it has also brought an informational cacophony of echo chambers, fake news, political propaganda, computational propaganda and hate speech, contributing to the development of relativism in the media and the information environment, all available to be shared through a simple click. To put a numerical example, according to Statista, as of 2019 44% of adults worldwide have encountered fake news—this is in a world where roughly half of the population has access to social media.

Relativism disfigures the information arena and thus, the processes of political participation and opinion formation. Peter Van Aelst, a professor of



political science at the University of Antwerp, told THE PERSPECTIVE that the problem emerges as “people have a different set of views of what the reality is, and thus it becomes impossible to start a political debate.” The relationship among voters therefore becomes hopeless if everyone holds a distant perspective of reality and facts, which is mainly exacerbated by the pathologies of social media.

“When a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true, it becomes very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between facts that are true and ‘facts’ that are not,” Katharine Viner, the Editor-in-Chief of The Guardian, wrote back in 2016. It does not mean that the truth is no longer there; it simply means people no longer agree on what that truth is.

Van Aelst illustrated his concern with an interesting anecdote: “I was listening to a podcast about how Republicans view what happened with the election in the US and a lady appeared making a statement regarding the alleged fraud. She declared: ‘I have been watching and I saw the fraud happening in front of my eyes.’ She was 100% certain that, from the sources that she turns to in social media, she was objectively right.” Van Aelst explains that outlets spreading similar sort of information pose a great problem: they appear to be legitimate and end up being blatantly partisan.

Consequently, this creates a self-sustaining relationship, where false notions that are presented as true build up skepticism, which in turn leads to those citizens that only utilize social media as a news source unable to acknowledge whether what they are reading is true or false. “Suddenly, there is no place where you can go for the truth,” clarifies Van Aelst. For example, in 2018, the percentage of people who trusted

social media sources in the US and Canada was relatively low—34%. Yet, 55% of adults in the US either “often” or “sometimes” get their news from social media, according to the Pew Research Center.

The whole concept might appear rather abstract and academic so far. If we look at real-life examples that have occurred in recent times, relativism can be much more easily understood.

“The events in the US about not accepting the election results is an extreme example of relativism. You cannot have a legitimate leader if you do not agree on the simple fact that somebody has won and the other has lost the election,” comments Van Aelst. This is the precise loss of elemental truth that is essential in democracies. If we begin to question even some of the most authentic facts, such as an election in a country like the US without the remotest evidence of fraud, where does the line stop? It is quite worrisome, and it should be, because it can have devastating consequences such as the shocking assault of the Capitol in the US, undermining the foundations that support our societies, explains Van Aelst.

Trump, during his time in office, managed to create a narrative of his politics that was based purely on relative criteria. These frameworks often included the appeal to raw power and *ad hominem* arguments (“I’m president and you’re not”), popular opinion and *ad populum* ideas (“Many people have come out and said I’m right”), and implied rejection of the importance that facts are supposed to have on an argument. Thus, he has been imposing a trend towards epistemological relativism and the destruction of neutral judgement often from something as simple as a tweet. While Donald Trump is no longer president of the United States, other leaders might follow

his example and employ similar tactics.

The implications of this trend have influenced the general perception of global issues like climate change. As Van Aelst explains, “Temperature is rising and yet some people deny it, arguing it is simply an opinion,” while there is clear scientific proof that the world is indeed getting hotter. “That some people dispute the basic facts that demonstrate climate change is truly problematic.”

Tweets and statements from a global leader denying the climate crisis (Trump: “We must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the apocalypse” or, even before elected, “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make the US manufacturing non-competitive”) are truly damaging to our capacity to collaborate to solve these problems efficiently and can result in the support for counterproductive and dividing policies—like the temporary exit of the US from the Paris Agreement.

The detrimental impacts of relativism have been, in part, perpetuated by the rising role of social media—and especially the self-publishing nature of its platforms—within the public sphere and its information ecosystem. “Social media adds a further emotional layer of people that are passionately convinced of their views,” explains Van Aelst. When you combine that with the ease through which information, and specially false information, spreads through social media and—what is worse—is often taken to be true, you get a distortion of reality amid a significant proportion of a population. This occurs to the point that, according to the Washington Post, three in ten Americans falsely believed that the elections had been forged; almost 75% of Republicans replied “no” to the question “Did Biden legitimately win the presidential election?”—a view influenced by

the claims of their party leader.

Van Aelst is optimistic that we will reach a point where truth is restored to its rightful place as the key to legitimate argumentation. However, he does believe that the problem will worsen before it gets better. He calls for a reinstitution of the professional, objective fact-checking paradigm of global politics. “If a politician knows that his or her statements will be thoroughly fact-checked, it helps him or her stay closer to the truth.”

On a more general level he argues, “media literacy should be something that young citizens must be taught, so that they are aware of how social media works.” He adds: “the ability of factual data is available to journalists but also to the broader public, in a friendly and easily accessible manner,” is also important, he continues, “so that if a politician complains on immigration we are two clicks away from checking the objective facts of the matter.”

Fortunately, some of these measures are already up and rolling with NGOs that strive for competent media education of teachers and students such as Media Power Youth, or nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking institutes like the International Fact-Checking Network, which provide powerful tools of accountability for journalism and social media.

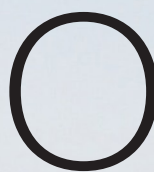
Relativism is a pathological phenomenon intrinsic to our hyper-connected information environment that we must learn to avoid and deal with. Understanding the problem is, however, just the first step to return to factual, objective truth. We must be careful too; else we risk losing journalism to propaganda.

# ON DISPLACED AND FORSAKEN PEOPLE

## GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED LANDS

IN ITS RECENT RULING, THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS FOUND RUSSIA RESPONSIBLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ON GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. WHILE CELEBRATING THE RULING, GEORGIANS CONTINUE TO DISREGARD THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE DISPLACED BY THE WARS AND THE CALLS FOR DIALOGUE FROM THOSE LIVING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF BARBED WIRES. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO GEORGIAN EXPERTS AND A DISPLACED PERSON FROM SOUTH OSSETIA TO GAIN INSIGHT INTO THE UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS.





On January 30, 2021, nine days after the announcement of the court's ruling, an old building collapsed in Zugdidi, western Georgia. A 10-year-old girl was miraculously pulled alive from under the rubble. What puts her story in the spotlight is that her family—just like other residents of the building—are Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) from Abkhazia. The incident is a vivid demonstration that even after three decades since the conflict in Abkhazia, the Georgian government has not fulfilled its duty to provide IDPs with safe living conditions.

As of today, there are around 270,000 IDPs in Georgia, making up approximately 7% of the country's 3.7 million population. The majority of them became displaced in the early 1990s, as a result of an ethno-political confrontation in Abkhazia. The remaining IDPs fled Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, a conflict due to which Georgia lost control over South Ossetia.

Since their displacement, some IDP families have been provided with housing by the government, however, around 50,000 IDP families are still waiting. Even after so many years since the conflicts, many IDP families continue living in old, uninhabitable buildings—still waiting for the Georgian government to provide them with housing.

The Georgian government  
exerts control over nei-  
ther Abkhazia nor

South Ossetia—both of which aspire to independence and are run by their respective local authorities. Despite their ambitions, these regions have not managed to gain international recognition as independent states and continue to be reliant on and heavily influenced by Russia, whose soldiers guard the checkpoints along the barbed-wire borders that divide them from Georgian-controlled territories.

### Ruling of the European Court of Human Rights

The Georgian government submitted the case to the ECtHR in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. The ruling was announced in January 2021 and said that Russia had breached a number of articles of the European Convention of Human Rights. The court found Russia responsible for—among other wrongdoings—inhumane and degrading treatment of Georgian civilians, torture of prisoners, and looting and burning of homes. Further, the court said that “the strong Russian presence and the South Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities’ dependency on the Russian Federation indicated that there had been continued ‘effective control’ over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” The decision of the court was widely celebrated in Georgia, as officials assured the population that the ruling would help the country regain

its territorial integrity. “The court has confirmed Georgia’s claims that Tskhinvali region [South Ossetia] and Abkhazia are integral parts of Georgia and are occupied by Russia,” said Gocha Lortkipanidze, Georgia’s Justice Minister. However, amidst the country-wide celebration of the ruling, little attention was paid to the living conditions and needs of people directly affected by the war.



An abandoned building complex in Akarmara, Abkhazia, Georgia.

© Pavel Neznanov/Unsplash

## The Forgotten Ones

“The court’s ruling is a valuable document indeed. Georgia has been claiming that Russia is an occupier, that it invaded Georgian territories, which now has been confirmed by the court’s ruling as well. However, when the ruling came out, nobody remembered IDPs,” Toma Sukhashvili, an IDP from South Ossetia told THE PERSPECTIVE.

After fleeing the war in 2008, Toma and his family experienced all the hardships that IDPs have gone through—from squatting state-owned buildings for shelter, to being forcefully evicted from these buildings by police.

Georgia did not have a state strategy on IDPs until 2007—and the state program on providing IDPs with homes started only in 2009. IDPs, many of whom had nowhere to go, found shelter in non-residential state properties, such as schools or hotels. However, years later the government started to gradually reclaim these buildings—mostly to boost the economy by selling them to foreign investors. As a result, some of the IDPs were offered new homes, while others were offered compensation

for abandoning their temporary residencies. If they refused to leave, the government would cut them off from water and electricity supply to make the living conditions unbearable, or eventually, they were forcefully evicted by police. IDPs often resorted to extreme measures of protest, such as sewing lips or setting themselves on fire, demanding the government pay attention to their needs.

The situation started to improve somewhat after the state strategy was put in place. However, it has not resolved the problems of thousands of people still living in life-threatening conditions such as the building that collapsed in Zugdidi.

“More than half of the IDP population is still waiting to be provided with homes. The government has raised the budget for rehousing projects, but if we look at the number of people on the waiting list, it becomes clear that the current pace is still slow. With the current pace, it will take 20 more years to provide all remaining IDPs with homes,” Eliko Bendeliani from the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts told THE PERSPECTIVE. She elaborated that even after so many years since these conflicts, the living conditions of some of the

IDP families are so harsh that they could easily be compared to torture.

"Families have to live in deteriorating buildings. They are deprived of basic means of hygiene [...] In some cases, there is only one toilet on a single floor, or they don't have indoor toilets at all. It's unimaginable that people are living in such conditions in the 21st century," Bendeliani explained.

### A Bitter Reminder of War

In the aftermath of conflicts, the government's rhetoric ensured IDPs that they would be returned to their homes in no time. Now the hope of return is nothing but a distant dream.

The incident, such as the crumbling of the building where IDPs lived, is a bitter reminder for Georgians of the war and the fact that the state has failed to provide its citizens with care and safety. Still, the issue of IDPs barely penetrated the mainstream narrative of victory and a country-wide celebration on 21 January, when the Strasbourg court announced the ruling. In fact, the ruling barely even raised the discussion on Georgia's relationships with Abkhaz and Ossetian populations.

"When people say 20% of Georgia is occupied by Russia, it doesn't include the concerns over the state of IDPs," said Toma Sukhashvili.

He believes that for the most part, the phrase has gained a narrow connotation that Russia has taken Georgian territories. He elaborated that the Abkhaz and Ossetian people who live on these territories shouldn't be forgotten.

### Dialogue or No Dialogue

"20% of my country is occupied by Russia" is the phrase that caught on after the 2008 war, during the rule of the United National Movement party led by the former Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili. This is when the country's policy towards the occupied territories started to target Russia as the only other agent in the conflict.

The current stance of the Georgian government is the continuation of this policy. It considers Abkhazian and Ossetian people as Georgian citizens, however, at the same time, it refuses to speak directly to Abkhazian and Ossetian officials, denying their agency in the process.

**"With the current pace, it will take 20 more years to provide all remaining IDPs with homes."**

Eliko Bendeliani to THE PERSPECTIVE

Since 2008, the Geneva International Discussions—co-chaired by the EU, the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)—is trying to tackle the conflict in Georgia by bringing together representatives of Georgia, Russia, USA, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While South Ossetia is unwilling to cooperate with Georgia beyond that format, the Abkhaz authorities have made attempts to widen the scope of dialogue with Georgia. Since the power shift in Abkhazia in March 2020, the new Abkhazian leadership reiterated their will for a separate format for bilateral talks with Georgian officials.

"There could be a different format for negotiations and contacts... It could be something not as distant as Geneva, but something on the border, for resolution of this kind of [border-related] issues," said Aslan Bzhania, Abkhazia's newly elected President in March 2020.



Other calls suggested cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, energy and transportation—however, they were dismissed. At the time, the Georgian government was preoccupied with upcoming parliamentary elections and none of these calls were answered—not even months after Georgian Dream, the country’s ruling party, took office for the third term. Now the Georgian leadership is preoccupied with political rivalry with its opponents, missing the window of opportunity to rebuild relationships.

### Fearing the Russian Narrative

In the meantime, Georgians are constantly reminded of the presence of Russian soldiers nearby. Georgian nationals living near the borderline are often taken and arrested by Russian soldiers under false charges of illegal border crossing. According to a report of the Georgian State Security Service, in 2018 alone, more than a hundred Georgian nationals were arrested on such charges.

Some of such arrests resulted in fatal endings. In 2018, a Georgian citizen and a former soldier Archil Tatanashvili died in custody in South Ossetia after being arrested on the charges of being an informant

for the Georgian special services. South Ossetian authorities had claimed he had “fallen down from stairs,” while Georgian autopsy found that he had suffered over 100 separate injuries before dying. Georgia holds Russia accountable for these crimes, which has been denying its agency in the conflict, encouraging Georgians to speak with Abkhazians and Ossetians directly. Paata Zakareishvili, Georgia’s former State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality believes that the reason behind the Georgian leadership’s refusal to engage in a direct dialogue is the fear that they will strengthen the Russian narrative. He told THE PERSPECTIVE that Georgia “has become the hostage of its own concept.”

“When we had formal and informal meetings abroad with Abkhazians and Ossetians, I know that their representatives were questioned by Russians upon return. [...] Russians want there to be only Geneva talks because they can observe the situation. Because of Russia’s presence, Abkhazians and Ossetians aren’t able to openly express themselves,” Zakareishvili elaborated, encouraging Georgian officials to develop separate channels of communication with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

© Tamuna Chkareuli

Long corridors such as this one are typical in residences of IDPs in Georgia. This building in Zugdidi, Western Georgia, was never designed as a residential building, however, families have been living in it for decades now.





A residence of Internally Displaced Persons in Zugdidi, Western Georgia. Residents of this building have no drinking water or individual toilets.  
© Tamuna Chkareuli

### Estrangement—a Possibility

So far, besides Russia, only a limited number of countries have acknowledged Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Georgia enjoys the support of its territorial integrity from its western partners—the EU and the US. Because of this, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have found themselves in isolation, as they refuse to cooperate with the EU if the partnership is managed through Tbilisi—the seat of the Georgian government. This has allowed Russia to strengthen its influence in these isolated regions. Paata Zakareishvili believes that Georgia's refusal to engage in a dialogue with these regions contributes to the increase of Russia's influence over them.

"The ruling of the Strasbourg court is a proof that Georgia is occupied—however, it will not resolve the conflict. Europe cannot resolve our conflicts. The government should be smart enough not to allow estrangement with Abkhaz and Ossetian communities," said Zakareishvili, adding that Georgian officials should "let Brussels work directly with these regions."

On 21 February Tea Akhvediani, the acting State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, stated that Georgia is ready to "broaden the platform

for informal dialogue and cooperation of mutual interest with Abkhazian and Ossetian societies." Her use of the words "informal dialogue" may suggest that the ministry has no concrete plans in terms of revising its current policy of cooperation with these regions.

### When Russian Soldiers Leave

Toma Sukhashvili, an IDP from South Ossetia believes that "Georgians should try to see real people beyond the terms such as Abkhazian and Ossetian society." In his view, Abkhazians and Ossetians are currently seen by Georgians only as puppets operated by Russia, incapable of making their own judgments.

"This illusion will fade when Russian soldiers leave and Georgians find out that they have a problem with Abkhazian and Ossetian people, whose existence was not acknowledged, who were not spoken to. In our consciousness there are no societies, there are only territories," concludes Sukhashvili.

**Disclaimer:** For ease of reading, we decided not to use qualifiers such as *de facto regimes*. Lack of such terminology does not imply our stance on the status of the regions mentioned in the article.

# THE BUSINESS OF SELLING SEX

## HOW A PETITION SPLITS THE PORTUGUESE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

JANUARY 2020: A PETITION WITH OVER 5000 SIGNATURES IS PRESENTED TO THE PORTUGUESE PARLIAMENT BY “SEX BUSINESSWOMAN” ANA LOUREIRO. IT AIMS TO LEGALIZE PROSTITUTION, PROPOSING ITS REGULATION AND STATUS AS “REAL” WORK—including labour and fiscal rights.

IT HAS RAISED CONCERNS FROM FEMINIST ASSOCIATIONS, INCLUDING OTHER SEX-WORKER LED MOVEMENTS, SCHOLARS AND POLITICAL PARTIES. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE WITH SÉRGIO, FROM SEX WORKERS’ MOVEMENT (MTS), AND DR. ALEXANDRA OLIVEIRA, AN EXPERT IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF SEX WORK, TO UNDERSTAND THE STAKES OF THIS

“Every day I practice a crime, and I will continue to do so until [prostitution] is legalized,” Ana Loureiro—the author of the petition—told RTP, the public broadcasting organization of Portugal. Selling sex itself is currently not illegal in Portugal, but facilitating such a transaction by others is a criminal offense—according to Article 169 of the Portuguese Penal Code, penalties reach up to eight years in prison. Ana Loureiro, sex worker



and manager of a brothel in Campo Grande, Lisbon, has thus placed herself in an unusual position: calling herself a “sex businesswoman.” Publicly describing her business ventures alongside other women, Ana is admitting to being a criminal while simultaneously addressing the country’s highest legislative body.

“Facilitating” the selling of sex is not an easily defined legal term, and that means that not only “pimps,” but also a variety of other agents end up being labelled as criminals. According to Sérgio from Sex Worker’s Movement (MTS), a grassroots sex-worker led association, Article 169 “makes us [sex workers], or people in our lives, criminals, preventing us from working together.” This is because “facilitating sex work” can be interpreted in multiple ways, from being security guards, drivers, landlords or coworkers of sex workers, thus potentially criminalizing their whole support network. As a result—despite selling sex not being illegal—sex workers are, according to Sérgio, currently





unable to ask the police for protection and justice when they experience violence, as “it could be [them] on trial.”

The regulation of prostitution as a site of concern for public health and moral has, similarly to other European countries, meant being legally regulated in Portugal from 1853 onwards. In 1858, prostitutes were first made to register with the police, with the purpose of hygienizing society rather than give these women social rights, according to Women’s Union Alternative and Response (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta—UMAR), a Portuguese women’s association. In 1963, this climate of moderate tolerance ended, with restrictive measures attempting to eradicate sex work by prohibiting it, having little practical effect as the business simply moved underground. After the democratic revolution of 1974, prostitutes started to be regarded as victims in need of protection rather than criminals, which, to this date, is the logic of the legal framework.



Up: Sex Workers’ Movement banner on International Woman’s Day in Lisbon, Portugal on 8 March. © MTS  
Down: The red umbrella is the symbol of the global sex workers’ rights movement. Here during Red Umbrella March for Sex Work Solidarity on Saturday, June 11, 2016 in Vancouver, Canada. © Saly T. Buck/Flickr

Continuing this turbulent history, the petition proposed by Loureiro intends to advance the rights of sex workers and calls for the legalization of facilitating sex work—as long as any form of coercion or abuse in the business remain criminalized. If legalized as a business, workers would be able to pay taxes and receive the corresponding social benefits, such as sick leave, fixed salaries and other contractual benefits. It also calls for regulating controversial aspects of the work, such as establishing mandatory periodical medical exams, raising the age of consent for engaging in sex work to 21 years old and criminalizing the activities of illegal residents. This, according to Dr. Alexandra Oliveira—lead researcher of the study “Less equal than others” about sex workers’ rights and advocacy in Europe—is more reminiscent of the nineteenth century than it is actually progressive for sex worker’s rights.

This proposal was discussed at a Parliament hearing on June 4, 2020 and is now under review—with several associations having issued statements on their disagreement to it. This debate on sex work laws is not new—not in Portugal or elsewhere. In a webinar on the connection between human trafficking and sex work, Sandra Benfca from the Portuguese women's association Democratic Women's Movement (Movimento Democrático de Mulheres—MDM) stated that since 2008, the discourse has resurfaced cyclically in the media and the political sphere. The study led by Dr. Alexandra Oliveira found that European countries have been moving towards increased state control of prostitution—contrary to this petition's aim of depenalizing the activity—by regulating it administratively, rather than criminally. The tendency in Europe, Dr. Alexandra Oliveira continues, has been towards neo-abolitionist models that criminalize the purchase of sex, one that started in Sweden, in 1999, and spread to Norway, Iceland, France and Ireland.

### Is It a Crime? No Simple "Yes or No"

The complicated maze of legal approaches to sex work is worth untangling first. According to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)'s Briefing Paper on Sex Work and the Law, the three main legal models of sex work are criminalization, legalization and decriminalization. NSWP has, among these three main models, identified twelve variants that exist across the globe—showing how there are no two similar countries in this respect. It has also advocated for improving legislation on other issues—such as trafficking, migration and non-discrimination—which further impact people

engaged in sex work by forging a mosaic of interlocking legal frameworks.

Criminalization means that all (or some) of the agents involved—the client, the prostitute, the pimp, among others—commit a crime. Legalization—the model implemented in Greece, Germany and the Netherlands—means that, while sex work and surrounding activities are not a crime, they ought to follow certain regulations. At last, decriminalization, so far exclusively implemented in New Zealand back in 2003, means selling sex is neither a crime nor bound to specific regulations, fostering self-

organizing of workers and providing them general labour rights. It has been supported by international organizations, such as UN Women, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as anti-trafficking organizations, such as La Strada International.

### The Great Feminist Split

Several Portuguese feminist associations are standing

against this petition, but not in unison—they have increasingly irreconcilable positions on the way to transform sex work legislation, mirroring the polarization in other countries and the global feminist movement. The stakes seem to be getting higher: this year, the divergence of feminist positions on the future of sex work, and on how the law ought to regulate it, had a dramatic effect. International Worker Woman's day in Portugal is coordinated by the network 8M, that organizes a national strike and dynamises preparatory events throughout the year. Because of the topic of sex work and—to a lesser extent, trans rights—for the first time in the country's history, the network was split into two organizing committees, according to a Público

"The author of the petition is seeking a sanitizing regulation characteristic of the nineteenth century."

Dr. Alexandra Oliveira to  
THE PERSPECTIVE

newspaper's report.

On the one hand, associations such as Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights' (Plataforma Portuguesa para os Direitos das Mulheres—PPdM) and Democratic Women's Movement (MDM) believe in the need to abolish sex work through a neo-abolitionist model, such as the Swedish one, by criminalizing the purchase of sex. This long tradition of feminist abolitionism, originating in the International Abolitionist Federation created in 1875, in Liverpool, believes that sex work is inherently exploitative—with MDM labelling it “a form of slavery” and “a striking expression of violence against women” on their website.

In a statement regarding the petition addressed to the Parliament, PPdM also claims that the petition violates the Portuguese Constitution by breaching international conventions that the state parties to, such as the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. What is violated concretely, in their opinion, is the state's need to prevent all practices based on a social understanding of women as inferior, meaning they consider sex work to perpetuate gender-based violence.

On the other hand, associations such as Sex Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores do Sexo—MTS) and UMAR, as well as scholars such as Dr. Alexandra Oliveira, oppose the petition, as they believe that decriminalization—and not abolition through the criminalization of purchasing sex—is best suited for ensuring labour rights, security and human rights of those involved. Sérgio from MTS explains that

**"The law should serve to minimize the risk of**

**violence, social and economic vulnerability of all workers, but especially those of us who are most marginalized."**

This, they believe, is a crucial failure of this petition, as by discriminating migrant workers, proposing they are not included in the protection of the law, it legitimizes their deportation and criminalization. Privileging bigger brothels instead of autonomous, small-scale and street sex work and supporting the control and the policing of these establishments are other concerns expressed by the movement.

Dr. Alexandra Oliveira has similarly supported the petition's quest for sex workers' rights, but criticized its “hygienist vision” and xenophobic aspects that exclude migrant women from legal protection. She stated that “The author of the petition is seeking a sanitizing regulation characteristic of the nineteenth century.” Sex Workers' Movement agrees that these control measures foster discrimination, penalize those who are unwilling—or unable—to register and stigmatize sex workers as a “public health problem,” as they so many times throughout history have been.

### **A Way Out of the Maze**

Regardless of legal regime, different stakeholders agree that strengthening exit strategies for those engaged in sex work is important. While some NGOs, such as O Ninho (*The Nest*) or Ergue-te (*Raise Yourself Up*) help people leave sex work, no state-led initiative exists. A bill proposed by the independent MP Cristina Rodrigues and supported by PPdM has recently been approved in the Parliament—and it aims to create the first pilot-program of such kind.



This holistic project will cover several cities and provide medical, psychological and sexual health services, as well as addiction treatment and legal counselling.

Few will disagree that precarity, violence, social stigma and discrimination are the everyday reality of sex workers' lives across the globe. In an attempt to put an end to these, the feminist movement in Portugal—and beyond—has ruptured important ties and put solidarity at risk. It remains to be seen whether the law will be changed due to this petition—or the responses to it. It is equally uncertain whether the new pilot-project will bring any effective repercussions to an issue historically characterized by elusiveness, resistance to legal control and underground nature. In the midst of the uncertainty, sex workers are there, as always, navigating the maze, fighting to see their human rights respected and to live in a violence-free world.

July 7, 2012, Paris, France. Protest against plans of penalizing sex work clients.

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# SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

THE REMEDY FOR THE PANDEMIC OF INEQUALITIES?





SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY HAS RECENTLY REACQUIRED THE SPOTLIGHT IN THE WAKE OF THE CURRENT PANDEMIC AND ITS UNEQUAL EFFECTS ON SOCIETY. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO TWO POLITICAL SCIENTISTS TO DISCUSS THE INTERNATIONAL SPREAD OF FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY. WHICH ROLE CAN IT PLAY DURING A GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS? WHAT CHALLENGES DOES ITS IMPLEMENTATION FACE?

Ever since its outbreak, COVID-19 and its impact on society has been evaluated continuously. Madonna called it “the great equalizer”—a comment for which she received a prompt backlash. While the idea that everyone is equal before the virus tends to be popular, in reality the opposite seems to be the case.

A modelling tool recently developed by Oxford University confirmed that ethnicity and economic hardship are both risk factors for getting infected with COVID-19. At the same time, gender inequalities are also growing in light of the pandemic. Not only are women more at risk of contracting the virus by working in the health sector in a greater share than men, they are also even more likely to take on unpaid care responsibilities at home than before. Women are thus more affected by the pandemic than men, not least economically.

### Sweden—Pioneering Feminist Foreign Policy

With the strain the pandemic put on healthcare systems, supply chains and the access to transport internationally, the access to antenatal services or the supply of contraceptives has been disrupted in many places. In response to this, the Swedish government has provided more money for policy areas like sexual and reproductive health in order to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on women. This measurement is part of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, which the government introduced in 2014 as the first country worldwide to pursue it. When introduced, Margot Wallström, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, said during a parliamentary debate

that “half of the population that so far has been almost systematically excluded and forgotten—namely women—will now be included.” The country has focused on the three main areas of rights, representation and distributing resources in a fair manner.

“These norms are also found in a number of international conventions on women's rights and gender equality,” explains Malena Rosén Sundström, senior lecturer of political science with a focus on feminist foreign policy at Lund University. By explicitly aligning their own foreign policy with these norms, the Swedish government still followed a unique approach, she says. “For example, with regard to representation, there has been a focus on including more women in peacebuilding and resolving conflicts, for example by establishing networks of women mediators.”

### Overlapping Inequalities—Intersectional Approach

Since 2014, different countries have followed and announced to implement feminist policies, such as Canada, France and Mexico. Each of those countries' approaches differ to an extent, as Ole Elgström, professor emeritus of political science at Lund University, explains. “France and Canada rely more on the market to reach their feminist goals” he says. These are goals which put more emphasis on economic progress. The Swedish approach would be broader, as it also includes trade policy and security policy. “All of them—and I think that is important—belong to what you could call liberal Western feminism.” Mexico differs from the other countries in that case, Elgström continues: “They

have parts which are more intersectional and put more emphasis on women of color, on indigenous females."

An intersectional approach seems to be especially important in the light of different structural inequalities and oppressive systems which overlap with sexism, such as racism, classism and ableism. This becomes even more visible with the toll the pandemic takes: The 2020 "Women in the Workplace" study conducted by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, showed that among women, women of color were especially likely to lose their jobs or experience negative effects on their careers due to COVID-19. Disabled women have already been more at risk to work in low-wage jobs or to be a victim of domestic violence before the pandemic—issues which have aggravated even more now.

While the Swedish government has officially expressed its commitment to intersectionality in a handbook on their feminist foreign policy, the phrasing remains rather vague: "The policy is based on intersectionality, which means taking into account the fact that people have different living conditions, levels of influence and needs." Later on, this understanding of intersectionality is widened to include "The fact that women and girls, men and boys are not homogeneous groups but have different identities, needs, influence and living conditions."

"I would say that different kinds of inequalities and different contexts are taken into account," Malena Rosén Sundström says about the Swedish approach. "In some parts of the world there has been a focus on training midwives, in other parts of the world there has been a focus on women's enterprise and employment."

How effective feminist foreign policies really are in fighting inequality is difficult to measure, Ole Elgström argues. "But there are two ways to

influence with feminist foreign policy. One is a direct influence where we have concrete actions, for example having more female peace negotiators, and all of that could lead to concrete positive results." Another, more indirect way of influencing, would be to raise more attention for feminist issues internationally simply by putting it on the public agenda, Elgström explains. Still, this might not happen solely out of altruistic reasons: "What we should not forget also is that for countries who have feminist foreign policies, it's not only to address inequalities, but it is also a policy which adds to a country's reputation, both internationally and nationally."

### **Obstacles in Spreading Feminist Foreign Policy**

There are also challenges to the successful implementation of feminist policies. In their joint study, Sundström and Elgström have examined how the Swedish approach is perceived by other EU members and what that reveals about their own attitudes. "In some countries it is actually a liability to call your policy feminist," Elgström explains, referring to Eastern-Central member states, where the word "feminist" often conjures a negative—if not radical—image. But this scepticism is found in other countries as well, he adds, as the meaning of "feminism" evokes various connotations. "The word 'feminist' means something different for different people and different countries," he says. "In many cases countries tend to be more critical of these policies than when the term 'feminist' hadn't been used for describing them, because the concept itself raises eyebrows for many people."

In addition, it is sensitive for many countries when they feel that their domestic affairs are intervened in by another country, like Sweden promoting feminist foreign policy internationally, Elgström says.

## **"In the non-western**

countries it could easily be seen as an imposition of western liberal values into domestic politics."

He deems special sensitivity to cultural context crucial in this case. "What might be necessary is a different way of selling your policy and trying to formulate it in a way that it pays respect to the target." According to him, spreading feminist foreign policy internationally while remaining sensitive to different cultural contexts is a major future challenge. In that context, it might be important to work with groups from within the country, he says. "To try to change things not from the outside, but from the inside."

Another major pitfall might be finding an appropriate reaction to backlash and criticism. "The usual advice in this case is to respond in a positive way to the criticism, to try to make others understand what you mean by 'feminist' and to confess that you yourself also cannot be perfect," Elgström suggests.

What adds to the problem is that Swedish feminist foreign policy was deemed hypocritical by some NGOs—for example the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—namely because of its export of arms to countries with a stained human rights record like Saudi Arabia. What fuels the debate is that women are also disproportionately affected by war in general, including the conflicts the countries Sweden exports arms to are involved in, like the one in Yemen. "In a sense it makes Sweden being perceived as less credible and coherent," Elgström confirms. "I think most diplomats would agree that it is a fine balancing act between security policy and ideational policy. There are different strong interests, economic and security interests and others, like diplomatic interests."

## Feminist Foreign Policy—the Way Forward?

The current developments look favorable for the spread of feminist foreign policy. "Regarding gender policies within European states, there has been a positive impact over the last 20 years in how you look upon gender policies," Elgström says. "Today, Spain and Portugal are very active in gender politics, which was not the case 20 years ago."

In light of the pandemic, the positive results feminist foreign policy can yield on the gender gap have gained new attention. In the public appeal published in *The Guardian* in February 2021, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, stressed that the virus has deepened the already-existing social—and gender—stratification. Despite the challenges in its implementation, feminist foreign policy could play a more prominent role in the future. "We have had the pandemic only for a year and to change policies takes a long time," Ole Elgström points out.

"But it could well be that there will be more change in emphasis in the future, for example on sexual and reproductive rights."



Upon assuming the office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Margot Wallström pledged to create the world's first feminist foreign policy. © Victor Svedberg/Socialdemokraterna/Flickr



The Reichstag building, Berlin, Germany. © Christian Lue/Unsplash

WHILE BRUSSELS IS DISCUSSING NEW EU-WIDE COMPETITION RULES ON DIGITAL GIANTS, GERMANY IS MAKING HEADWAY: AS OF JANUARY 19, IT IS THE FIRST MEMBER STATE TO MODERNIZE ITS ANTITRUST LAW TO COUNTER THE MARKET POWER OF THESE LARGE DIGITAL CORPORATIONS. THE PERSPECTIVE TALKED TO A EUROPEAN COMMISSION SPOKESPERSON, THE RESEARCHER FRISO BOSTOEN, THE RESEARCHER AND SENIOR LECTURER DR. JOHAN AXHAMN AND PROF. DR. DANIELA SEELIGER FROM LINKLATERS LLP TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESSES OF THE NEW GERMAN LAW AND ITS AFTERMATH.

## DIGITAL TRAILBLAZING

Germany Becoming the Global  
Avant-Garde in Countering  
the Abuse of Big Tech





Digitalization has not only brought profound changes to life as we know it, but it has also contributed to the expansion of new business models—and with that comes new challenges for competition.

### Global First-Mover Advantage?

The amendments made to the German GWB (Gesetz gegen Wettbewerbsbeschränkungen—Germany's Competition Act) and which entered into force on January 19, 2021, are revolutionary and innovative, making Germany the first country in the world to implement preventative rules aimed at countering the market power of large digital platforms such as Facebook, Amazon and Apple. The main characteristic of the reform is represented by fairness, thus ensuring that real competition is revived in some sectors.

How come this is only happening in the digital and well-developed world of 2021?

Dr. Johan Axhamn, senior lecturer at the Department of Business Law at the School of Economics and Management at Lund University, tells THE

PERSPECTIVE that “It always takes some time to investigate a new market conditions, carry out impact

assessments and to consult with interested parties before proposing any new legislation.” What makes these processes even more difficult are the differences between the approaches of the new and current rules. “The new rules are of an *ex-ante* nature, whereas the competition rules are of an *ex-post* nature—competition authorities have traditionally been able to act only after a company has abused a dominant market position,” explains Axhamn. “The fact that the rules take aim at activities by very large companies with their origins in the US and with an international presence does not make the considerations easier,” continues the professor.

“After years of intense debate, we have now reached our goal: we will be the first parliament in the world to adapt competition law to the challenges of the digital world,” Hansjörg Durz (CSU), vice-chair of the Bundestag’s Digital Committee, told EURACTIV back in January 2021.

In contrast to both the European and global approaches, “Germany is the first country in the world to enact new legislation of this kind that supplements traditional competition rules. So in this perspective Germany is an ‘early mover,’” highlights Axhamn.

The dominant market positions of digital platforms such as Facebook and Amazon have long been a thorn in the flesh of the European competition surveillants. On a social level, the core perturbation of the Silicon Valley tech



companies is mainly oriented towards the trade and exchange of illegal goods, services and content online. Prof. Dr. Daniela Seeliger—a partner in the Linklaters Competition/Antitrust practice group—explains to THE PERSPECTIVE that 10 years ago it would have been difficult to imagine “how fast and deeply competition policy would be compromised by the then-new internet ‘stars’” and that it is still extremely complicated to precisely “define the risks and opportunities which are generated by the now internet giants.” However, one of the last decade’s main issues is connected to “the fast growing market power of the big internet companies due to the strong network effects of their platforms, their access to tremendous stocks of accumulated data and their immense financial resources,” explains Prof. Dr. Seeliger. A new danger to effective competition, as indicated by Mrs. Seeliger, is “the ongoing expansion of the big internet industry into neighbouring or even foreign markets (the so-called ecosystems),” which alienates mostly small and medium-sized companies in these markets.

Manipulative algorithmic systems of these tech giants jeopardize the fairness of the market not only by boosting the spread of disinformation, but also by self-preferencing. The accelerating digitalization of economy and society made large digital platforms take control over important ecosystems in the digital economy. The companies that emerged as gatekeepers of the digital market also act as private rule-makers, unearthing unfair conditions for businesses using the platforms and the limiting choice for consumers.

Germany did not wait for the EU to rewrite a rulebook for the digital age before becoming “a pioneer in the regulation of digitally powerful companies,” tweeted MP Falko Mohrs from SPD—Social Democratic Party of Germany—who also holds the post of a rapporteur and a member of the Competition Law 4.0 Commission.

## Origins of The Reform

When asked about the origins of this reform—namely whether the initiative was born from capitalist thinking or desire to protect citizens from digital superpowers—Friso Bostoen, PhD researcher at Consumer Competition Market (CCM) at KU Leuven, Belgium, tells THE PERSPECTIVE that “Germany has been particularly concerned with the power of big tech players, not only when it comes to issues of competition, but also when it comes to other issues such as free speech and content moderation.”

“The new law is, therefore, an ambitious step that is in line with long-standing ideas and principles,” highlights Friso Bostoen.

In a different manner, Prof. Dr. Daniela Seeliger affirms that the draft “is neither capitalist ideology nor a welfare state policy but embedded in the German kind of social free market policy [soziale Marktwirtschaft].”

## Tackling Digital Markets: Tougher Rules

After the 10th amendment to the German Competition Act has entered into force, a press release reported the key information of the reform. Andreas Mundt, President of the Bundeskartellamt, clarified that a “highly dynamic digital economy and the rapid growth of the large digital platforms have made it necessary to be able to take even faster and more effective action.”

Generally, the process requires a long and detailed assessment before the competition authorities can intervene and only after a company has abused a dominant market position (*ex-post*). However, “as the new rules are to be applied *ex-ante*”—as Johan Axhamn clarifies—the new reform will turn the spotlight on the Bundeskartellamt (Federal Cartel



Office) which will be able to tackle the issue before it takes place “within markets where firms are not yet dominant.”

In March 2021, following the new Section 19a of Germany’s Competition Act, a list of conduct for companies regarded as ones of “paramount significance for competition across markets” was released. Rules such as the prohibition of self-preferencing, the practice of privileging a company’s own services or products within its ecosystem, were presented. A relevant example of a corporation falling under these regulations is Amazon, which strategically rises its own brand products ahead of competitors. According to the new code of conduct, e-commerce companies such as Amazon would no longer be permitted to promote their own goods. The most popular websites and services will be restricted from exclusionary conduct, misuse of data, making interoperability of services or portability of data more difficult, providing insufficient information about services and demanding benefits for the treatment of another company’s offers. Moreover, the pre-installation of apps on the devices of a dominant company will most probably become restricted. Take the example of Apple: pre-installing

apps for their own services such as App Store, Apple TV, Apple Maps might soon become prohibited.

One of the benefits of this new regulation may be that once the antitrust authorities identify a tech platform as one having “paramount significance,” the Bundeskartellamt will be able to “intervene more quickly to prevent or combat anticompetitive contact,” explains Friso Bostoen.

### European vs German Reforms

As part of the European Digital Strategy, the European Commission announced its priority on the enhancement of the rules governing digital services in the EU. Therefore, there were two legislative initiatives being proposed by the EC: the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA).

The European Commission spokesperson tells THE PERSPECTIVE the EU-wide plan in which “The Digital Markets Act aims to ensure fair and open digital markets for digital businesses to grow within the single market and compete globally.” Crucial to mention is that “the proposed DMA allows



Apple: pre-installing apps for their own services might soon become prohibited.  
© David Grandmougin/Unsplash

member states to tackle behaviors or services that are not covered by the DMA as well as companies not designated as gatekeepers under the DMA.” According to the Act, obligations that go beyond the law—given they are implemented following an in-depth, case-by-case economic assessment—can also be imposed by the member states.

“For instance, the new German law allows tackling all forms of anti-competitive self-preferencing, whereas the proposed DMA mainly focuses on more favorable ranking,” explains the source from the Commission.

Considering the process that lay behind the actual laws—starting with expert reports and ending with the Parliament’s approval—Friso Bostoen points out that “the German legislative process proceeded fairly quickly.” In parallel, “the European Commission has also been working on these issues for a long time now.”

The Commission has now proposed a “more interventionist Digital Markets Act” which has the potential to go further than the German law in regulating tech giants. However, it might take “a few years before the DMA enters into force,” Bostoen reports. The German reform aims at making the competition in the digital space fairer. As stated in the first draft, the amendment brings up a mild modernization to the laxity of unfair competition through which it intends to cease the abuse of market power by digital giants.

Prof. Dr. Daniela Seeliger explains that the sanctions of the two regulations are also different. On one hand, German law lines “administrative prohibitions.” On the other hand, the European legislation draft allows both the imposition of “draft fines and penalty payments.”

Through pointing out the differences between

European and German reforms, some gaps and possible loopholes might be identified and fixed, the amended GWB having the potential to advance on a European level. Moreover, since Germany is a driving force behind DMA—having its own regulations, Berlin has the possibility to exert influence on Brussels to improve the EU proposal’s weaknesses.

### **Action, Reaction and Counteraction: How Will Digital Giants Respond?**

What kind of repercussions are likely to arise from the new German reform? It is clear that “the new law imposes increased regulatory costs,” explains Friso Bostoen. However, considering that the area of the reform is rather restricted, “only applying to the largest, most important tech players, small and medium-sized enterprises are not burdened,” continues the researcher.

Following a similar path, Johan Axhamn agrees that “it is a completely new legislation that has no precedence anywhere in the world, so the effects of the legislation are hard to predict.” However, similarly to Bostoen, Axhamn outlines that the core objective of the law is to make it easier “for new market participants and small competitors to compete against the major digital platforms and for other companies to have access to the services provided by the platforms.”

Friso Bostoen explains that any law can have unintended consequences—mostly on the regulated firms’ incentives to innovate. However, innovation may—believe it or not—thrive in the situation in which Bundeskartellamt limits its intervention to specific issues. In this case, the researcher illustrates that “smaller players such as app developers and providers of online services, could in fact have the opportunity to compete on a level playing field.” Will this lead to resistant reactions from the Big Tech? And will there be any loopholes to be found

and exploited? THE PERSPECTIVE addresses these questions to Bostoen who explains that the new law has been carefully drafted—and that many experts contributed to the process. He adds that since “the competition law examines the economic reality and is not as concerned with formal distinctions, it is generally quite resistant to ‘loopholes.’” Bostoen specifies that the “powerful weapon of certain tech players—i.e. intensive lobbying—is no longer very effective at this point,” after having already passed through the Parliament. According to Bostoen, in the case Bundeskartellamt takes decisions regarding abusive conduct, they can always be appealed to higher courts.

“Interestingly, the new law organizes a ‘fast-track’ appeals procedure for decisions based on Section 19a—another recognition of the fact that the speed of intervention is crucial in digital markets,” continues Bostoen.

Similarly, Johan Axhamn explains that it might take quite a long time until “it will be possible to assess whether a specific legislation is fit for purpose.” To make it clear, he spells out that legislations are “a balance between flexibility and legal certainty [foreseeability].” In other words—it is not only important to make the legislation future-proof, but to ensure that both the “ones who are subject to the rules and those who are to enforce them, are able to assess with a certain level of predictability the scope and content of the rules.”

“The new rule includes definitions—such as the services targeted—exceptions and rules on the burden of proof that all have to be applied in specific cases. For example, it is not entirely clear how the criterion of ‘paramount significance to competition across markets’ will be applied in practice. A similar imprecision applies to the exceptions to the scope of application, et cetera,” exemplifies Johan Axhamn. Contrarily, Prof. Dr. Daniela Seeliger brings into

discussion an interesting, potentially positive reaction from the digital giants, which might exempt the arising of any loopholes. “The government and the Bundeskartellamt anticipate that the big internet companies will realize that the new regulation is not aimed at distorting their legitimate business. Therefore, it is hopefully not an unrealistic scenario that the internet companies will have an interest in cooperating with the competition authority in order to develop an internet strategy that clearly distinguishes between lawful and unlawful behaviour,” believes Seeliger.

### **“Europe’s ‘Digital Decade’”—Hit or Miss?**

“A Europe fit for the digital age” is a targeted and envisioned reform: and yet, uncertainty remains—how is the new law going to influence Germany’s economy and digital landscape? The results and effects of this reform are expected to become visible as soon as the stipulations and instruments prove to be suitable to protect competition from abusive behavior in the digital world in an effective and congruous manner. Johan Axhamn tells THE PERSPECTIVE that the outcomes of the new rules depend on the way they will be put in practice by Bundeskartellamt—namely whether they are capable or not of striking “an adequate balance between the pro- and anti-competitive effects of the new rules.”

“It is difficult to predict the exact influence of the new law on the German economy and digital ecosystem. However, it is probable that the consequences will not stop at Germany’s borders. We have seen before that actions of the Bundeskartellamt can have effects all over Europe and even beyond. In response to an investigation of its conduct in Germany, for example, Amazon changed its terms and conditions *worldwide*. That is why the effects of the new law are not to be underestimated,” concludes Friso Bostoen.





ANASTASIA LAZARIDI | FEATURE

# IRAN

JUVENILE OFFENDERS WAITING ON DEATH ROW

AROUND THE WORLD, BEING A TEENAGER TRANSLATES INTO THE PROCESS OF COMING OF AGE. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE ARE ENDLESS. CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND DREAMS OF FINDING INDEPENDENCE START TO COME TRUE. THE REALITY OF AN IRANIAN TEENAGER USUALLY ISN'T AS HOPEFUL, THOUGH. IN IRAN, MANY YOUNG CRIMINAL OFFENDERS ARE HELD DURING THEIR TEENAGE YEARS IN PRISONS, STRIPPED AWAY FROM THE RIGHT TO DREAM ABOUT THEIR FUTURE, AS THEY WAIT FOR THEIR EXECUTION.

**D**eath penalty on its own constitutes a serious violation of numerous basic human rights—the right to life, liberty and security, to mention just a few. But what makes it particularly shocking is its imposition on teenagers. According to Iran's domestic legislation, one becomes eligible for execution as soon as they reach criminal maturity—nine years old for girls and fifteen for boys, according to Sharia law—when convicted for insults against God or murder.

During the last 30 years, Iran has become a state party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—both of which prohibit the imposition of the death penalty against individuals who were below 18 years of age at the time of the crime. In a world where teenagers committing crimes are viewed as youngsters deserving a second chance, Iran's cruelty stands out.

THE PERSPECTIVE talked exclusively with Maja Åberg, Senior

Policy Adviser at Amnesty International Sweden, which, for the past 40 years, has been continuously campaigning for the worldwide abolishment of death penalty. The organization's work has contributed to raising and strengthening the national and international voices supporting the abolition of death penalty both in law and in practice.

#### **Capital Punishment: How Does The Practice Still Hold Up?**

"When Amnesty started its work in 1977, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. Today, that number has risen to 106—more than half the world's countries. More than two-thirds are abolitionist in law or practice," Maja Åberg tells THE PERSPECTIVE. This is an astonishing leap towards direction favoring human rights—although it makes one wonder what the reasoning behind Iran's perverseness is.

In an attempt to enforce changes and to align with international human rights law, a new Islamic Penal Code came into effect in 2013. The Code

reduced the number of death-eligible crimes for juvenile offenders. However, it also gave more authority to the judges positioned to order death sentences in additional cases based on Sharia law, such as *hudud* offences—which can refer to robbery, consumption of alcohol and apostasy—actions that go against the claims of God. Young offenders can be exempted from execution if found mentally incapable of understanding the nature of the committed crime—or its consequences. Another policy introduced in 2015 specified that juvenile criminal offenders must be prosecuted in front of specialized juvenile courts—not adult courts, which had previously dealt with all crimes, even the ones committed by minors.

Although the reforms included a few more favorable conditions regarding juvenile justice, they failed to cease executions as such. "These measures are far from a cause for celebration. In fact, they lay bare Iran's ongoing failure to respect a pledge that it undertook over two decades ago, when it ratified the Convention on the Rights of the



THE PERSPECTIVE talked exclusively with Maja Åberg, Senior Policy Adviser at Amnesty International Sweden. © Amnesty International Sweden

Child (CRC), to abolish the use of death penalty against juvenile offenders completely,” Maja Åberg continues.

Iran’s authorities cannot deny the excessive practice of the death penalty, which has resulted in the concern of global institutions such as the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR). As of November 1, 2019, according to Human Rights Watch’s World Report 2020, Iran has executed at least 227 people over the span of 10 months. Three of them were confirmed executions of people who were either below the age of 18 or who were sentenced to death for crimes they committed before reaching legal maturity.

According to the 2021 UN report by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights

in Iran, Javaid Rehman, at least 85 young criminal offenders sat on death row, while three were executed between January 1 and December 1, 2020. “After China, Iran is the top executioner of the world,” says Maja Åberg, showcasing that despite some juvenile justice reforms, Iran continues to impose death penalty on juvenile offenders.

#### **Iran: Judicial Reality**

In January 2018, Mahboubeh Mofidi was executed for murdering her husband whom she was forced to marry at the age of 13. In response to Mofidi’s death, the UN then-High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, stated that, “No other state comes even remotely close to the total number of juveniles who have been executed in Iran over the past couple of decades.”

The international obligations that Iran is bound to prohibit—without exception—the execution of individuals aged less than 18 years at the time of the alleged crime. However, the Penal Code retains the capital punishment for girls aged at least nine and boys of at least 15 years of age for *qisas*, or in other words, “eye for an eye” crimes—such as assault or murder through retaliation—and *hudud* crimes, such as adultery, robbery or apostasy. As Maja Åberg illustrates, “The death penalty is also imposed for behavior including consensual same-sex sexual conduct, sexual extra-marital relationships, as well as for vaguely worded offenses such as ‘insulting the Prophet,’ ‘enmity against God’ and ‘spreading corruption on earth.’”

Mehdi Sohrabifar and Amin Sedaghat—two cousins arrested



and executed on April 25, 2019 in Adelabad Prison in Shiraz, Southern Iran—embody yet another tragic example of Iranian judicial conduct. Arrested at the age of 15, Sohrabifar and Sedaghat were convicted on multiple rape charges, followed by what media termed an “unfair trial.”

According to information received by Amnesty International, neither the boys nor their families were aware about what was coming next—the teenagers learned about the sentence only shortly before their execution.

The teenage boys were never given the chance to properly defend themselves, which left them in a precarious legal position—especially during the early stages of the investigation, when following their arrest, they were held in a police detention centre and allegedly beaten for two months.

Their relatives never had the chance to say goodbye to them, as they only received a phone call after the executions took place. Iran’s Legal Medicine Organization then informed them of the boys’ death and asked to collect the bodies, which bore lash marks—indicating that they had been flogged prior to their execution by hanging.

## **Stopping What’s Inhumane Once and for All**

Maja Åberg strikes an optimistic tone for the future: “This is something all governments must use [as] their political leverage to stop and use all bilateral meetings as an opportunity to raise this issue.” She also adds that working with the international community in the UN is another way to pave the way towards the abolition of death penalty. Every other year, the UN adopts a resolution with the ultimate goal of abolishing death penalty. “We are slowly getting there; this year 123 countries supported the resolution, which is a very high number,” says Åberg.

## **The Power of Campaigning**

Pressure from international communities has been successful in stopping executions before, like in the case of Nigerian juvenile offender, Moses Akatugba—who was able to eventually walk free—as Maja Åberg shares with THE PERSPECTIVE. Moses was arrested at the age of 16 under the suspicion of stealing three mobile phones and money in an armed robbery. During the interrogation he was tortured and lacked legal representation, which led to a forced confession—later used as evidence during his trial. After waiting on death row for 10 years,

Delta State Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan pardoned him in a response to a massive campaign launched by Amnesty members from all around the world—including Maja Åberg herself. This story, however, would be more difficult to repeat in Iran, where juvenile records are usually released only after the alleged offenders were executed.

The work of organizations, such as the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, has assisted in making the world aware of the ongoing violations of human rights in the judicial system of Iran. The UN Special Rapporteur, Javaid Rehman, has expressed his concern about “the harassment and detention of human rights defenders and lawyers for [...] the defence of human rights, including prolonged detention and new convictions.” The fear of repercussions carried out by the Iranian security apparatus for speaking about the subject is evident in those involved in death penalty cases. But there is hope—substantial changes to Iran’s judicial system and capital punishment—followed by pressure applied by nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations—will hopefully soon contribute to abolishing this inhumane practice once for all.

# FROM THE WEST BANK TO THE GAZA STRIP

## WATER SCARCITY IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

TO EXPLORE THE PALESTINIAN WATER CRISIS, WE NEED TO ONCE AGAIN TAKE A STIFLING TRIP ALONG ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS, PALESTINIAN STATELESSNESS, AND INTERNATIONAL LAW BEFORE FINALLY ARRIVING AT THE BANKS OF THE RIVER DYING OF THIRST. THERE, WE LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF ACTIVISTS AND THOSE UNDER THE OCCUPATION. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO ABDULLAH ALROZZI, RESIDENT OF THE GAZA STRIP, AND DR. NANCY MURRAY, CO-FOUNDER OF THE ALLIANCE FOR WATER JUSTICE IN PALESTINE.

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**W**ith the dawning of 2021, the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem has entered its 54th year. In other words, it means more than a half-century of systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. The backbone of the law violations are the settlements built on Palestinian land that was occupied by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967—these have been under continuous expansion by every Israeli government ever since. Today, the settlements can be found within the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

### **Palestinian Expatriates**

Besides the expanding settlements, there is another crucial impasse in the conflict: the denial of Palestinian refugees' return to their former homes and properties in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel. As much as the walls surrounding the OPT have been locking Palestinians in, the walls also keep displaced Palestinians out.

This violation of the UN Resolution 3376, which states the Palestinians' right to return, has resulted in a major crisis. The Palestinians have become the world's largest stateless community. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, as of 2019 about

five million Palestinians are living in the State of Palestine: nearly two million were estimated to live in the Gaza strip and three million in the West Bank. Today, the West Bank is also the home of about 441,600 Israeli settlers. At the same time, more than five million Palestinians are registered as refugees. The majority of them live in refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Syria—but also in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights, explains that two different law systems are being applied in the Occupied Palestinian Territories based on nationality. Still, whether it could be defined as an occupation or apartheid has been a violent and controversial discussion. In the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, apartheid is defined as inhuman acts "committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime."

### **A River Dies of Thirst**

"[...] Water in clouds of endless forms spread across whatever ration of sky is left for us [...]" wrote Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008), a Palestinian national poet and author of "A River Dies of Thirst."

One central illustration of different law systems is the sharp contrast in water access between Palestinians and Israeli settlers in the OPT, where since 1967, Israel has been controlling all water resources and water-related infrastructure. Under the authority of Israel's Military Order 158, Palestinians need a permit to construct any new water installation. This includes water pumps, new water wells or the deepening of existing wells. Israel also controls the collection of rainwater in much



of the West Bank, and has been reported to regularly destroy the Palestinian communities' cisterns for rainwater harvesting. The outcome of the water occupation is that about 180 communities in rural areas in the Occupied West Bank have no access to running water. Meanwhile in Gaza, more than 90% of the water supply is unfit for human consumption. THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to Abdullah Alrozzi, a resident of the Al-Zaytoun neighborhood in the Gaza Strip, about how he experiences the water conditions. Alrozzi is a community artist currently working as a researcher in the field of contemporary artistic space. He seeks to contribute to his local community and its people through creative tools. "The occupation steals the land and the basic necessities of life for the population and promotes apartheid," Alrozzi says. He explains that drinking water is a real problem, since water from the desalination plants is not safe to drink and bottled water is of better quality but is expensive.

The quantity of water sold to Palestinians is regulated by the Israeli authorities and is provided by the state-owned Israeli water company Mekorot. For the poorest Palestinian communities, the prize of water can sometimes equal 50% of a family's monthly income. For hygienic and domestic use, the artist clarifies: "We rely on the municipal water line, which creates pressure on public lines and causes water cuts for more than five continuous days, causing water scarcity in many homes, forcing them to use large storage tanks."

**"The subject of water is a good way to reach people who might otherwise close their ears to what we have to say about the situation in Israel/Palestine."**

Dr. Nancy Murray to THE PERSPECTIVE

## Water Consumption Around the World

Alrozzi stresses that the Israeli occupation is expropriating the main sources of water in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—this is as the groundwater reserves have begun to run out. The water consumption by Israelis in the OPT is about 300 litres per person per day. The average water consumption by Palestinians per person per day is 73 litres. In several communities in the West Bank,

the water consumption for the Palestinians does not even exceed 20 litres per person per day. This is far below the daily minimum of 100 litres per capita per day recommended by the World Health Organization.

Juxtaposing these numbers to a survey carried out between 2015-18 on global water consumption by the German statistics database Statista, gives a more colorful contrast: The average water use per person per day in Sweden in 2015 was 666,35 liters. Luxembourg, with the lowest water consumption in the study

among 30 countries, consumed 212,82 liters per capita per day in 2016. At the same time, the US reached the striking number of 3306,36 liters per capita per day, placing it among the world's largest water consumers. While these numbers sharpen the thirst of Palestinians, Alrozzi finds comfort in the Palestinian youth who stayed in Palestine despite the hard conditions. "[The youth] want to define the path of their lives in their motherland," he says, inspiring hope and life and challenging their difficult reality.

## Alliance for Water Justice in Palestine

But even with all the hope and life that the youth in Palestine can inspire, the burden of an occupation is heavy to carry. The fourth Geneva Convention establishes the responsibilities of an occupier. But who is responsible for the implementation of international laws? Who takes responsibility when the occupier fails to follow them? In a stormy political labyrinth where roadmaps are lost, activists and NGOs—both local and international—have shouldered an important responsibility.

One of these international organisations is the Alliance for Water Justice in Palestine. THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to co-founder and author, Dr. Nancy Murray. She has worked on human rights issues both in the UK, the US, Kenya, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and is currently living in Boston. She explains that The Alliance for Water Justice in Palestine is an organization created and sustained by volunteers like herself. “We work together out of our mutual commitment to justice and a better future for both Israelis and Palestinians, which must include an end to Israel’s ‘water apartheid’ policies.” She thinks that the most positive aspect about her job is the sense that the organisation is telling an important story to the US public, whose tax dollars are enabling the Israeli water policies. “The subject of water is a good way to reach people who might otherwise close their ears to what we have to say about the situation in Israel/Palestine.” Murray believes that the hardest aspect is “surmounting the efforts to shut down the Palestinian narrative and stifle criticism of Israel.”

## Looking to the Future

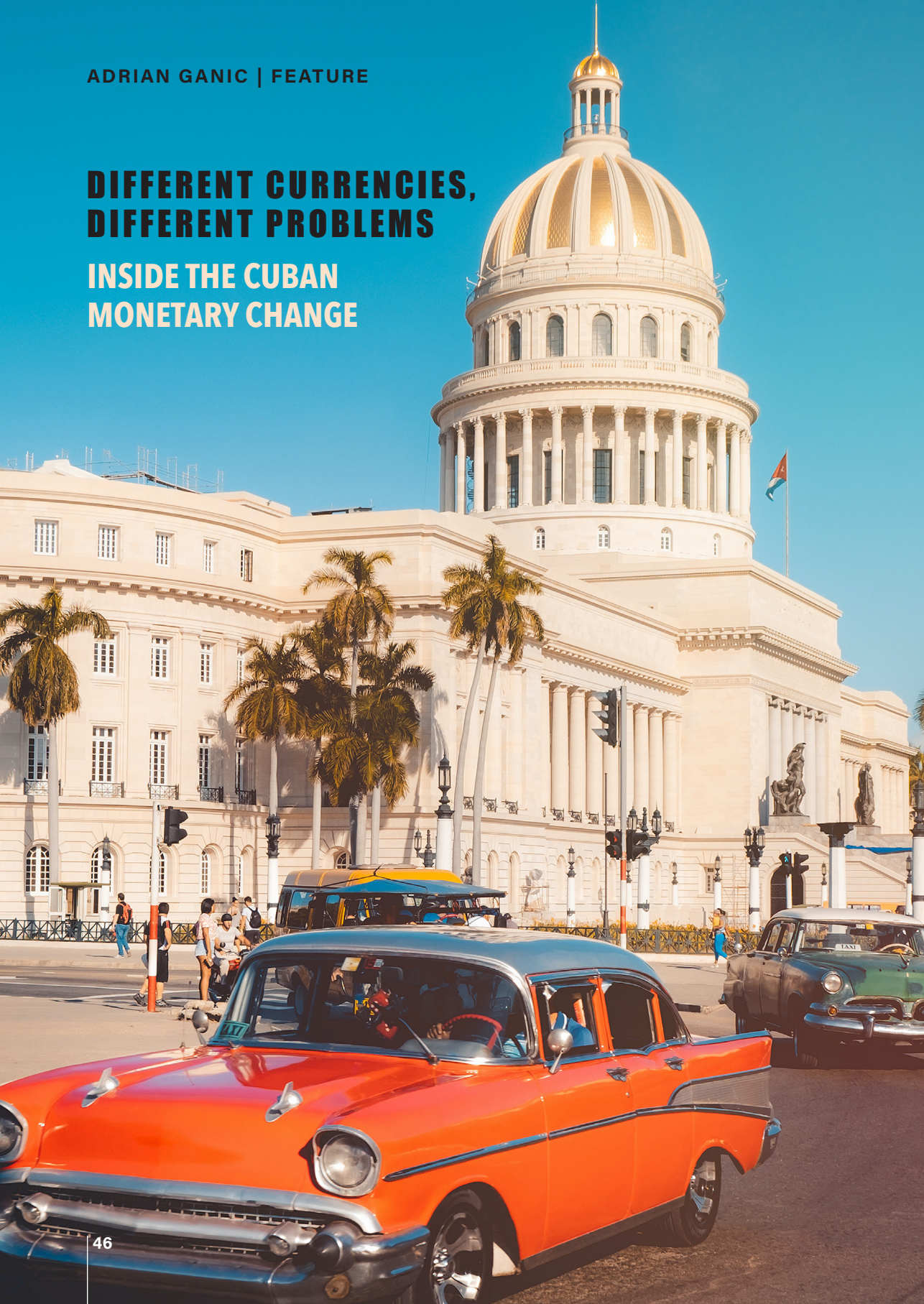
To the question of whether or not she has perceived change in the water situation during her work, Murray replies: “The water situation in Palestine has gone from bad to worse. [...] Palestinian farmers are forced off their land by Israel’s seizure of their water resources and destruction of their water infrastructure. [...] Palestinians in refugee camps and villages are deprived of water for weeks at a time, especially in the dry summer months, as water is diverted to illegal Israeli settlements.” Murray explains that the situation is even more dire in the Gaza Strip, which has been under a strict Israeli blockade for 14 years. She further points to a UN statement from 2012, which anticipates that the Gaza Strip would be uninhabitable by 2020 due to the water situation. “Health indicators concerning the growth of water-related diseases indicate that this is indeed the case,” she says. Murray illuminates the importance of the water perspective in the conflict: “Water justice is a lens that has exposed the terrible inequalities [during the] COVID-19 pandemic. In the Gaza Strip, Navajo Nation and so many other communities where there is virtually no access to clean running water and indoor sanitation, who can regularly wash their hands?”

Murray concludes that if we are to survive as a species, we, of course, need water. “But we also need hope—hope that can motivate us to build a better world. That world must include freedom, justice and equality for Palestinians and oppressed peoples everywhere.”

ADRIAN GANIC | FEATURE

# DIFFERENT CURRENCIES, DIFFERENT PROBLEMS

## INSIDE THE CUBAN MONETARY CHANGE





AS OF JANUARY 1, 2021, THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT'S PLAN OF ENDING THE COUNTRY'S DECADES-LONG DUAL CURRENCY SYSTEM IS PUT INTO EFFECT, WITH THE GOAL OF ONLY HAVING ONE CURRENCY IN CIRCULATION BY JUNE 2021. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO THREE LOCALS AND TWO ECONOMISTS TO GET AN IN-DEPTH VIEW OF HOW THE SHIFT IN THE MONETARY SYSTEM IS IMPACTING PEOPLE LIVING ON THE CARIBBEAN ISLAND.

## **First Things First: Why Does Cuba Have Two Currencies?**

It all began in 1959, when a guerilla group led by lawyer-turned-revolutionary Fidel Castro overthrew the Cuban military government. Two years later, Castro declared that: "The world is on the road toward communism" and that, naturally, Marxism-Leninism was the way forward for the Cuban state. In an attempt to convert theory into practice, the Central Bank of Cuba, under the direction of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, pulled all existing banknotes from circulation and replaced them with a new currency: the Cuban Peso (CUP). By doing this, the central government gained control over the money supply, stopped capital flight and removed vital funding sources for the counter-revolution.

By effectively banning foreign currency, Cuba's ability to purchase goods on the international market was limited. Instead, the country had to heavily rely on the Soviet Union: from 1976 to 1980, the

USSR invested \$1.7 billion into the Cuban economy and in 1985 trade between the two countries accounted for over 70% of Cuba's entire trade. Being economically dependent on the Soviet Union worked just fine until it collapsed in the early 90s, as the USSR had

**"Some small changes may come, but then we will fall into the well again."**

Carlos to THE PERSPECTIVE

allowed Cuba to import goods such as oil, food and machinery at favorable prices. Losing out on this trade-deal and the economic aid provided by the USSR left a severe, negative impact on the Cuban economy.

## **USA and the Trade Embargo**

To make matters worse for the Cuban economy, the United States decided to exercise its

newly acquired unipolar position in the world. This resulted in a tightened trade embargo against Cuba, which further extended the prohibition and penalties for US companies and foreign subsidiaries of US companies trading with or investing in the island. First implemented in the 1960s as a response to the Cuban revolution, the effects of the embargo were negligible as long as Cuba had economic and military backing from the USSR. In the early 1990s, however, the island nation was feeling the pressure.

In desperate need of foreign currency to access the international market to buy consumer goods, Cuba was forced to act. It rejoined international trade networks, allowed new forms of private and corporate property and decriminalized the circulation of USD in the country. Cubans refer to the period between 1991 and 2000 as "el Período especial"—"the Special Period"—which was characterized by food and energy shortages, recession and a general distrust in the state's ability to provide for its citizens.

## Cuban Convertible Peso

In 2004, the Cuban government banned the use of the US dollar in shops and other businesses, though it was still allowed to circulate. The US dollar was replaced with a second national currency: the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). The Cuban Peso could not be exchanged directly into foreign currency and had to be exchanged into the Convertible Peso at a fixed rate of 24 CUP to 1 CUC. At the same time, the Convertible Peso was fixed to the US dollar and could only be traded domestically, at more or less a 1 to 1 rate.

Cuba's dual currency system was now in full swing, and while it allowed the country to gain access to foreign currency, it was clear from the start that having two currencies circulating simultaneously would bring consequences.

### From Two Currencies to One

In the almost two decades that have passed since its implementation, the dual currency system has left a clear mark on Cuban society. As of 2018, three million citizens are employed by the state and receive salaries in Cuban Pesos, while those working in the tourist or international sector benefit from the Convertible Peso.

Because of the significant difference in value between both local currencies, the dual currency system acted as a strong disincentive to work in the public sectors. So-called "unskilled" workers such as taxi drivers, doormen and tour guides earn more than professors and lawyers. Additionally, the system has divided Cuba into a two-tier class system, favoring those with access to the Convertible Peso and foreign remittances, as many consumer goods on the island have heretofore been sold in CUC. As income inequality has risen, structural problems of discrimination have crept



Two Cuban currencies. The Cuban Peso was  
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deeper into society. The glory days of the 1980s, when Cuban society was essentially funded by the USSR, are long gone.

With these economic and social problems in mind, it is no surprise that the Cuban government has decided to merge the two currencies. With CUC's impending abolition, the CUP will now be the Cuban currency pegged to the US dollar, at an official rate of 24 to 1. According to Martin Andersson, Associate Professor at the Department of Economic History at Lund University, the currency shift is going to entail harsh consequences for Cuba in the short term. He states: "The CUP is losing its value through inflation and the fixed rate to the dollar is unlikely to hold in reality, suggesting that more devaluation is yet to come."

### Hyperinflation

Even though the Cuban government has tried to counteract the effects of devaluation by increasing salaries, high levels of inflation have already been observed. "The CUP has been



implemented as a way for the new government to consolidate its power.

devalued, the average salary does not correspond to prices, although they [the government] want to say that it does. Before the change [in the monetary system] the cost of electricity was 9,000 CUP and now it is 16,000,” Carlos, a former bartender living in Havana, the Cuban capital, tells THE PERSPECTIVE.

But hyperinflation is not limited to the price of electricity. All goods and services are impacted by the devaluation of the CUP—which will likely force the government to adopt additional measures of price control.

Igor Martins, doctoral student in Economic History at Lund University, states that these kinds of complementary policies usually result in “empty shelves, because whoever produces will not accept to sell at these prices and you are going to have a black market.” The effects of this are felt in practice.

“The day-to-day of Cubans today is taking accounts, comparing prices and being alarmed by the rapid rise in prices of products in private

and state businesses,” Carlos says. Another Havana local, Yusnaidy, who works in the public sector, affirms that “there are families that have serious problems acquiring basic products such as food and hygiene articles.” THE PERSPECTIVE’s contact adds: “I lived through the ‘Special Period’ in the 90s and there are strong similarities to the current situation.”

### **Tourism—Cuba’s Holy Grail**

The Cuban export sector should, in theory, be positively impacted by inflation, as weaker currency makes domestic products cheaper for other countries to import. But as Professor Andersson notes, “Cuba does not hold many attractive goods for the international markets.” The one exception is tourism—the Cuban government’s holy grail. Nearly 4.3 million tourists visited the country in 2019, which generated over \$3 billion in revenue. Tourism is an important source of income to the state because it injects foreign currency, mainly USD, into the economy. The government then uses the foreign currency to import products from international markets. Cuba is heavily reliant on imports. The World Food Programme estimates that 70–80% of the food consumed on the island in 2019 was from abroad.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made traveling to Cuba a distant memory. With the crippling of Cuba’s tourism industry, high levels of unemployment and other symptoms of recession are expected. Add to this the crisis in Venezuela—the primary subsidiary of the Cuban economy—and the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration from 2017 to 2020, and Cuba is caught between a rock and a hard place.



## Why Now?

This begs the question—why now? For doctoral student Martins, any guess is as good as his: “I understand the reasons why they introduced the convertible [CUC] into their economy, but I do not know why they waited so long to effectively unify the exchange rates.” On the streets of Havana, one of the theories going around is that the shift was implemented as a consequence of the external factors mentioned above. “It [the monetary shift] has been talked about for several years. I think it has been done more quickly since USD is no longer entering the country,” says Yusnaidy.

To Carlos, the timing seems to be rather clear: “We have always lived off other countries—USSR, Venezuela. It [the monetary shift] is being done to influence national production and export in the long term.” Amid a disabled tourism sector, no economic aid from Venezuela and heavier US sanctions, it seems as though the only way for the Cuban government to acquire foreign currency is to finally reform its own economy.

## Symptoms of a New System

While the jury may still be out on the timing of the monetary shift, it is apparent that change needed to be made. When asked by THE PERSPECTIVE to share thoughts on the government’s decision to eliminate the Convertible and only keep the CUP, a local Cuban student claimed that: “It was a necessary action. The CUC hindered the national

economy and made the internal development of the country very difficult.”

Still, for Cuban society, acclimatizing to the new monetary system will entail major challenges. Because of the hyperinflation of the Cuban Peso, the government cannot use its own currency to pay for imports as its value is too low. Because of the lack of tourism revenue in USD, the government is left without foreign currency to use in its place. This has resulted in long lines of people queuing on the streets of Havana and other Cuban cities to try to purchase what little goods are available at the supermarkets.

“People have to get up and queue early in the morning and hope that they can buy, which was not always the case before. I once waited in line for four hours and when I got in there were no products,” the Cuban student adds.

As a way to try to kill two birds with one stone, the government has converted 72 of the approximately 5,000 convenience stores in Cuba to so-called “Dollar Stores”—stores where products can only be bought using US dollars. The new stores have made the price of basic products soar to the point that weekly grocery shopping for a family of four costs over \$100. By comparison, the minimum wage for citizens employed by the state was \$88 per month in 2020.

## What Comes Next?

The Cuban government’s ever-lasting quest for acquiring foreign currency can only end if Cuba’s dependency on foreign goods decreases. For that to happen, more long-term economic and social reforms need to follow. Professor Andersson and doctoral student Martins agree: policies that boost domestic production and put more Cuban products on Cuban shelves need to

**"We will never see the 80's again. Those years are just memories."**

Carlos to THE PERSPECTIVE

be implemented. If this does not happen, and if the CUP cannot maintain its 24 to 1 rate to the USD, Cuba risks “dollarizing” its economy. If USD becomes the main legal tender on the island, the social inequality between those with access to foreign currency and those who do not will only increase.

Among those who spoke to THE PERSPECTIVE, there is a notable difference in confidence in the ability to overcome the tasks that lay ahead. “I believe that in the long term we can transform our economy, but we have to fight very hard to achieve many economic goals,” Yusnaidy says. In contrast, Carlos, less optimistically, states that: “We have become accustomed to depending on others and a country like this, with that mentality, does not progress. We are not China. We are Cuba. Some small changes may come, but then we will fall into the well again. This is just a stage. We will never see the 80s again. Those years are just memories.”

Will something actually change? Will the monetary shift bring any significant improvement to Cuban's

everyday life? These questions are extremely hard, if not impossible, to answer at this moment. The currency change is still an ongoing process and many of its long-term effects are still beyond the horizon. Professor Andersson concludes that the monetary shift might generate “more market reforms or more state control over the citizens. Which one it will be, I do not know.”


One thing is for certain: the glorious days of the 80s will not return. If Cuba wants to integrate itself into the global community, if Cuba wants to stop being reliant on foreign currency, if Cuba wants its citizens to live better lives—the country needs to break its cycle of dependency and modernize both its economy and society. As Cuban poet José Martí once said: Cuba should include everyone and be for the good of all citizens. The people of Cuba can only hope that their government follows these words and stop favoring only those with foreign banknotes in their wallets.

*All local interviewees' identities have been anonymized.*

Trinidad, Cuba. © Ingo Bartussek/Adobe Stock







AURÉLIE POLLAK | FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

Aurélie is currently on a research stay in Costa Rica. She is investigating innovative practices related to the country's high human development rates and environmental protection policies for her Master's thesis in Innovation and Global Sustainable Development at Lund University.

# THE ABOLITION OF THE MILITARY FORCES IN COSTA RICA FROM DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

DID YOU KNOW THAT SOME COUNTRIES DO NOT HAVE A STANDING ARMY? COSTA RICA ABOLISHED ITS ARMY 70 YEARS AGO—AND MANY ARGUE THAT IT HAS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE COUNTRY'S UNIQUE DEVELOPMENT CAPACITIES. BEYOND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE EARLY ELIMINATION OF THE ARMY IS ALSO AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

**T**HE PERSPECTIVE spoke to Carlos Cascante Segura, professor at the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, and Historian José David Cortes, to shed some light on the mechanisms that allow a country to function without an army and on the long process of peacebuilding and development.

Since 1949, the elimination of permanent military forces in Costa Rica has been inveterated by the

Constitution. Whenever I ask a Costa Rican about the absence of military forces, they tell me that it was a positive decision as it permitted redirecting investments toward social and environmental policies. But what is the link between military forces and social development? How can a country located in a rather unstable region of the globe guarantee its security and sovereignty without military forces? The answers may be linked both to the historical heritage of Costa Rica and strategic international relations.



## 1948: Civil War and Civil Rights

At the turn of the 20th century, Costa Rica was mostly living off agriculture and exports of primary goods such as coffee and bananas, and as a consequence all power was concentrated in the hands of wealthy producers, explains historian José David Cortes to contextualize. However, the global crises of the first part of the century destabilized the export economy and opened the door, in the 1940s, to the unlikely governing alliance of the Republican party, the Catholic Church and the Marxist party.

Even though the new political forces intended to increase the social rights of the population, the system was still far from democratic. In 1948, José Figueres Ferrers fomented a coup against the President of Costa Rica. This marked the start of a very short civil war which ended with the escape of the defeated President to Nicaragua, the establishment of Figueres as the new President, and an agreement to democratize the system and increase the rights of the working class.

José David Cortes points out that Figueres and its new government's "strongest ideology was social democracy (...), and they started a model of following social guarantees. Yet, not only did they maintain them but also, they expanded them. And here Costa Rica took such strong decisions as to nationalize the banking system (...) and create public institutions, public monopolies such as the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity, which currently operates and still maintains a certain monopoly at the electrical level, the National Insurance Institute, the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, among others." As part of the strategy to reduce the spending in the army and to promote human development, permanent military forces were abolished in a symbolic ceremony on December 1, 1948.

## A Small Country in the United States' Backyard

Even if Costa Rica is the first country without an army, conveying a message of peace and a human-centered nation, it still had enemies—mainly because the country kept on supporting other regional revolutions, but also because it is located amidst many illegal trade routes. "We must eliminate this idea that Costa Rica has always been peaceful and calm in international relations, this is not true," insists Professor Cascante Segura. Therefore, it is not that easy to dissolve an army but our experts explain how Costa Rica's process went smoothly:

Firstly, the Costa Rican army, similar to many other Central American armies, was growing progressively weaker throughout the 20th century. When it was decided to eliminate the permanent military forces, they were already incapable of protesting. "This would never have been possible if the army was strong" repeats Professor Cascante Segura. The difficulty laid, rather, in training the civil forces for their new tasks such as maritime and land surveillance.

Secondly, internal stability was guaranteed by growing civil mechanisms. Remember that before the civil war, the government was led by forces in favor of social rights? They shared a common interest in educating people and developing the civil powers of the country. Even before the war, they had laid the basis for stability based on education and consensus. These new policies were a source of national peace and internal control and, as a consequence, the need for military forces to maintain internal peace was continually diminishing. Furthermore, Costa Rica kept a clause in its constitution that it could call for temporary armed forces in case of emergency.

Last but not least is the international context:

1948 marked the beginning of the Cold War and some Latin American nations were already split and ravaged by ideological conflicts. In all of them, the regional hegemon—the United States—would add fuel to the fire by providing its support to the non-communist side, as it did in Nicaragua or even Argentina. No Central American country had an army capable of competing with the US forces, especially not the weakening Costa Rican army.

Before the Cold War, Costa Rica, unlike its neighbors, had kept relative political unity based on alliances and ideological balance. This permitted the development of a close, long-term relationship with the powerful big brother to the north. In 1948, “it made very little sense to have a large army if you know that, in the end, the one who will solve all problems is the United States” explains professor Carlos Cascante Segura. Furthermore, Costa Rica is part of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) of 1948 theoretically guaranteeing Costa Rica military help from other American nations (and especially from the US) in case of an attack. It has never been actively used by Costa Rica but it has been a deterrent to remind potential enemies that the most powerful army in the world is committed to defending the nation in case of aggression.

**"It made very little sense to have a large army if you know that, in the end, the one who will solve all problems is the United States."**

Prof. Carlos Cascante Segura to THE  
PERSPECTIVE

With time, the treaty has been losing power and relevance and nowadays, other international tools are preferred.

### **Peace as a Diplomatic Instrument**

If war and peace are all about strategic power games then what is the relevance of multinational treaties and international law?

It seems that many situations were too minor to mobilize foreign armed troops to Costa Rica, especially recurring tensions with Nicaragua. If the country had had its own army, some conflicts would likely have turned into violence. However, without an army, Costa Rica had no other choice than to resort to peaceful mechanisms to solve international conflicts. The latest example is a 2018 ruling of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which solved a land and environmental disagreement between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Since Costa Rica has no military power, it had to build alternative diplomatic instruments. Professor Carlos Cascante Segura argues that no country has more legitimacy to promote peace than a country that cannot go to war. In this respect, Costa Rica has gradually dedicated itself to the promotion of international disarmament. For example, it has played a key role in the negotiations of treaties against conventional weapons and against nuclear weapons. In 1987, then-President Óscar Arias Sánchez received the Nobel Peace Prize for his essential role in the establishment of the Esquipulas Peace Agreement, an initiative that promoted reconciliation and peace in five Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua). The UN also decided to establish its “University for Peace” in Costa Rica.



The Bellavista Fortress in the center of San José used to belong to the Costa Rican army. In 1948, the abolition ceremony was held there and in 1950 the building was turned into the National museum.

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Power relations are still essential to understand Costa Rica's strategy, which turned a "weakness" into a strength by becoming a peaceful third party serving as a mediator in case of international conflicts. In an era when humanitarian law is expanding and instruments for pacific conflicts resolution are sought, Costa Rica is seen to be in a credible position to use and contribute to the reinforcement of international law, explains Profesor Cascante Segura.

Beyond its role in driving international peace agreements, Costa Rica's successful demilitarization strategy also serves as a precursor of an alternative model in international relations. Since 1948, many small countries have chosen to eliminate their army, among them Costa Rica's neighbor Panama.

### **Stability, Education and Development**

Costa Rica's elimination of military forces did not only play a role on the international level: it also contributed to national development. Today, on many indicators—such as poverty reduction, security, health, natural resource conservation—

Costa Rica has been performing better than its neighbors, making it a fascinating case for development economists to study. Understanding the abolition of the military reveals some elements of Costa Rica's success story.

The continuous moderation in politics during the Cold War preserved Costa Rica from imperialism but also is deemed to be a key to stability and institutional development. The story of many Latin American countries has been interrupted by coups d'état in which the armed forces played a central role and one of the motivations for the abolition of the army is to avoid further military takeovers. "It was necessary to finish off with structures who at some point could enter into a counter-revolutionary process" analyzes professor Cascante Segura. José David Cortes also points out that in the absence of such power, Costa Rica's internal security is higher and democratic institutions have been more stable. Today, some Central American countries still live in fear of having the army seizing power, but several Costa Ricans shared with me that they feel safer in a country that does not have military forces.



However, the role of abolition must not be overestimated, and removing the army is not a secret recipe for peace. For example, Haïti tried to remove its army but remained confronted with insecurity. In the case of Panama, it is still too early to tell what are the long-term benefits. In Costa Rica, the governmental will for infrastructure building and natural resource protection are non-neglectable factors in the development path of the country. José David Cortés explains that development is not only about the abolition of the army but also due to having a strong democratic government which has been maintained over decades. Until today, the country has been led by an assembly of many parties, and even though corruption remains an issue, trust in the government is high, which also contributes to long-term stability.

Eliminating the army is not only about peace: It is also related to the reallocation of public funds into health and education infrastructure. Following the agenda of the new social-democrat government, 20.3% of the national budget was invested in education in the 50s and since then has been oscillating between 24.8% and 37.5%. Health investments also rose drastically and today Costa Rica's health system is rated as one of the best on the continent in terms of access and services. Not all the education and health investments are savings from the army, yet the abolition sent a

strong message about the new political strategy and aided in building trust. All the factors cited above played a role in the country's overall growth and according to a study from the Universidad de Costa Rica found that the annual GDP of Costa Rica has been on average 1% higher every year between 1950 and 2010 compared to simulated scenarios without army abolition.

### **Peace and Development as Mutually Reinforcing**

Costa Rica's positive development path is not the result of a miracle solution, but rather an accumulation of conjunctural and strategic events that favored human capital development over state empowerment. Without an initial investment in social infrastructure, Costa Rica would not have had the stability to abolish its armed forces which, in turn, played a key role—both symbolic and monetary—in human development.

Of course, future challenges lie ahead, but today Costa Rica is endowed with stable educational and health infrastructures, wide-reaching natural conservation policies, and a tradition for unity and collaboration which has again proven its use during the COVID-19 crisis. When on March 16, 2020 the first infection of coronavirus was confirmed in the country, Costa Rica could quickly transform its well-functioning health system to provide emergency care when needed.

Coffee production has played an important role in Costa Rica's history.

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THE SWEDISH

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The pandemic has widened the gaps in society and poverty. The UN has, in response to the new challenges of the Covid-19 crisis,

launched a program, "Build Back Better". The purpose is to reconstruct the world stronger and more resilient than before. We want to highlight the challenges that have become so obvious during the corona crisis.

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The Raoul Wallenberg Institute of  
Human Rights and Humanitarian Law



# DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

## A TAIWANESE EXPERIMENT IN POLICYMAKING

Democratic efforts are happening in the aftermath of Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement. It reached its pinnacle when the students, academics, civic organizations occupied the legislative chamber for nearly a month and demanded that the government drop the proposed trade agreement with China.

© Artemas Liu/Flickr



DEMOCRACY IS FACING CONSIDERABLE CHALLENGES, BUT WHAT IS BEING DONE TO SECURE ITS FUTURE? IN TAIWAN WE ARE WITNESSING A DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT IN CYBERSPACE. THE TAIWANESE GOVERNMENT HAS OPTED TO ENGAGE WITH THEIR CITIZENS DIRECTLY THROUGH DIGITAL FORUMS. THE PERSPECTIVE MET WITH COLIN MEGILL, THE CO-FOUNDER OF POL.IS, A PLATFORM OF VOLUNTARY POLL-ANSWERING AND SUBMITTING, POWERED BY MACHINE-LEARNING, REAL-TIME AI, TO SPEAK ABOUT DIGITAL DEMOCRACY.

**H**ave you ever had a misunderstanding where you heavily argued with someone, just to realize that you are both on the same page? Now, size that up to political parties. We are seeing heavy polarization in the majority of democratic states today. Brexit, the US elections and the EU policies are political processes that face not only disagreements but increasingly irreconcilable positions every step of the way. With social media echo-chambers and assumptions of the opposing party's dishonest intent, democracy needs to develop to face and overcome these challenges. But what if there was a way of uniting these infamously divided electorates, and perhaps, reach a consensus?

### **vTaiwan**

In Taiwan, a creative and innovative democratic experiment is unraveling: vTaiwan. Through several digital platforms and forums, government officials, market representatives, civil society organizations and civilians are interconnected in a non-hierarchical multi-step process of digital policy making. In a sense, it is a crowdsourced deliberative process that encourages new solutions to controversial national issues. By February 2018, out of 26 cases discussed some 80% led to some decisive government action. Two prominent examples of vTaiwan's success are the regulation of Uber in Taiwan—a controversial issue for years solved in only a few months—and the FinTech Sandbox Act that allows the financial technology field to conduct transparent and accountable small-scale experiments, unregulated by law.

These democratic and transparent efforts do not come out of nowhere. They are happening in the aftermath of the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement—a protest in Taiwan that reached its pinnacle when the students, academics, civic organizations occupied the legislative chamber for nearly a month and demanded that the government drop the proposed trade agreement with China. The ruling party had attempted to pass the treaty without offering any real opportunity to oppose it, and after the occupation, the government agreed to greater supervision and a clause-by-clause review. Ultimately, the Sunflower Student Movement provoked a change of government in the Taiwanese elections 2016. The new government chose to go down a path opposing one undertaken by China—that is, towards an open-source government. Open-source means that all the information and data is easily accessible to the everyday citizen who seeks insight into government business or to find flaws. Facing the uncertainty of statehood and Chinese political pressure, the move towards radical transparency is not surprising.

Audrey Tang, Taiwan's Digital Minister Without Portfolio (no department or ministry to manage) initiated these efforts in 2015 by formally integrating vTaiwan into practice. As a transgender, anarchist, radical transparency-advocate and software programmer, Audrey Tang moves Taiwanese democracy one step further towards country-wide consultation and insight into policymaking and reviewing.

## Pol.is—Surveys Created by People Taking Them

One of vTaiwan's most intriguing tools is a software called Pol.is—an open-source online platform for voluntary poll-answering *and submitting*. This software uses real-time machine-learning Artificial Intelligence to visualize the different opinion-groups—and on which sub-issues they differ. Any participant, government official or civilian, submits statements which leave participants with three options: agree, disagree or uncertain. Crucially, Pol.is does not have a comment feature, and thus eliminates the risk of potential trolls or “cancel culture.”

The algorithm can thereafter show on what points the opposing groups agree. Case studies performed by the Pol.is team show that the participants use that information to try and improve their own group's position by bridging the divide through bi-partisan statements. Eventually, certain statements can reach genuine consensus. An example of

this is Taiwan's controversial UberX case where 95% of the participants eventually agreed that “the government should leverage this opportunity to challenge the taxi industry to improve their management & quality control system, so that drivers & riders would enjoy the same quality service as UberX's.” These consensus items then led to concrete bill drafts and implemented policy.

THE PERSPECTIVE met virtually with the Co-Founder of the software Pol.is, Colin Megill, an expert and successful speaker on Artificial Intelligence with a background in International Relations. For nearly ten years he has worked to

create systems that enable the complex citizen voice to participate in decision-making. While talking about Pol.is and how it might help democracy evolve digitally, he stressed the issues of polarization and transparency.

Megill points to democratic votes today, where “binary votes like pro- or anti-Brexit, or having universal basic income or not, instead are highly multi-dimensional conversations about the way that the government interacts with society.” This binary system of voting yes or no, democrats or republican, creates the polarization.

**"From my view it's about disaggregating. If you aggregate and delay, you get Brexit. If you disaggregate and speed up, then you're dealing with it."**

Colin Megill to THE PERSPECTIVE

“Polarization is not present in society,” he says. “Polarization is a function of a lens that we view society with. When we view society by Brexit or not, then we have created a one-bit view-finder in this society that isn't society—it's the lens.” Instead, Pol.is allows for the participant to contribute with their own statements that can break the

dichotomy, break the lens. “Eliminating biases [of a survey-maker] is not possible. If we want to do that, we can open up the dimensions of the survey that are not in the frame of reference of the survey designer, or the frame of reference for the relevant power.”

Polarized democratic systems can't make space for this complexity and the multidimensional will of the people ends up expressing itself through large protests and non-constructive acts of defiance. Megill linked this to the Seattle Fault Line—an area at risk for earthquakes of magnitude 7 on the Richter scale. “When it releases, it's going to be a huge



March 30, 2014, Taipei, Taiwan. Students wearing black boxes depicting their demands for an oversight law to be established by the Legislature before allowing the trade agreement to be reviewed. © Tomszy2000/Flickr

earthquake,” he explains. “It can’t release pressure gradually, so it’s going to do it all at once. That’s how I understand Brexit. There were no pressure valves, just the blow-out.”

Despite Pol.is attempting to facilitate consensus, Megill is well-aware that political conflict will not simply disappear. Pol.is is not a magic harmony-tool, but rather a system trying to sustainably relieve political pressure build-up. “From my view it’s about disaggregating. If you aggregate and delay, you get Brexit. If you disaggregate and speed up, then you’re dealing with it.”

Data security is a crucial component of digital democracy. Megill highlights the significant risk of affecting the individual’s independent vote, but asks any concerned citizen to look at the digital banking system for comfort. He claims the bigger risk lies with social exploits, where people don’t use available security tools—such as two-factor authentication—designed to guard their passwords and sensitive data.

This, however, is not to say that digital policymaking is easy. On this point Megill stresses the danger of

machine learning managing citizens’ voices. “Let’s say that a government contractor applies machine learning just to stop bots, but ends up suppressing some portion of the public. [...] If you have a closed-source system for digital political debate, there is going to be a capturable area between citizens’ voices and the government itself.” To counter this scenario, Pol.is is an open-source software which means that anyone can check the code for errors, copy and modify it to fit their own needs. In this sense, open-source is a security aspect in and of itself.

Pol.is holds great potential for contributing to the digitalization of democracy—and there are several other trials and experiments happening simultaneously. Taiwan has modified the open-source code to a greater extent with another platform called Join—with over ten million unique visitors. The city of Amsterdam is also currently in the process of adopting its own version of the tool into their municipality-level decision making. Colin Megill invites any interested city or citizen to learn about Pol.is and experiment with it themselves. Cyberspace is expanding at an exponential rate and democracy needs to catch up. “Have at it!” Megill concludes.



NEW PRESIDENT, OLD SYSTEM: THE LATEST ELECTIONS MADE THE SMALL STATE RETURN TO ITS ONCE-ABOLISHED PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM. THIS STEP BACK SENT THE ONLY DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL ASIA ON A DIFFERENT TRACK WITH A YET-UNKNOWN DESTINATION. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO AN ELECTION OBSERVER, A LOCAL AND A HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH EXPERT TO GAIN INSIGHT TO KYRGYZSTAN'S ROCKY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY AND ITS LATEST DEVELOPMENTS.

**A**t the beginning of the year, Kyrgyzstan witnessed yet another dawn: the inauguration of a new, but controversial president. On top of that, the electorate voted to expand his powers. This election followed an annulled parliamentary election back in October 2020 that resulted in violent protests.

Little is known about this small country hidden by great mountain ranges. Bordering China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic lies in the hilly heart of Central Asia. The citizens speak both Kyrgyz—a Turkic language—and Russian. About 75% of the population are Sunni Muslims, while about 20% profess Russian Orthodox Christianity. The former member of the Soviet Union is home to over six million inhabitants, of which about one million live in the capital, Bishkek.

### **Democratic Development: An Uphill-Downhill Journey**

Just like a ride through the hilly Kyrgyz scenery, the country's democratic development had its ups and downs. Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union on August 31, 1991 under Askar Akayev who was confirmed as president in October 1991 and remained in office for almost 14 years. After corruption allegations in the parliamentary elections in February 2005, mass demonstrations known as the "Tulip Revolution" led to the resignation of the increasingly authoritarian Akayev.

His successor was Kurmanbek Bakiyev, head of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, who had helped lead the opposition. However, his democratic intentions turned out to be empty promises: in 2010, Kyrgyzstan saw a violent revolution and Bakiyev went into exile in Belarus. This second revolution led to a referendum, the game changer of the Kyrgyz democracy: the citizens voted for a parliamentary democracy, leaving the presidential system behind. Kyrgyzstan became the democratic island—or rather mountaintop—of Central Asia.

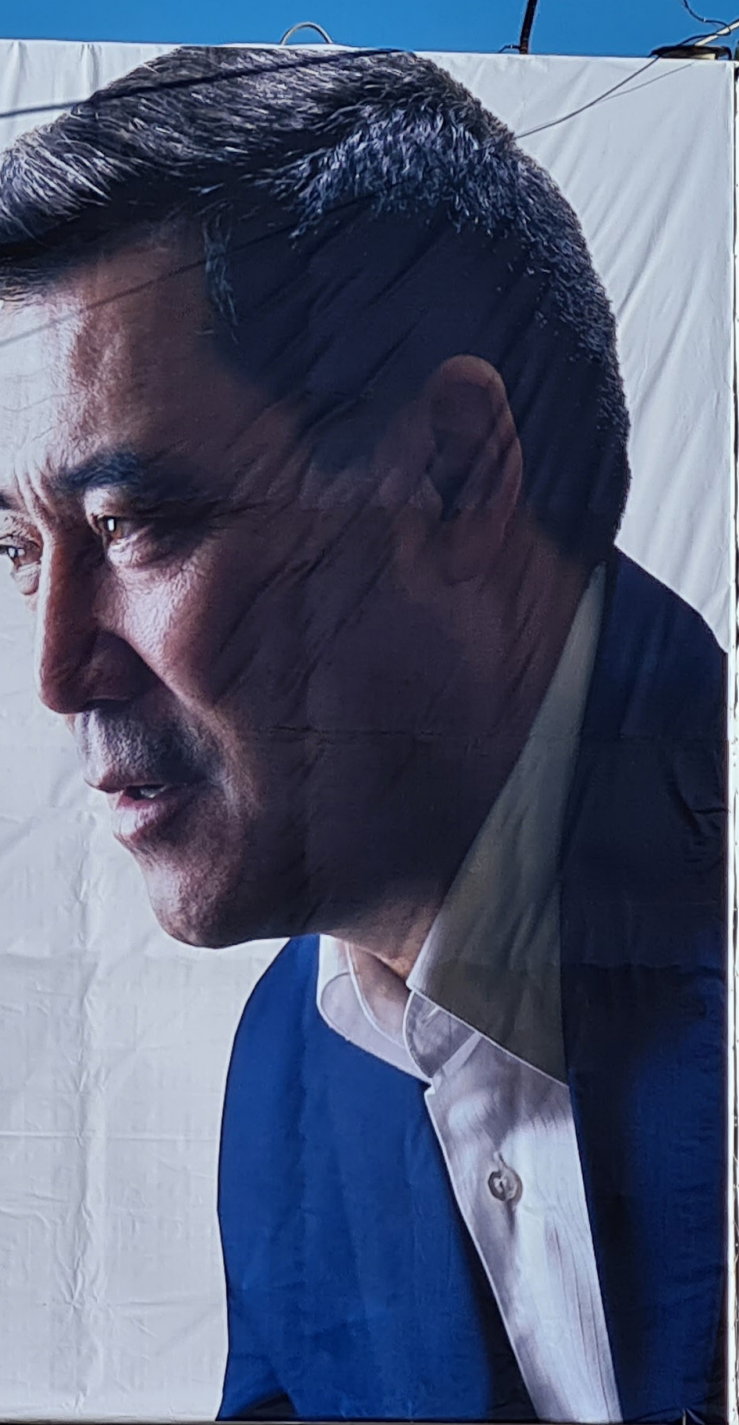
### **A Weakened Economy: All That Glitters Is Not Gold**

Hugh Williamson, the director of the Europe & Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch, considers all the countries in Central Asia to be "at a very low base in terms of their achievements on international human rights standards." Yet, Kyrgyzstan is a little bit more advanced—despite severe issues around corruption and nepotism. In Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Kyrgyzstan ranks 126th out of 180 countries. The country is one of the poorest ex-Soviet republics and has been relying on Russian support ever since the dismantling of the USSR.

"On January 4, the Russian Federation sent us help worth \$20 million to pay the pensions and social money and support, otherwise our financial system would have collapsed," reports Maria, whose name was changed for privacy purposes. The young woman from Bishkek fears that older people are going to suffer a lot—that they are going to starve.

Sadyr Japarov's election poster.

© Hanns Seidel Stiftung Zentralasienvertretung



# KYRGYZSTAN

**A SINKING  
DEMOCRATIC  
ISLAND?**



“They don’t know if they will get their pension or not, unless the Russian federation helps us again and again,” she adds.

The predominantly agricultural country has hardly any resources. However, the so-called Tien Shan Gold Belt has generated interest among international investors. Especially in the last years, the Kyrgyz GDP increasingly benefits from remittances from migrant workers living abroad. Maria, who has lived in Turkey for several years herself, remembers the years 2010–2012 as relatively stable times; people started earning more money and could afford to open businesses. Today, this kind of optimism has evaporated. When thinking about what the future might hold, Maria does not see any glimmer of hope: “We are not expecting any bright future. And this year, I hear from everyone that they are going to emigrate somewhere, somehow.” On top of all of this is the increased political instability.

### **The Riots of 2020: The Storm at the White House**

The world was shocked to see the alarming images from the storming of the United States Capitol, but a similar event had occurred months before at the White House in Bishkek—the presidential office building that, ironically, carries the same name as

its American counterpart. These riots broke out after the parliamentary elections on October 4, as the opposition feared election manipulation—an allegation that also concerned the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

International election observer Dr. Max Georg Meier from Hanns Seidel Stiftung, a German political foundation, reports: “There were specific indications that there had been fraudulent elections in the parliamentary elections, such as the purchase of votes; unlawful use of the right to cast the vote in a place other than where one is officially registered; use of administrative resources by candidates and parties who were close to the then government and the then President.”

Political opponents stormed the government buildings. Hundreds were injured in the protests, one person died. President Jeenbekov’s government, elected in 2017, resigned. The elections were declared invalid. After the protests in 2005 and 2010, this was the third upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in 15 years.

According to Meier, the demonstrations were supported by the political parties that had not made it into the national parliament and that accused the

The White House in Bishkek was stormed during the October protests.

© Elena Odareeva/Adobe Stock





winning parties—including the president—of electoral fraud. “But there were also large crowds of young, nonpartisan people present who protested against the political establishment and fought for their future,” he adds. Meier continues: “As with the popular uprisings in 2005 and 2010, the protests in 2020 were also very spontaneous, emotional and filled with great anger on the part of those involved.”

Maria was shocked waking up to videos showing people flooding the streets and rioting in the White House. But to her dismay, the citizens of Bishkek are “not new to this” and they know for sure that “nothing good is going to come out of that.” Despite all the chaos, Maria also remembers a particularly proud moment—men of Bishkek and nearby villages showing their “civil duty” and gathering together to protect the city. “They were guarding several nights in a row, guarding shops, hotels, buildings, banks, jewelry stores, so nothing could be touched or destroyed.”

Aside from storming the White House, another defining event occurred last year: the freeing of the prominent prisoner Sadyr Japarov by the opposition. Once an advisor to ex-president Bakiyev, he called for the nationalization of the country’s Canadian-owned Kumtor gold mine. In 2013, he led the protests that ended with the hostage-taking of a local governor. After fleeing Kyrgyzstan in 2013, Japarov returned in 2017 and was then sentenced to more than ten years in prison. Following his liberation in October 2020, the Kyrgyz parliament voted him in as prime minister and later appointed him as interim president.

### **The Elections of 2021: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back?**

The snap elections took place on January 10, 2021. The Kyrgyz were to decide between 17 contenders,

with Japarov being the top candidate and ultimately, the clear winner with nearly 80% of the votes. His closest opponent, Adakhan Madumarov, received less than 7% of the votes and declared his nonrecognition of the election outcome. The voter turnout was only 39%.

“The parliamentary elections of October 2020 and the presidential elections of January 2021 were organized very professionally by the Kyrgyz Central Electoral Commission,” reports election observer Dr. Max Georg Meier. The voter registration was conducted on a biometric basis. The ballot boxes in Kyrgyzstan count votes automatically, although the result needs to be confirmed manually later on. “Those who work at the polling stations are well trained and work with great motivation. As an international election observer, I can confirm all of this in the last two elections,” he assures.

This low turnout was partly due to the fact that participation in elections in Kyrgyzstan is voluntary, as opposed to some neighboring countries in Central Asia. On the other hand, the Kyrgyz people feel a certain political fatigue, explains the election observer.

Maria read the electoral programs of all the candidates. She particularly regrets the absence of tangible plans: “None of them were talking about real presidential duties and what they would do for the country. Some were very general, like, ‘we want to do all the best and promise not to do anything bad.’ Others were like, ‘we need to raise our spiritual strengths and raise as a powerful nation.’ It sounded very strange and not trustworthy.” The young woman from Bishkek decided to go for the option “I vote against everyone.” According to Maria, there were no references to foreign affairs, army, military or law. Neither the losers of the election nor the winner, President Japarov, addressed these issues. Unlike after the parliamentary elections, election

observer Meier thinks that one could not speak of widespread electoral fraud, even though Japarov made use of state administrative resources. “Japarov did not need it [resorting to fraud], because of his great popularity. There were also no protests after the presidential elections. As an international election observer, I can confirm all of the above,” adds Meier. Maria, however, thinks differently. She considered the election itself useless, as the Kyrgyz already knew the results. “And they say that 80% voted for him, which we don’t believe, because whoever you ask, nobody voted for him,” she says. An ex-convict being the newly “legitimately” elected president is not the only redefining development in this post-Soviet country: alongside the presidential elections, the people were also asked to decide

**"We are not expecting any bright future. And this year, I hear from everyone that they are going to emigrate somewhere, somehow."**

Maria to THE PERSPECTIVE

whether they wished to maintain parliamentarism or go back to the presidential system previously abolished in 2010. About 84% of voters supported the latter. Meier argues that after 2010 the hopes for the parliamentary system were high, but after a decade, people still have yet to gain from it.

Thanks to her position as a copywriter at a law firm, Maria knows that many rules and laws were broken in the course of this plebiscite. “The way they decided to hold that referendum was not according to

the law, because there were so many steps they should have taken before and so many commissions should have approved it and that takes a long time,” she tells THE PERSPECTIVE.

These rather opaque machinations are also concerning from a human rights perspective, according to a human rights expert, Hugh Williamson. Additionally, far-reaching constitutional changes were proposed in November. Some of those new amendments foresee the reduction of the number of deputies, or the creation of a national *Kurultai*—an ancient Turkic tradition that envisages an assembly of members of the public. Maria considers those changes “strange and medieval.” She supports the now-abolished parliamentary system. The second referendum on the new constitution will most likely be held April 11, 2021, and it will officially change the form of government.

#### **Sadyr Japarov: Boon or Bane for Kyrgyzstan?**

Maria’s negative opinion of Japarov contrasts Meier’s observation. The election observer believes that despite his violent past, Japarov enjoys popular support. “Voters are disappointed with the previous politicians, their style of government and the political parties after 30 years of independence.” Japarov was the alternative, he benefited from nationalist and religious groups and is very popular among young citizens. “He presents himself as the man of the common people and the middle class who fear for their future, as well as an opponent against the previous corrupt political elite. He wages a ‘fight against evil.’”

Hugh Williamson from Human Rights Watch agrees that Japarov’s communication is based on populist phrases and skillful rhetoric instead of on a clear policy agenda. “He emphasized the value of the Kyrgyz culture, emphasized the value of sort of boosting the Kyrgyz economy,” says the expert. He

adds that Japarov's aspiration to remove the major Canadian gold company in Kyrgyzstan back in 2013 was "a symbol of nationalist politics at the time."

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased popular dissatisfaction with the political leadership. "All of this was then material for the election campaign of the winning candidate, Japarov," says Meier, "people have attached all their hopes to him."

Maria remains appalled. "A person with a prison record cannot run for the presidency, but they annulled it, which already makes him illegitimate. I am not a lawyer, so this is just my opinion." It is questionable whether other leaders share Maria's stance: "If other presidents find our president illegitimate, then they might cancel the agreements and contracts and they might ask for their money back." Kyrgyzstan is indebted to many other countries—one of them being China. "Because we don't have the money, they might take our resources, our valuable lands with gold or water, or they will just take some of our territories. We don't know what's going to happen."

### **The Future: Advancing Towards Authoritarianism?**

Yet, the issues regarding Japarov's legitimacy and potential diplomatic changes are not the only concerns. The return to the presidential system could be a slippery slope towards authoritarianism. Inaugurated on January 28, Japarov proudly announced he wants to open a "new page in history."

Meier does not deny that there is a danger of Japarov's presidency sliding towards autocracy, but he also emphasizes that Japarov is aware of the risks. "The Kyrgyz citizens love their freedom and the liberality of their country. They would revolt against new authoritarianism." The new constitution might give the parliament enough power to

control the president; hence, it doesn't necessarily have to end in autocracy, concludes Meier.

Hugh Williamson from Human Rights Watch believes it is too soon to evaluate the direction Japarov is heading, since we can only "judge what he had [sic] said and his actions since October last year." When it comes to the return to the presidential system, Williamson emphasizes: "It doesn't necessarily mean it is a worse system for human rights, but there is the danger that there will be a narrowing of focus on human rights around the decisions of one man in the presidency rather than a range of different players as it were."

As for Japarov's time in office? Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations will try to engage with the new president and try to encourage him and his administration to implement human rights and to respect the law. Williamson draws particular attention to the case of Azimzhan Askarov, the country's most prominent political prisoner who passed away in July 2020. "That is a real tragedy for the country, because he should not have been in prison in the first place. He was carrying out his human rights activities when he was caught by police in the middle of the uprising in 2010, tortured in prison and accused of killing a policeman," explains Williamson. Now, after his passing, Human Rights Watch calls for reviewing the case. "This is sort of a symbolic, important case for Kyrgyzstan," concludes the director.

How the country will develop under the new president and the old/new presidential system remains to be seen. Even though the events of January surely made waves, it is most likely too soon to know whether Central Asia's only democracy will sink. But considering the country's widespread corruption and Japarov's opaque rise to power, the common parlance might be proven correct when we say: no one is a (democratic) island.





## INDIA'S FARMING PROTESTS

# MODI, MONEY AND MARKET DEREGULATION

IN AUGUST 2020, THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT MADE PUBLIC THEIR NEWLY PROPOSED AGRICULTURAL REFORM BILLS. THESE WERE MET WITH ANGER FROM INDIAN FARMERS WHO HAVE BEEN PROTESTING PEACEFULLY SINCE THEN. ON JANUARY 26TH 2021, THESE PROTESTS TURNED VIOLENT, SUBSEQUENTLY GAINING MEDIA ATTENTION AND LEAVING MANY WORLDWIDE WONDERING; WHAT IS GOING ON IN INDIA?

In September 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi passed three agricultural reform bills through parliament at a record pace. These were the: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill and The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill. These are otherwise respectively referred to as the APMC Bypass Bill, the Freedom of Food Stocking by Agribusiness Bill and the Contract Farming Bill. Together they dictate a significant shift in Indian agriculture towards rapid economic liberalisation.

The significance of these new reforms is that the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led

by Modi, has delivered change—desired for years by farmers—to Indian agriculture. The critique, however, is that this has come in an unwanted, corrupt and dysfunctional form. Nor are these the kind of changes they were asking for.

Out of India's population of 1.39 billion, approximately 43% are employed in the agricultural sector according to the 2019 World Bank statistics. Despite this vast workforce, farming is less than 15% of India's GDP, with the agriculture sector consisting of largely small farm units. The Indian Agricultural Census of 2015-2016 stated that smallholder and marginal farmers with less than two hectares of farming land make up 86.2% of all Indian farmers.

December 2020, Punjabi farmer protesting.  
© Randeep Maddoke/Wikimedia Commons

## How Was the Agricultural Sector Managed?

Before the new bills were introduced, the Indian government provided farmers with subsidies, exemption from income tax and crop insurance, which was the responsibility of each federal state to govern and maintain. Under the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act, the sale of agricultural products was authorised at mandis, state-regulated wholesale markets. Commission agents were intended to act as links between farmers and traders, but due to the lack of mandis in reality, farmers were reliant upon private traders. In 2015, it was reported that only 5.8% of Indian agricultural households were able to access APMC mandis and get the minimum support price for their produce, with many also acting corruptly.

Therefore, an insufficient market system together with poorly managed small plot sizes and a lack of modern technology translates into a farming sector that has been crumbling for years. Farmers have been demanding for decades a raise of the minimum support price and for more effective legislation. These new laws are seen as a clear move by the government to squeeze them out of the system for big business. Over 40 farming unions have come together, organising marches and blockades. As Darshan Pal, a protest leader stated to Deutsche Welle: "We want to send out a signal loud and clear. We will not tolerate the repressive measures unleashed by the government against farmers..."

However, the new market system rushed into law by Modi has created pockets of unregulated space. Private buyers also often favor large-scale farming units in order to deliver "large volumes with minimal friction" according to Bhavani Shankar, professorial research fellow in Food Systems and Health at the University of Sheffield. This di-

rectly contradicts the Indian system of small-scale holdings and farmers, already burdened by a failing system, who now have massive corporations to compete with. Therefore, farmers are protesting at reforms that only benefit India's super-rich, which under Modi's governance, have only been getting richer while unemployment has rocketed. In particular, fingers have been pointed at two billionaires, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, who are both in the Indian food business.

## The Problem of Commercial Agriculture

Allowing corporations into a system is argued to be an unsuccessful method of changing a broken system. By looking at the United States, where corporate agriculture has existed for decades and resulted in declining farm incomes and rising debts, it is clear that commercialization has not been effective. The American Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy highlighted in their statement of support for the protests how the Reagan administration's "systematic erosion of parity prices and other deregulatory efforts" allowed for profits for those who bought into the large-scale monoculture system and simultaneously put strain on traditional farming methods.

## How Can Food Insecurity Be Tackled?

In September 2020, Indian National Congress (INC) leader Palaniappan Chidambaram voiced that the new agricultural bills "undermine the three pillars of our food security" by manipulating "the principles of minimum support price (MSP), public procurement and public distribution system (PDS) to ensure food security." As a result, these new bills are said to challenge the food security of more than 800 million Indians.

The drive towards commercialization, believing that market driven approaches must bring suc-

cess in reality does little for small-scale farmers. The latter can vary in definition from country to country, but according to the international collaborative initiative Foresight4Food—which specialises in scenario analysis of global food systems—small-scale farming largely refers to those whose land is less than two hectares and are financially insecure. Experts at Foresight 4Food, Jim Woodhill, Saher Hasnain and Alison Griffith state that small-scale farmers have “marginal commercial opportunities at best.”

Small-scale agriculture can also be split into commercial small-scale farmers who are the minority, and the others who constitute the majority who are extremely poor. As such, to combat food insecurity and revolutionize a burdened system, a more sophisticated approach is required that understands the issues facing the majority and can aid in the creation of targeted policies. The Route to Food Initiative states:

**"We need to know our farmers, and learn about how they grow our food. We need to support local supply-chains."**

One country where small-scale farming is seen as a viable method to combat food insecurity is Kenya. Route to Food states that small-scale farming prioritizes production and supplies 75% of the national food demand. Muthoni Njenga, a supporter of Route to Food states that “improving food security depends on removing the socio-economic and political barriers faced by small-scale farmers in expanding their productive capacity.” By placing more attention on societal factors that

inhibit food security, such as education and cultural gender barriers, the prosperity of small-scale farming can be maximised without the need for big business to enter the logistical chain.

The United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR) also supports the move towards locally grown produce and the empowerment of small-scale farming to combat food insecurity. Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, argues that “the international community must support the ability of each region to feed itself, and to reinvest in local production.”

### **How Has the Crisis Been Handled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi?**

Since the start of the crisis, protestors have been tarnished as anti-nationalists by the nationalistic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of the Indian government. On January 26th 2021, peaceful protestors—who had marched to New Delhi—were met with beatings, tear gas and immediate arrests. Furthermore, electricity and bathroom access restrictions in protest camps were implemented.

The country, ranking poorly on the World Press Freedom Index at #142 (out of #180), has seen government crack-downs on free speech. The government brought charges against journalists, such as Rajdeep Sardesai, a well-known figure on the India Today television channel, for allegedly promoting violence at the protests. Additionally, there have also been reports across the world of torture of protestors in jail and sexual assault.

According to Reporters without Borders, Indian national media outlets are closely tied to the state. As such, accusations of mistreatment of protestors and criticism from the international community has been met with silence or a tone of ‘leave us alone’. Indian celebrities have also



denounced the protestors and any international condemnations of the crisis, portraying the issue in a pro-government light. Bollywood celebrities Akshay Kumar and Suniel Shetty retweeted the message of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, which called, “the temptation of sensationalist social media hashtags and comments, especially when used by celebrities and others, is neither accurate nor responsible.”

The handling of these protests has undoubtedly tarnished Modi’s strongman image and shines a light on the state of India’s democracy which has fallen to 53rd place (from #27 in 2014) in the Economist’s Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index. Stig Toft Madsen from the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS), speaking on the Nordic Asia podcast, stated that: “when they make a decision at top level, they like to carry it out quickly and they expect their loyal MPs and other coalition supporters to vote it through parliament without too much debate.” Supreet Kaur, assistant professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley calls the new laws an act of “authoritarianism disguised as capitalism.”

THE PERSPECTIVE interviewed Shiney Varghese, author and senior policy analyst at the American Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy on the topic. She works on agriculture and food systems with a focus on agroecology and water justice. She served on the experts panel of the UN Committee on Food Security (CFS-HLPE) from 2017 to 2019. Varghese grew up on a farm in Kerala in southwestern India and now lives in the United States.

**TP: Are these protests the final outburst after years of mishandling regarding the agricultural sector?**

SV: “Yes, the Indian agriculture sector has not



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a BJP rally.  
© Al Jazeera English/Flicker

been doing well for decades. Whatever progress has been made has been at the cost of India’s environmental health, and the wellbeing of its food producers and rural communities. On the one hand the sector has been starved of systematic public investments in research and extension services as well as institutional and infrastructure development; on the other hand, with increasing input costs and other expenses, a large majority of the farmers and farmworkers are operating at the margins, and heavily indebted. So, farmers protests have been happening on a regular basis for a very long time, and at times even at national level, but what has been especially interesting about these protests is that they have captured the attention of farmers from across India, even if they are not all in Delhi for the protest site. They see the three laws as the straw that will break the camel’s back. They are also joined by food security advocates interested in promoting diversified and decentralised and sustainable food and agriculture systems in the country.”

**TP: How do you see change happening within the Indian agricultural sector that is more ethical?**

SV: “It is a tough question, especially in these times when the central government seems to favour ecologically, economically and ethically disastrous policies in general. On a positive note, there have been some state-level and district level initiatives that provide institutional support to smallholder farmers practicing agroecological far-

ming, including organic agricultural practices and/or promotion of farmer-producer organisations that help build collective bargaining power of farmers in the market-place. However, these can be effective at a national scale only if farmers are assured stability of income and safety net through minimum support price for what they grow.”

**TP: Are these farmers' laws a façade for his party's own benefits and harming the traditional federal set up?**

SV: “Given the diversity of India's food and agricultural cultures, and agroecological diversity in the country across states and regions, it makes little sense to have these laws enacted at the level of central government. For the architects of India's constitution this was likely an important factor that led them to determine that agriculture ought to be a state subject; indeed, it has been argued that enacting these laws at central level goes against the principle of federalism enshrined in the constitution.”

**TP: During the COVID-19 pandemic, Modi has used the conditions to pass laws extremely quickly. Are these new farming laws a key example of this style of governance where his rushed approach does not allow for federal consultations?**

SV: “Neither the sudden lockdown in the spring 2020 in India, nor the passing of the farm laws are atypical of Modi's style of governance, which likely sees the role of the Prime Minister as an executive with unlimited power rather than first among parliamentarians. What the world can see is that consultations are scant – be it with elected state governments or parliamentarians elected to the houses.

COVID-19 exposed the vulnerabilities of the food and agricultural systems across the world, like never before. Moving forward, there should be an

increased recognition of the importance of decentralised, regional food systems as a key component for enhancing nutrition security. Given India's recognition of agriculture as a state-subject, it is in a good position to take advantage of this emphasis on developing regionalised decentralised food systems. Given that more than 31% of its population was food insecure even before pandemic (this accounted for 22% of world's food insecure), it is in fact a mistake to move towards increased centralization of India's food and agricultural governance.

If Prime Minister Modi had been an effective executive, this would have been an opportunity to encourage states to consider appropriate reforms, to address underlying concerns of farming communities in such a way that India can improve its nutrition security while protecting its environment.”

And so when looking towards the future of Indian democracy by observing the handling of this farming crisis, it seems that there may be fault lines appearing in India's democracy. This will ultimately harm Indian society further on issues such as food security.

In conclusion, as a parliamentary democracy, not a presidential system, it appears that Modi's style of governance - which has become even more autocratic and authoritarian since the COVID-19 pandemic - does not mesh with that of a state founded on civic republican ideals, whose constitution is aimed at securing the common good of all its people.

The obvious personalisation of power has harmed the handling of these farmers' protests and it will be interesting to see how India moves on from this crisis. Crucially, the shocks from the pandemic are yet to be fully felt but one thing is clear; COVID-19 has enraged many and made even clearer the divides in many societies across the world.

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# AN ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL(S)

THE PREDICAMENT OF  
INDONESIA'S SINKING  
CITY

JAKARTA IS SPRAWLING, FLOODING, AND PERHAPS MOST WORRYINGLY, SINKING. A PROPOSED NEW CAPITAL ON THE ISLAND OF BORNEO PROFFERS A GREEN AND GLITTERING TECHNOLOGICAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF URBAN INDONESIA. BUT CAN MOVING THE COUNTRY'S CENTER OF POLITICAL OPERATION SAVE THOSE MOST BELEAGUERED BY JAKARTA'S WOES? OR WILL THE NEW CAPITAL TAKE ITS PLACE AMONGST THE COME-TO-NAUGHT ECO-CITIES AND SPATIAL FIXES OF THE WORLD?

It is no secret: Jakarta is a capital on the brink. The city of 10 million—whose greater metropolitan area population has ballooned to three times that—sinks, on average, up to 15 cm each year. Nearly half of it already lies below sea level. An entire fifth of the city's population resides in North Jakarta, an administrative district that in the past ten years has sunk 2.5 meters; some areas' subsidence has even reached a staggering 25 cm per year. Annual rains regularly overwhelm the city's sunken and inadequate drainage systems—66 people died and 170,000 were evacuated in the immense deluge of January last year. Earthquakes and landslides are both intimate friends of the capital.

"Jakarta's problems are deep-rooted in decades of mismanagement," says Leonard Simanjuntak, Greenpeace Indonesia Country Director. "Mismanagement of resources, of spatial planning, of environment, of water catchment areas... You name it." Part of the government's solution? Develop an entirely new capital from the ground up nearly 1,300 kilometers away in East Kalimantan, a province on the island of Borneo, smack-dab in the middle of the Indonesian archipelago. The project was announced at the end of August 2019, and by the end of the year, a winning design had already been chosen.

The Chief of the New Capital Design Competition Organizing Committee, Danis Hidayat Sumadilaga, previously said the new capital had to meet three criteria: it was to be reflective of Indonesian identity, it was to be environmentally friendly and it

was to be "modern," with all the techno-architectural vagueness that term entails. In short: a vision of sustainable development. As Simanjuntak describes, "It will be a kind of smart city, a techno-city powered by renewable energy—massive solar rooftops and public transportation as the backbone of transport."

This gleaming new eco-capital, however, is not meant as the catch-all solution to Jakarta's woes. In fact, the city is planned for just an exclusive few. "It will be a bureaucrat city," Simanjuntak says. "Maximum 1.5 million, which is basically the number of bureaucrats in Jakarta." But government bureaucrats are not the ones who bear the brunt of Jakarta's sinking, flooding and congestion. According to Yosef Djakababa, Assistant Professor at Pelita Harapan University's International Relations Department and expert in Southeast Asian history, those who inhabit the rapidly sinking northern neighborhoods of Jakarta and the pockets of flood prone areas to the south are mostly the disenfranchised poor. This is a demographic for whom the new capital—what with its planned renewable energy, extensive urban ecology (50% of the city has been earmarked for green spaces), and potential AI-integration—is not being built.

### Rife with Dubious Precedents

Another city that began as a fully-planned bureaucrat utopia: Brasília. Sixty years ago, the city was inaugurated to replace Rio de Janeiro as Brazil's capital and seat of government. Then-president Juscelino Kubitschek "had a campaign slogan of

A family caught up in a Jakarta flood.

© World Meteorological Organization/Flickr



‘Fifty Years in Five,’ which meant fifty years of Brazilian development in five years, and so quickly built the skeleton of the capital and finished it before he left office in 1960,” explains James Green, professor of Brazilian History at Brown University. Brasília was a world apart from anything the country had seen until then. The core of the city is a schematic layout of government bodies: Congress, the presidential building, various ministries. “Some say it was planned in the design of an airplane,” the professor says. “It was—and kind of still is—a strikingly different image of a government, which people still see sixty years later as a ‘modern’ and ‘new’ city because of that central part, which is extremely organized and structured.”

Yet a city cannot function without a diverse range of inhabitants. In this regard, Brasília’s bureaucrat-oriented, fully-planned design fell short. In fact, the city has long been criticized by historians, academics and journalists for its segregation-conducive developmental trajectory. Green elaborates: “Even though it was designed to have people of different socioeconomic levels, in fact it placed poor people an hour and a half or two hours away because right around the city was a national security zone. So you couldn’t build there. Outside of that, there is a ring of towns of poor people living there... The poor people come in and work as service people,

and then they leave. They work very hard.”

If Indonesia’s new capital is likewise built for bureaucrats, then perhaps it faces a similar, spatially-disenfranchising future—not just for people who might migrate to fulfill the non-bureaucratic socioeconomic functions of the city, but for the people of the region as well. As Djakababa at Pelita Harapan points out, “Moving the capital to Borneo does not necessarily empower or benefit the people who already live over there, even though that’s an aspect that [the government] is promoting.”

In fact, an oft-overlooked social dimension of this capital move are tensions within the highly diverse and geographically vast Indonesian archipelago. There is, according to Djakababa, a historical trend toward the centrality of Java—the island upon which Jakarta is located—which has led to interregional tensions concerning domestic development patterns. “If you ask people who live in Jakarta, probably most of them—especially from the middle and upper class—they would say [the capital move] is a great idea,” he says. But, “There are probably also tendencies that people who live in Kalimantan will see this as an invasion of people from Java to their land. That is also a possible perspective, due to the transmigration issues that were already happening since the Dutch colonial period.”

A coal mine in East Kalimantan, Indonesia.

© The Center for International Forestry Research/Flicker





# "Jakarta's problems are deep-rooted in decades of mismanagement"

Leonard Simanjuntak to  
THE PERSPECTIVE

Indonesia's transmigration program was a colonial effort, later continued by the Indonesian government, to redistribute the population of Java across the less developed regions of Indonesia. As recently as the turn of the millennium, latent ethnic tensions between some Javanese and several groups on Borneo led to fatally violent conflicts, leading to hundreds of brutal killings and tens of thousands of displaced persons. "[Conflict] is a possibility. Even if the government has strong reasons to move the capital," Djakababa remarks. "The friction is there."

In any case, an unplanned influx of people to the bureaucrat-centric new capital is probably an inimical inevitability of this particular development project. "What we have seen so far for decades in Indonesia is the potential for sprawling, for uncontrollable sprawling," Simanjuntak from Greenpeace says. Aside from potential ethnic and socioeconomic reverberations, in Greenpeace's view, "This potential for people—not bureaucrats, but more people—to come into the outskirts of the city could create another chance for environmental degradation."

This, coincidentally, highlights another concern for the new capital: whether or not in its "smart" and "green" flight from Jakarta's eco-ills, the new capital's development will actually and beneficially touch upon its wider environmental context. Other

"eco" and "smart" cities such as Korea's Songdo International Business District and China's Tianjin Eco City have seen criticism from academics and on social media for their inadvertent socially insularizing construction. Just as in the case of Brasília, it was the very same self containment-oriented ground-up planning that has lent a markedly contrived sense of alienation to these still less-than-vibrant cities. Tianjin Eco City has, in particular, been knocked for its use of eco-tech to cocoon itself and its inhabitants in from ambient ecological and polluting ills, rather than facilitating behaviors and lifestyles that would actively mitigate those ills.

## A Pernicious State of Affairs

In Indonesia's case, on top of concerns about the inevitable exacerbation of deforestation and wildlife habitat destruction—including that of endangered orangutans and proboscis monkeys—the energy context of the proposed capital is cause for concern. "The proposed location is surrounded by coal mines," Simanjuntak says. "East Kalimantan is probably the most important, or one of the largest, coal-producing provinces in Indonesia."

The Indonesian state electricity firm, PLN, has previously stated that the new capital would rely on the already-existing regional grid *plus* additional greening of the proposed city's power supply. And it is precisely this interconnection that leads to skepticism concerning the actual energy "greenness" of the proposed capital. "There are quite a few planned coal power plants next to the mines," Simanjuntak continues. "So it would be hard to imagine that this new capital would be solely energized by renewables." Further, lurking governmental interests in energy and status-quo developmentalism hardly appease these misgivings. "There are still enough people in the cabinet who believe that they cannot rely solely on renewables. These are people that are still very close to the fossil fuel industry," he notes.

Corporate interests are influencing both the new capital's development and the tackling of Jakarta's litany of geo-meteorological predicaments—a principal contributing factor to which, it should be noted, is the continuing over-extraction of groundwater due to years of public utility mismanagement and the profit-oriented privatization of Jakarta's water services. Despite the promises of the new capital, there are, in fact, projects aimed at saving the existing one. After all, as Simanjuntak notes, "Jakarta is not impossible to restore. But it needs very strong political will."

One of these projects is an offshore land reclamation-based sea-wall project undertaken with consultation from Dutch firms and the Dutch government. It is meant to reduce the burden of sea level rise-associated flooding on the city. However, a key element of this project includes, unsurprisingly, real-estate developments by private companies.

According to Djakababa, construction has been continuing even through the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being sold as part of the relief plan for Jakarta, these developments are afflicted by the same problems as the rest of the city. "Real-estate projects that are located in this new reclamation area—what I know is that they have problems with suitable water for consumption. For drinking, or even cleaning." He continues, "Some of my students live in those areas and they complain that they have to take showers using mineral water gallons because the water from the faucet is

not suitable even for bathing, you know. The house is like a mansion but the running water quality is just bad. It's kind of ironic."

Ironic and, unfortunately, predictable. The new breath of the proposed capital and the resuscitation of the old one exist in the stale and stifling air of neoliberal development and foreign direct investment-schemes. Those very schemes reinforce neo-colonial power relations between Indonesia and world-minority powers such as Europe and Japan.

As Simanjuntak from Greenpeace explained, a widely-lambasted and mass-protest-inducing 1000-page-long omnibus bill pas-

sed in the dead of night late last year acts as the overarching legal framework that is the basis for the Sovereign Wealth Fund set up to administer FDI that is to comprise 80% of the proposed capital's funding (the Indonesian state itself, in contrast, will only foot about 20% of the bill). In addition to disastrous labor deregulations—including the reduction of severance pay, the cutting of mandatory leave, and allowing longer work hours—the environmental impacts of the bill are severe. "It pretty much dismantles our existing environmental safeguards," Simanjuntak says. "This law enables the government to actually do more harm to the environment, as well as to the people. It's a giant law, but the spirit is to make it as easy as possible for investors to have projects in Indonesia. So that's worrying."

## "Moving the capital to Borneo does not necessarily empower or benefit the people who already live over there, even though that's an aspect that [the government] is promoting."

Yosef Djakababa to  
THE PERSPECTIVE

And, of course, there is one more omnipresent concern: under the shadow of COVID-19, is the proposed capital move even still feasible? "It's not really in the focus," Djakababa says. "It's all about COVID and health issues... The government has problems in managing [the pandemic] effectively. As you know, it's a lot of funding to deal with COVID, so [the capital move] is not really a priority anymore." Still, he acknowledges the fact that this project may overarch the timing-uncertain yet inevitable end to the pandemic: "It is still a possibility that it will become a priority again." Greenpeace's Simanjuntak adds, "The plan is there, but talking about construction, it's now beyond the horizon. We'll have to deal with this pandemic first."

Such are the fantods induced by Indonesia's visions for development. Under close examination, the proposed capital, with its color-shifting "green" promises and convoluted circumstances, seems less sustainable-development and more castle-building. As James Green from Brown University succinctly puts it: "I think people come up with wonderful plans that people think will solve all the problems and then they don't quite work; sometimes they're very rigid in the way that they see development, which doesn't allow for spontaneity or originality or different ways of understanding a city. But on the other hand, what do you do when you need to expand housing... What do you do?"





# ANIMAL TWITTER WARS

## CHINESE WOLF WARRIORS **VS** TAIWANESE CATS

CHINA AND TAIWAN ARE ENGAGING IN A SYMBOLIC “ANIMAL WAR” ON TWITTER AFTER THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC ABANDONED ITS “HIDE YOUR STRENGTH STRATEGY” AND SHIFTED TO AN AMBITIOUS “WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY.” HOW HAS THE CHANGE MANIFESTED, AND WHAT ARE THE TAIWANESE CATS DOING IN RESPONSE TO THE CHINESE WOLVES? WHY DO ANIMALS PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN ALL OF THIS? THE PERSPECTIVE TALKED TO EXPERTS ON CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS.

“Where there is a ‘wolf’, there is a ‘warrior,’” tweeted Liu Xiaoming, former Chinese ambassador to the UK last May in a response to a question about wolf warrior diplomacy posed by China Global Television Network in Europe (CGTN Europe). It was a rather straightforward answer if one looks at it from the Chinese point of view: to each provocation, there will be retaliation.

Meanwhile, the newly appointed Taiwanese de facto ambassador to the US, Hsiao Bikhim, said she would counterattack wolf warriors with her own cat-like diplomacy—soft power. “Happy lunar new year, and stop threatening us,” she tweeted to China in February. The two countries thus engaged in a symbolic animal war—but the rest of the world is involved as well, as China abandoned its “hide your strength strategy” and shifted to wolf warrior diplomacy.

### **What is Wolf Warrior Diplomacy?**

The term “wolf warrior diplomacy evolved” from the Chinese blockbusters “Wolf Warrior” and “Wolf Warrior 2.” In the sequel, which became the highest-grossing Chinese film ever released, the hyper-masculine main character, Leng Feng, saves an unnamed African country by challenging American hegemony on the

continent that has historically been under Western influence. The patriotic movie ends with a picture of a Chinese passport with a message summarizing the moral of the story on it: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China. When you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.”

While the change in Chinese foreign policy can be observed since the beginning of the 21st

## **"Gone are the days of hiding and biding."**

Paul O'Shea to  
THE PERSPECTIVE

century, the term “wolf warrior diplomacy” was popularized by Western journalists only during the last few years. In 2020, it became a buzzword to describe the Chinese response to COVID-related criticism and commentary: after Western countries pointed fingers at Wuhan’s bats and accused the People’s Republic of China (PRC) of mismanagement of COVID-19, the PRC lashed back against the West with their own waves of

propaganda, accusations and unfounded claims.

Among those were a fake picture depicting an Australian soldier killing an Afghan child, various examples of how the virus originated in the US, and propaganda portraying happy Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Yet the former Chinese Ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, explained that the Chinese diplomats—the so-called “wolf warriors”—simply react and set the record straight when there is fake news floating around.

### **Manifestations of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy in Taiwan**

One of the targets for China’s new and more aggressive diplomacy is Taiwan and other countries in the South China Sea. “China suspended all tourism to Taiwan and engages in a high degree of cyber espionage. Formerly, many hotels and airlines would list destinations as Taipei, Taiwan, but nowadays it might say something like Taipei, PRC, suggesting that Taiwan’s capital is actually part of China,” Scott W. Harold, Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation, tells THE PERSPECTIVE. He also notes that there have been efforts to deport Taiwan nationals who are accused of a crime in another country

to China for prosecution.

The scale of the hostile activities towards the island is increasing, especially after the election of the new American president Joe Biden. The signal was delivered when a group of Chinese warplanes simulated an attack on a US aircraft carrier near Taiwan. And in case that was not clear enough, Chinese defense ministry spokesman Wu Qian said that: "Taiwan independence means war." Harold remarks that: "The tension is entirely one-way. Taiwan is not threatening or looking for tension with China; it has grown because Beijing is trying to compel Taiwan to submit to unification on terms set by China."

Taiwan does not have many options on how to react to such quarrelsome behavior. Responding with the same level of intensity could be dangerous, which is why the island uses soft power—cat warrior diplomacy. One example of this would be the release of a new version of Taiwanese passport in January, on which its official name, "Republic of China (ROC)," has been downsized and the words "TAIWAN PASSPORT" in English are emphasized. What could be considered a cat-like move is an attempt to avoid confusion with China amid the pandemic and, as Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen stated on Instagram, "it will also

make the international community more unable to ignore the existence of Taiwan."

### **Unification of Two Different Cultures?**

The unification is nevertheless a sensitive topic—not only politically, but also culturally. A lot of Taiwanese people do not consider themselves Chinese. "Even though my ancestors came from China, I have never felt as Chinese as I was born in Taiwan

## **Twitter, officially banned in China, has become a platform for most of the "wolf warrior attacks."**

and lived here ever since. I feel 100% Taiwanese, and we have different political institutions, history and we share different values than China," says Sunny Peng, a Taiwanese International Relations graduate.

Edmund, who did not wish to disclose his last name for safety reasons, works for a Taiwanese marketing company in Indonesia and thinks that Taiwanese people's identity changes are based

on generation. "My grandpa is from China, so it's natural he identifies himself as Chinese. My parents probably think they are both Taiwanese and Chinese because when they were in school, the educational system ingrained in them that they are Chinese. In my generation, most people regard themselves as Taiwanese only—or both Taiwanese and Chinese," he tells THE PERSPECTIVE, "while I think that Chinese policy towards Taiwan is aggressive as usual and has not changed, we can see that it became aggressive towards other countries. I believe that the most important thing for Taiwan is the assurance from the USA," he adds.

Paul O'Shea from the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University, claims that China's tough stance on Taiwan is indeed nothing new: "The wolf warrior diplomacy has had two effects. One is that it damages China's international reputation, but the second is that it makes clear to everyone: China is not going to back down—they demand respect," explains O'Shea. In his opinion, the Chinese stance does not change much for Taiwan and the biggest change is that Taiwan continues to gain international support, while China's image deteriorates. Yet, China's shift in its foreign policy is noticeable—if





"Panda diplomacy." The practice of sending animals has been very popular in China.

© Shiyang Xu/Unsplash

not to Taiwan, then to the rest of the world.

### A Change of Strategy

China is pushing a new, conquer-the-world narrative—which stands in stark contrast to its former foreign strategy based on the motto “taoguang yanghui,” developed under the former leader Deng Xiaoping. “‘Hide your strength, bide your time and never claim leadership.’ The idea was that China should avoid conflict and focus on development,” adds O’Shea. While Deng himself said that “By no means should China take the lead,” Xi Jinping wants to see China more active in the international arena. During the 2000s, the motto changed to China’s peaceful rise. “Gone are the days of hiding and biding. China’s narrative is that it is undergoing national rejuvenation and now regaining its

rightful place in the world. China should have a major say in global affairs and it now seeks to shape the world in its image,” explains O’Shea.

Twitter, officially banned in China, has become a platform for most of the “wolf warrior attacks” despite the fact that a year ago it had almost no Chinese diplomatic presence. While its tweets are clearly aimed at the foreign audience, it is also signalling its domestic audience. “Chinese Communist Party’s top leadership is signaling that China is being very strong, not showing any weakness. It will not be bullied or doubted in any way by the outside world,” explains Harold.

### The Animal Practice: What Do Furry Friends Have To Do With Politics?

From wolves to cats and other

animals—affiliating certain qualities to certain species has been around for a very long time. Animals are considered sacred in many societies and oftentimes took on prominent roles in oral storytelling since the times of Aesop’s fables.

As animal symbolism is so ingrained in our societies, it is reflected in many fields including politics: from symbols of power or peace to the actual practice of “animal diplomacy,” a term for bringing animals as a gift on a diplomatic visit, a practice that has consequently left Vladimir Putin with four dogs.

The practice of sending animals has been very popular in China. While the term “panda diplomacy” came into play in the Western world only in the 1950s, the first pair of pandas were given by Empress Wu

Zetian to emperor Tenmu in Japan in 685. Giving someone a panda—a cute, clumsy animal—implies that you have only the best intentions, and “panda diplomacy” has been around for almost 1400 years. Yet, in 2005, China offered a gift to Taiwan: a pair of pandas named “Tuan Tuan” and “Yuan Yuan”—names meaning “reunion,” an incident which crossed the Taiwanese government.

The use of animals as symbols is highly popular in Asia: protesters in Thailand wield rubber ducks against violent police and criticize monarchy by holding up pictures of snake-like Voldemort, and Ikea stores in Hong Kong went out of stock after a stuffed toy wolf clutching a grandmother became an anti-government protest symbol.

Does the Taiwanese cat have a fighting chance against the Chinese wolf? Survival of the fittest suggests that the one who fits the environment best also has the greatest chance of surviving. But strength and size are only one part of the equation. Many other factors like cleverness, the ability to cooperate and other unexpected unknowns may come into play. It is hard to predict who will be the winner—and there might not be one.

After all, zero-sum games are hardly ever played in real life—and much less in the delicate world of diplomacy.

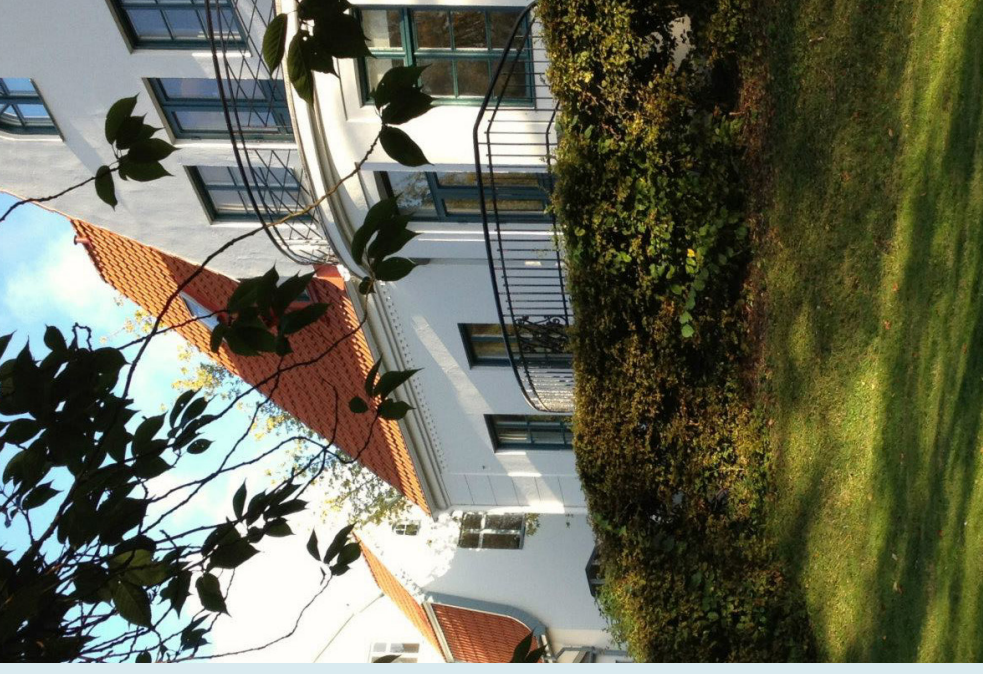
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