Fair Observer

Monthly

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The COVID-19 Crisis Has Catalyzed Vision 2030

Nada Aggour
March 2, 2021

The pandemic has prompted a much-needed agenda revaluation, pushing Saudi leaders to move with a greater sense of urgency toward economic diversification.

A look back at history shows that desperate times do indeed call for desperate measures. After all, it was not until Saudi officials watched in horror as oil prices plummeted by 70% that, in 2016, Vision 2030 was born. While other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members presented their own initiatives, true to form, Saudi Arabia's economic reform agenda is the most ambitious yet. 2020 was set to mark the agenda's first benchmark achievement. Instead, an oil price war, a disastrous bombing campaign against Yemen and a 5.4% contraction in GDP set a different tone than the kingdom may have intended.

The disruption ensued by the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on economies and markets worldwide, but none saw the eye-watering lows experienced by the oil industry. This was exacerbated by Saudi Arabia and Russia going head-to-head in a price war that brought about further carnage. Despite production cuts being eventually agreed upon, the global downturn and persistent oversupply of oil reached its crescendo with US oil dropping spectacularly into negative for the first time in history.

Progress Overview

As the dust began to settle, a sense of urgency set in among leaders as they were faced with the aftermath of the crisis. Not only did COVID-19 highlight the risk of oil dependency, but it has further exposed oil-exporting economies to fiscal vulnerabilities. With growth contractions across the MENA region, the current price of oil is far below the break-even level required to balance the budgets. With the exception of the UAE, oil represents over 50% of GCC budgets, highlighting the urgency to diversify in order to pay off the fiscal bill. While the impact of COVID-19 on Vision 2030 is unclear, an analysis of existing achievements and overall aims can paint a clearer picture of how Saudi Arabia should reassess its grand plan in light of the pandemic.

Only a year after the announcement, it seemed that Vision 2030 was not enough to satiate the Saudi appetite for grandiose ideas. So, in 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the construction of a $500-billion smart city of NEOM. Aside from talk of a fake moon and flying cars, the Saudis managed to hit a more palpable note with investors with the city's $5-billion green hydrogen plant. By 2025, the facility will supposedly produce 650 tons of hydrogen daily and 1.2 million tons of green ammonia for export.

Despite the challenges hydrogen fuel presents, this project offers Saudi Arabia an unparalleled opportunity to pioneer a market gaining "unprecedented political and business momentum," according to the International Energy Agency. Beyond this, while there is little publicly available information on the kingdom's key performance indictor achievements, visible progress has been made in the one thing it does best — state-managed tasks. Notable regulatory reforms in 2018-19 earned Saudi Arabia a spot in the World Bank's top 10 global business-climate improvers.

Strong development has also been observed in capital markets and the banking system, whereby the growth of Tadawul, the Saudi stock exchange, has been the standout achievement. Such praiseworthy steps have also been accompanied by progress in the realm of digitization and social reforms. Yet this is not enough.

While the kingdom is certainly achieving its goal of being an ambitious nation, less can be said for its key pillar — a thriving economy. Job creation, foreign direct investment (FDI), entrepreneurship and private sector growth are all core areas where Saudi Arabia has fallen short. A recent string of PR disasters, like the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and the 2017 high-profile purge that included the arrest of 11 senior princes, have further tainted the kingdom's image, harming investor confidence. At mere 0.57% of GDP, current FDI levels are simply not enough to fund the diversification plan.

Needless to say, the economic challenges spurred by the pandemic will require a tightening of the Saudi purse strings to rein in the growing budget deficit. Such fiscal prudence will inevitably impact the ever-more necessary reform agenda, indicating that a stringent revaluation of the Vision 2030 objectives will be needed to deliver on its promises.

The To-Do List

To lay the foundations of their revised plan, the kingdom must first reprioritize spending and maximize income from existing revenue streams while attracting and retaining investor funding. This will require boosting FDI through greater transparency, accountability and generally better self-conduct on the international stage. In the longer term, focusing on strategically sound, high-impact projects while delaying those with little real-time value will be an integral step in the agenda's revaluation.

Much to Saudi Arabia's dismay, this will mean moving away from the likes of NEOM to the less glamourous task of actual economic reform. Yet if NEOM were not enough, within it there is now The Line — a linear, AI-run city free of carbon, cars and any sense of realism. Regardless of its supposed economic benefits, the fact of the matter remains that problems are not solved through procrastination, even if it costs billions.

Arguably the hardest yet most important step for Saudi Arabia will be to cede state control to make room for a diverse, competitive and independent private sector. The kingdom's strategy of spreading itself thin across all sectors is not only inefficient, but unattractive. A more market-based approach will stimulate entrepreneurship, competition and, most importantly, draw in foreign investment.

This ties into the second key step: optimizing the business environment. This means pushing for greater access to capital, greater ease of doing business and greater stringency and transparency in the legal system, encouraging entrepreneurship both at home and from abroad. The third and most important step is human capital development. In a country where 67% of the population is below the age of 34, disregarding the youth would mean neglecting Saudi's greatest asset.

Quality of education and upskilling the youth must be prioritized alongside creating jobs suited to the existing workforce. The importance of human capital cannot be overstated: In order to create a successful economy that best serves the people, investing in its citizens must be the crux of Vision 2030.

Finally, to reinvent itself as the business hub of the Middle East, the kingdom must rein in its regional military interventions, a massive burden on both its budget and international image. In order to truly convince investors, Saudi must actively channel its efforts away from conflict and toward long-term economic reform.

On the whole, despite some notable achievements, progress is slow, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a long journey ahead. However, COVID-19 has prompted a much-needed agenda revaluation, revealing some shortcuts and pushing Saudi leaders to move with a greater sense of urgency. The Word Bank itself warns that "higher than expected oil and gas revenues could reduce the pressure for [GCC] governments to reform," exemplified in Vision 2030 itself being the result of such a price shock. However, with the eye-watering oil price drops of

2020, COVID-19 may have been the rude awakening Saudi leaders needed.

The challenge now lies in both pioneering change while stimulating an economy in a world experiencing the greatest recession since the Second World War. This, of course, is no easy feat, but the key to success will lie in focusing on projects that truly add value. This will mean ceding control to facilitate private sector growth, optimizing the business environment and committing to its citizens by investing in the youth. Only then can Saudi Arabia unlock its potential and become, as it envisions, the "epicenter of trade and the gateway to the world."

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Can the British Army Modernize Under Pressure?

Sophia Wright
March 3, 2021

As bad luck would have it, the need for expensive new equipment comes at a time when defense budgets are scarce.

Over the past three decades, the British Army has faced numerous challenges. British soldiers have been putting their lives on the line in several intense multilateral deployments, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These operations have enhanced the mechanical wear and tear, necessitating an early replacement of vehicles that were already due to be replaced by newer generations.

As bad luck would have it, the need for expensive new equipment comes at a time when budgets are scarce. In the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, UK defense budget allocations were systematically slashed by governments that considered the expense no longer indispensable. This has led many observers to describe the modern British Army as a shadow of its former self. The entire British Armed Forces shrank by more than 50% percent over the past three decades, dropping from 311,000 to 145,000 personnel.

While the overall budget has increased from £38 billion ($53 billion) to £48 billion, the figure is misleading as it does not take into account rising costs of development or inflation. A more telling indicator is the percentage of GDP dedicated to defense, which dropped from 3.5% to 1.7% between 1990 and 2020. The rhythm of deployments, however, has not slowed, with the UK taking an active part in virtually every NATO operation in the past decades.

But things may be changing. As defense expert Andrew Chuter writes: "The British government has approved the largest rise in its defense budget since the end of the Cold War, with £16.5 billion (U.S. $21.9 billion) in additional funding made available for spending on shipbuilding, space, cyber, research and other sectors over a four-year period." This is welcome news for an institution that can no longer count on European military assistance as it could before Brexit.

Retiring the Heavy Cavalry

In the coming decade, Britain will be waving its Challenger 2 tanks goodbye. Put in service at the end of the 20th century, the Challenger has served proudly in Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was simultaneously its finest hour and the beginning of the end for the heavy tank. During combat, Challengers were repeatedly struck with rocket-propelled grenades and proved exceptionally robust. Throughout the invasion, the tank remained operational despite extreme conditions and performed admirably.

However, it became apparent that the Challenger could only be deployed in certain environments. Challengers were never used in Afghanistan because they could hardly have

operated in the mountainous terrain and because this battlefield was landlocked — two factors that threaten the tanks' very existence. Heavy armor can be moved easily by sea, with difficulty over land and never by air.

The heavy tanks are, therefore, proving increasingly irrelevant as Britain strives to maintain its global presence and capacity. From a strategic setting that pitched two massive conventional military blocs against each other in the plains of Central Europe, the West discovered a post-Cold-War era in which it needed to be able to deploy rapidly to every corner of the world. Heavy weaponry is considerably less relevant today. This type of firepower is not needed in skirmishes and territory control, and its low deployability presents a problem for many operations.

As the UK Ministry of Defense struggles to reorganize budgets, it surprises no one that heavy armor would be the first on the list for the difficult cuts ahead. After several drops in numbers, Harry Lye reports that "The British Army's fleet of Challenger 2 main battle tanks (MBTs) and Warrior Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) could be cut under plans reportedly being drawn up by military chiefs." What will replace British armor if it is effectively mothballed is anyone's guess.

The Artillery

Britain's AS-90s are also getting close to retirement and, for once, this may be good news. The AS-90 is the UK's standard self-propelled artillery — effectively a tank, mounted with an artillery howitzer instead of a direct-fire barrel. Artillery regiments have also seen their fleets diminished, for the same budget reasons, and they are also plagued with the same logistical difficulties as their colleagues in the heavy-armor divisions. While not quite as heavy, AS-90 howitzers are immensely cumbersome due to their armor coating, are nearly impossible to move quickly and will easily be evaded by today's nimble insurgencies.

But Britain is in luck: There is a new type of howitzer on the market that may fix all of the army's problems at once. New truck-mounted howitzers, such as the French Caesar cannon, swap armor for mobility. Their simpler design makes them easily transportable by air and considerably less expensive than their predecessors. The Caesar howitzer is the first of its kind to have successfully passed the test by fire in operational deployments. Magzter reports that "Using the truck's ability to move offers the benefit of being able to have a much lower total system weight particularly if armour protection is either limited to the driver/crew cab area or even eliminated altogether."

China, France, Japan, Sweden and many others all have turned to this design, which has demonstrated good operational results. The Caesar cannon is also one of the few artillery types that are air-transportable. Should Britain acquire such howitzers, it could simultaneously maintain its current stock numbers and reduce its military expenditure — a rare opportunity in military affairs.

The Caesar artillery unit also represents a diplomatic opportunity. The UK was hoping that Brexit would naturally lead to closer ties with the US. This has not transpired — and seems unlikely in the future. Plans for an integrated EU army and low financial contributions from Western European countries have led to American exasperation with its Eastern allies, meaning that US strategies have become, in reaction, increasingly self-sustained and self-centered over the years. Building reinforced interoperability with the French and enhancing the capacity among European nations for rapid deployment is a practical and achievable way to rebuild international ties.

The Boxer Gamble

And then, of course, there was the Boxer, the now-infamous infantry fighting vehicle which, despite its critical role on the battlefield, was purchased under the worst possible conditions. While the protection of infantry soldiers receives

priority, now that new threats are about, it is unclear why London would allow fair competition for the tender to be scrapped.

Soldiers commonly need to take the threat of improvised explosive devices or drones into account — something that hardly existed in the 20th century. But, given how drastically the battlefield has changed in the past few decades, defense analysts were astounded that the British Army would throw as fundamental a quality prerequisite as a tender out of the window. By a simple decision, the UK bought the Boxer off the shelf, hoping that it would somehow be adapted to modern threats. Andrew Chuter covered the matter, indicating that 500 Boxers would be ordered — without competition — from the defense contractor Artec at a cost of £4.4 billion, to be delivered in 2023.

The price tag includes 10 years of technical support. This entails that in case the Boxer reveals itself ill-suited to current-day operations, the UK troops will be stuck with it for at least a decade. Hasty and unverified spending is certainly unwelcome in times of financial strain. But what is done is done. The British Army will presumably not be overturning this decision, and we can hope the Boxer performs well.

Some of the choices facing the British Army will not make commanders' hair turn gray beyond reason. If new cannons come at a lower cost, the army can stay within its budgetary envelope and maintain, or even increase, its fleet. Other choices, such as deciding whether to shelve the cavalry, will be more of a strategic gamble. Indeed, Britain may have little need for heavy tanks now, but who knows if it will need them again? One thing is sure, however: Buying the Boxer blindfolded was a huge, almost irresponsible risk in a time of budgetary constraints. Let's hope future choices will be made with more discernment.

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Pastoral Nomads in North Africa Consider In-Place Farming

Jacqueline Skalski-Fouts
March 3, 2021

Recent trends reveal that pastoralists in the Maghreb region are turning to sedentary farming practices like agroforestry as nomadic herding becomes more difficult.

North African pastoralism, an agricultural method used for centuries by nomadic people in the steppe highlands, is on the decline. Facing limited grazing land due to overuse and drought, pastoral nomads are favoring more sedentary farming methods like growing fruit or nut trees and crops.

Developmental nonprofits in the area have begun working with communities facing scarce economic prospects in the face of "extreme" climate events like drought, which occur in Morocco every two years. The High Atlas Foundation (HAF), working in part with Farmer-to-Farmer, a USAID program, creates tree nurseries in areas of the lower mountain regions. Some communities from the higher pasturelands have voiced their interest in these projects. This follows a trend within the past two decades of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists seeking out additional or alternative forms of agriculture.

Since 2004, the number of nomads in the Maghreb region has declined by more than 60%. As of 2014, only 25,300 remain. Morocco is home to one of the largest regions of pastoral rangelands in the Maghreb. These rangelands make up about 40% of land territory, or 20 million hectares, in Morocco and Algeria. In Morocco, the majority of nomadic pastoralists range in the western coastal plains. Their pasturelands include the Rif and Tell mountains, where altitudes for some summer pastures reach 3,000 meters above sea level. There, the air is dry and the pressure is lower, limiting the kind of

agriculture the area can sustain. Along these routes, pastoralists herd camels, sheep and goats, producing mutton and valuable products like wool (to be used for local handicraft) and manure, an alternative for chemical-based fertilizer.

Pastoralism is a process engrained in Moroccan history and heritage. Up until the last century, semi-nomadic pastoralists occupied the Middle Atlas regions, traveling with herds during the grazing season and growing crops like cereal for domestic consumption. Herders still use indigenous breeds and veterinary medicine developed over centuries.

Yet some pastoralist communities are beginning to favor more sedentary farming methods. Part of the reason is the rising cost and devaluing of mutton as a main source of meat, now associated with being unhealthy due to its high cholesterol content. However, the Moroccan ministry of agriculture suggests the reason is that pastoralists are suffering from the degradation of rangelands, which makes it difficult to maintain a livelihood.

Overuse Degrades Pasturelands

Moroccan pastoralism is changing for a wide range of reasons. Viable grazing lands are affected by the amount of rain per season, availability of shrubs for grazing and regional politics or poverty — all of which are subject to change. The main factors that make pastoralism difficult for many, and may be a reason for some to switch to sedentary farming, include shifting social values, environmental change and rising population in both urban and rural areas. But the most pressing issue for pastoralists is land degradation.

Many typically point to overgrazing as a reason for the degradation of pastoral rangelands. This is often blamed on pastoralists themselves, whose herds graze away the vegetation. Yet varying rainfall, especially in arid climates, leads to periods of drought, and the shrubs that typically cover the steppe lands are not as plentiful.

Rangelands in the Maghreb region lose 1,557 hectares a year to drought and degradation, and in nearly three decades, more than 8.3 million hectares of land have been "severely degraded." This is one of the reasons there has been a recent movement of pastoral nomads traveling northward, particularly toward the Souss region in Morocco. But this kind of movement leads to regional conflicts like land disputes and tension, especially in the Souss region that is home to a large population of Amazigh people, who must now compete with newcomers for land and natural resources.

Overuse, rather than overgrazing, more accurately explains the desiccation of pastoral land. Overuse, or human-induced degradation, comes from improper agricultural practices like plowing with heavy machines and over-irrigation, soil erosion by deforestation and, to some extent, overgrazing. Agricultural researchers have suggested that overuse, coupled with a growing rural population and a difficult climate, wears away the land, so pastoralists must either move to more viable pasturelands or build themselves an economic cushion by engaging in irrigation farming and growing crops, fruit or nut trees.

Land formerly used for pastoral purposes is being converted to sedentary farming areas. Fruit and nut trees provide diverse incomes as grass for herding becomes harder to find. Land used for forestry and herding has declined by 21% since the early 1980s, while agricultural land used for non-forestry and non-pastoral purposes has increased by 7.7%.

At the same time, as more people move to cities, rural areas face low population densities. Modernization policies have tended to favor farming expansions and development in areas with higher populations, leaving pastoralist societies — far from city centers — to be politically marginalized. This has reduced their access to certain services, such as privatized veterinary services, which makes it difficult for herders to afford veterinary care.

A Semi-Nomadic Majority

Many pastoralists in the region, in part a result of changing social norms and development in the region, are only semi-nomadic and will likely stay so. This means they may have both farmlands and herds, which they send off with a herder for the grazing season. As advancements in education expand access to rural areas, pastoral families value sending their children to schools for a more formal education, which requires them to stay in one place. Yet despite shifting trends and smaller numbers, pastoral systems will remain important as the population grows and demand for meat rises.

As rural life changes, development must also change, so it is important to work with rather than against existing shifts. The High Atlas Foundation works with communities to address these agricultural changes by taking a participatory approach to development. HAF takes note of communities that are looking to grow fruit, nut or medicinal plants, thereby determining trends and producing a plan for the community to approve for implementation.

This process has taken root as HAF's House of Life program, through which 12 nurseries have been built around Morocco. Trees are planted every January where they grow for two years, contributing around 30,000 trees annually to be donated to local farmers and schools as a way to reduce environmental damage and improve local livelihoods. As communities continue to mark their interest in sedentary farming, projects like this face new levels of expansion.

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The Complex Role of Racism Within the Radical Right

Mario Peucker
March 4, 2021

Measures aimed at tackling racism are important tools for promoting community cohesion, belonging and safety.

Several political parties and governments around the world have centered their commitment to countering the radical right on tackling hate and racism. The most recent example was the announcement by the German cabinet in late 2020 to spend €1 billion ($1.2 billion) for a four-year program on combating "right-wing extremism, racism and antisemitism."

There is no doubt that such political agendas are well intended, and most citizens would agree that racism is not consistent with their society's democratic values. As US President Joe Biden put it in his inaugural speech, two weeks after the deadly storming of the US Capitol Building on January 6: "Our history has been a constant struggle between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart. The battle is perennial."

Tackling racism deserves firm political commitment in its own right, and it certainly has a place within a multi-pronged strategy to countering violent extremism (CVE) on the radical right. But is there a tendency to overestimate the efficacy of anti-racism initiatives at the expense of other prevention and intervention measures within the CVE space?

Related to this, what role does racism play within the radical right? While it is widely acknowledged that there is no unanimously agreed definition of right-wing extremism or radicalism, most experts in the field consider racism to be a very common feature or, at the

very least, one of the "accompanying characteristics" of right-wing extremism. This centrality of racism seems to have led many into thinking that tackling racist hate is a particularly effective way of countering right-wing extremism.

What Kind of Racism?

Decades of extensive scholarship — and the lived experiences of those affected — have emphasized that racism is systemic and interpersonal; it is attitudinal, behavioral and structural; and it can draw on biological social constructs and on cultural or religious markers, actual or perceived. At least one (or many) manifestation of racism is present across all radical–right groups. But what kind of racism?

The diversity of radical–right movements and groups is well understood in academia, and there have been numerous attempts to develop typologies that capture divergent groups under the umbrella of right-wing extremism. Exclusivist and anti-egalitarian beliefs are a common denominator, but articulations of racism differ across various radical right groups, movements and ideologies. These nuances are important but often overlooked in public and political debates.

Some elements of the radical right, for example, mobilize in particular against Islam, expressing primarily anti-Muslim racism. This applies to what is often referred to as "counter-jihad" movements (a self-attributed and ideologized misnomer in many ways) and the anti-Islam protests that swept across Europe and Australia in the second half of 2010s. Non-white people are usually welcome there as long as they share anti-Islam sentiments. For example, in Australia, where most of my research has taken place, it was also not uncommon to see radical-right protesters at these rallies displaying Aboriginal flags and insisting they were reclaiming Australia from Islam also on behalf of indigenous Australians.

These anti-Islam groups and movements differ from white supremacy organizations. For example, one Australian white supremacy group expressed its disagreement with those prominent anti-Islam movements as thus: "We do not believe in multiculturalism minus Islam." Of course, these boundaries are blurry. There have been personal overlaps, and some radical–right groups with explicitly neo-Nazi convictions have strategically used the anti-Muslim movements to recruit more people to their white supremacy and antisemitic agenda.

Another example that illustrates the complex, fluid and sometimes contested role that different forms of racism play within the radical right are the Proud Boys in the United States. Founded as a self-described Western chauvinistic boys club by Gavin McInnes in 2016 with an explicit, culturally racist and misogynistic profile, the group quickly adopted the markers of a white supremacist network, despite its chairman, Enrique Tarrio, being himself of Afro-Cuban descent. Infighting between Tarrio and another openly antisemitic and white supremacist leading figure (who reportedly referred to Tarrio as a "token negro") in late 2020 revealed the internal fractions — all racist, yes, but racist in different ways.

An Indicator of Radical-Right Ideology

While people associated with or sympathetic to radical–right movements generally seem to hold racist views, the majority of those with such exclusionary or prejudiced attitudes toward certain ethnic, racial, cultural or religious minorities are not affiliated with right-wing extremism or radicalism. Attitude surveys across the Western world — from North America, the UK and Europe to Australia — have shown high rates of anti-Muslim sentiments and prejudice, expressed sometimes (depending on the country and the nature of the survey questions) by a majority of the surveyed population. Some surveys revealed that a substantial proportion of respondents also express biological racist views. According to the results of the European Social Survey a few years ago, 18% in the British sample agreed that "some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent." Considering the

possibility of social desirability effects, we can only speculate as to whether this figure underestimates the true prevalence of biological racism.

It is impossible to determine how many of those who hold anti-Muslim or other racist views are affiliated or identify with the radical right — certainly not all of them and probably only a small portion. This is not to disregard the higher susceptibility among these segments of society to mobilization and recruitment efforts of radical–right groups. The path into the radical right is slippery. A former radical–right activist, Ivan Humble, recalled how he became a member of the English Defence League: "I didn't identify as racist at the time, but I began to zero in on Muslim people in the belief that they were attacking the country I lived in, and that our society was being torn apart as a result. In hindsight, this was such a blinkered view but I couldn't see it."

In our recent research in Australia, we identified several factors that may help analyze the questions as to where and when racism becomes an indicator for radical–right ideologies. We conducted in-depth interviews with people who were invited to speak with us about the concerns they had about diversity and immigration in Australia. We found that most of those we interviewed expressed anti-Muslim racism and other forms of cultural racism, but our analysis concluded that only some of them were affiliated with the radical right. In what way did their articulation of racism differ?

1. Racism as Part of a Larger Meta-Narrative

Our analysis suggests that it is important to understand if, and how, racism is functionally embedded in a larger meta-narrative. Among those on the radical right, racism was not "only" an exclusivist personal attitude but part of an ideological system, built on conspiratorial thinking about a secretive global elite seeking to destroy Australian society and culture. They agitated against ethnic or religious minorities, but they often did so with a bigger enemy in mind, which they accused of pushing immigration and multiculturalism to pursue an evil agenda.

This is also illustrated in a speech by a central figure of Australia's radical right addressing a public demonstration in early 2019, where he insisted that immigrants and blacks were not the main problem. The real enemies were, according to him, "those who bring these people into our country."

Another soon-to-be-published CRIS study by Victoria University and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that the radical right in Australia extensively used the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests for their online mobilization, but, notwithstanding prevalent expressions of racism, a salient argument was that black BLM activists both in the US and Australia were only "useful idiots," controlled by an alleged communist or Jewish (or both) cabal for their sinister goals.

2. Racism and Political Activism

The second factor that can help identify how racism spills over into radical–right ideologies is related to individuals' willingness to act upon their attitudes. This addresses important aspects of the behavioral dimension of racism (and of radical–right movements).

Some in our fieldwork who have displayed racist attitudes expressed no desire to make these feelings public or try to convince others. Rather the opposite was the case: They deliberately avoid conversations about these issues — at least with those they expect may disagree with — and they explicitly denied being politically active. In contrast, those we considered to be associated with the radical right stated they were on a mission to "educate" others — for example, on social media — and they had been actively involved in a range of public rallies. They proudly accepted the label of being a "political activist."

3. Language and "Collective Identity"

The third factor that may help assess to what extent someone's racist expressions may be an indicator for a radical–right affiliation relates to

the language and symbols used. Certain expressions such as "race traitor" or "white genocide," and symbols such as 1488 or the use of (((triple brackets))) to indicate alleged Jewishness, are popular within segments of far-right discourses and point to what researchers Pete Simi and Steven Windisch call "identity talk": "a discursive practice to demonstrate that an individual's identity is consistent with the perceived collective identity of the movement."

The meaning and political message of symbols and terms can change over time: On the one hand, previously neutral symbols are coopted by parts of the radical right (e.g., Pepe the Frog or the "OK" hand signal reappropriated to represent white power), and on the other hand, terms that used to be characteristic for the radical right (e.g., New World Order, Social Justice Warrior) have become mainstream and lost their distinctiveness.

Countering the Radical Right by Tackling Racism

What does all this mean for countering the radical right? As mentioned above, measures aimed at tackling racism are important tools for promoting community cohesion, belonging and safety, and they can also play a role in reducing the pool of people who may be more susceptible to far-right mobilization. As such, anti-racism strategies form a vital part of what has come to be known as preventing violent extremism (PVE).

As an intervention tool within countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies, however, the potential efficacy of anti-racism approaches seems overrated. Racism may be a salient or "accompanying characteristic" of radical–right movements. While it may contribute to someone's pathway toward becoming actively involved in the radical–right milieu, the relationship between racism and engagement with the radical right is often better described in terms of correlation than causation.

If CVE programs intend to address the root causes of why people sympathize and engage with the radical right, they need to look further and beyond racism. Primarily focusing on ideological factors and trying to convince people that racism is "bad" is insufficient, even if complemented by legislative, security and law enforcement intervention. This is because such "corrections" can often lead to further negative backfire effects.

It is therefore widely acknowledged among CVE scholars and practitioners that countering the radical right requires multifaceted and targeted programs tackling psychological, social and, ultimately, societal questions around personal grievances and people's desire for purpose, respect and connectedness. When designing CVE interventions with the radical right in mind, it often requires holding back with moral judgments and showing empathy to those who have dehumanized others in order to further stem the harms posed by such activism.

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What's Behind Chile's Vaccination Success?

Lenin Cavalcanti Guerra
March 5, 2021

With 20% of its population inoculated, Chile is in the top five globally and far ahead of its neighbors when it comes to vaccination rates.

The deadly impact of COVID-19 has been felt in every corner of the globe. On February 22, the United States reached a tragic landmark of 500,000 deaths. Across the Atlantic, nine of the top 10 nations in deaths per million are in Europe, with tiny enclaves of Gibraltar and San Marino topping the tables. The

list of countries that have dealt with the pandemic relatively well is much shorter. Almost a year ago, I wrote about how leaders in Brazil and Mexico were slow in taking tougher action to prevent the spread of the virus. I falsely predicted that Latin America is unlikely to witness the death rates seen in Europe. Unfortunately, the effects of the pandemic were equally devastating in the region, if not worse.

Images of mass graves in the Amazonian town of Manaus and the dead bodies left in coffins in the streets of Guayaquil, Ecuador, have spread worldwide. More than 260,000 Brazilians and nearly 190,000 Mexicans died because of the virus, placing the two countries second and third in absolute numbers of fatalities. Peru registered 1,421 deaths per million and Panama 1,352 on March 4 — numbers that show the devastation caused by the virus in the region so far. Chile has also experienced a significant death rate of 1,084 per million.

The big difference in Chile was that authorities mobilized in advance to secure vaccines, hedging bets on various suppliers in different stages of development. In September last year, President Sebastian Pinera announced the purchase of 10 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Deliveries commenced on December 24, making Chile the first Latin American nation to start its vaccination program. The country has ordered some 90 million doses, more than enough to immunize its 19 million citizens. By March 4, more than 20% of its population received at least one shot, placing Chile fifth in the world when it comes to vaccination rates, just behind Israel, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Political Conflict

On December 29, Argentinians started to receive the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. The pace of immunization in Argentina has been much slower than expected, with several complaints of those not in priority groups receiving the jab before health workers and the elderly. The "VIP vaccination" scandal has caused the resignation of the health minister, drawing protesters onto the streets and generating criticism against President Alberto Fernandez. So far, Argentina has vaccinated only 2.61% of its 45 million citizens. The slower pace seems to be standard in the region, with most nations unable to vaccinate even 1% of their citizens. The cause is not only the shortage of vaccines but lack of planning and, more significantly, internal political conflict.

In Brazil, president Jair Bolsonaro has made several statements that undermined efforts to slow the pandemic. In a national broadcast on March 24, 2020, he criticized the restrictive measures adopted by governors and mayors, urging people to return to work and referring to COVID-19 as a "little flu." The president also highly publicized the unproven anti-malarian drug chloroquine as being effective against the virus, ordering the Ministry of Health to produce four million doses. His insistence on the use of the drug caused the loss of two health ministers, Dr. Henrique Mandetta, fired by Bolsonaro last April, and Dr. Nelson Teich, who resigned less than a month after taking over. Since then, the position has been filled by an army general specializing in logistics, with neither medical education nor experience.

Over the course of the pandemic, Bolsonaro has been exchanging public barbs with the state governments, such as over lockdown measures adopted by individual governors last month. On March 1, 16 of the country's 26 governors, including three Bolsonaro allies, signed a letter criticizing the government and accusing the president of misleading the public about federal pandemic relief funds. Sao Paulo's governor, Joao Doria, a former ally in the 2018 elections and a potential competitor in 2022, has been the president's most vociferous antagonist over the handling of the pandemic.

At the center of the dispute is the Butantan Institute, one of the most prestigious health centers in Latin America, situated in the state of Sao Paolo. Back in June, Butantan signed a partnership with the Chinese laboratory Sinovac

Biotech to produce the CoronaVac vaccine. Initially, Bolsonaro has signaled that Brazil would not purchase the Chinese vaccine, questioning its efficiency, but in January, the Ministry of Health added the vaccine to the national immunization plan following approval by the health regulator, Anvisa. Last month, Doria announced a deal for a further 20 million doses of CoronaVac to complement the 100 million already secured by Butantan.

Last August, Pfizer said it offered 70 million batches of its vaccine to Brazil, with a delivery scheduled for December. However, with Brazil dissatisfied with the terms of the contract, the deal is still being negotiated. Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello hopes to secure 100 million doses from Pfizer and 38 million from a pharmaceutical subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, Janssen, to start deliveries in May and August respectively. Due to this lack of urgency and an absence of a unified policy between the federal and state governments, Brazil has so far vaccinated just 3,67% of its population.

Crisis Management

Chile has also faced political unrest. Since 2019, the country experienced several mass protests calling for education and pension reforms. In a televised address, President Pinera declared a state of emergency, granting powers to restrain freedom of movement and assembly. The measure resulted in violence that cost 18 lives in five days, leading the UN to examine possible human rights abuses. As a result, Pinera's approval rating fell to just 7%. In 2020, amid the ongoing political crisis, COVID-19 hit the country hard, provoking the resignation of the health minister, Jaime Manalich.

However, Pinera managed to turn the situation around. With a degree in commercial engineering from the Catholic University of Chile and a PhD in economics from Harvard, the president is a billionaire businessman, with an estimated net worth of $2,9 billion. He has already led the country once, between 2010 and 2014, earning crucial government nous. Pinera made several concessions to the protesters and supported the calls for a new constitution in an attempt to turn down the political temperature.

A referendum on October 25 saw 78% of the population approve a new constitution that will substitute the current one created in 1980 under General Augusto Pinochet. The new Magna Carta will be written by a 155-strong body also elected through a popular vote and with an equal number of men and women. The document will then be confirmed by a popular vote before being implemented.

To assuage popular discontent caused by the initial handling of the pandemic in combination with other historical grievances relating to health care, education and pensions, Pinera focused his negotiation abilities to mediate the purchase of million doses of vaccine from different laboratories and suppliers. While most developing nations have been struggling with a lack of supplies, Chile is among the top three countries, along with Canada and the UK, when it comes to the number of doses ordered per capita. Back in September, just before the peak of protests, Pinera announced partnerships on the development and clinical trials between the Catholic University of Chile and Sinovac; the University of Chile, Janssen/Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca; as well as the University of Frontera and another Chinese laboratory, CanSino Biologics. More than that, purchases were agreed with Pfizer, Covax, Sinovac and AstraZeneca.

But despite perceived goodwill from an unpopular right-wing government, the president still faces an uphill climb when it comes to popularity. By March 1, 83% of the Chileans deemed the massive vaccination as good or very good, 58% asses the general management of the pandemic as positive, but Pinera's personal approval is still only at 24%.

The successful vaccination has already yielded positive outcomes. According to Chile's Health Ministry, the number of new COVID-19 cases has decreased in six of the country's 16 regions in the last seven days and in eight the last 14

days. Chile hopes to vaccinate at least 15 million people in the first semester, which would allow the country to immunize its entire population by the end of June. These numbers would put Chile way ahead in the vaccination game not only in Latin America but worldwide, suggesting that resolute leadership is as important for the nation's well-being as a robust medical system.

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Press Freedom in the Philippines: Death by a Thousand Cuts

Christianne France Collantes
March 11, 20

Legal battles and continuous friction between the Duterte administration and the media sustain fears over the erosion of press freedom in the Philippines.

In less than two years, the editor-in-chief and CEO of the independent news site Rappler, Maria Ressa, has been issued 10 arrest warrants. The latest accusations against her involve tax evasion and failure to file accurate tax returns, which she testified against on March 4, 2021, before the Court of Tax Appeals. In addition, Ressa faces numerous other charges, including illegal foreign ownership of Rappler Holdings Corporation — the Philippine Constitution restricts foreign ownership of mass media in the country, subject to congressional regulation. The charges amount to 100 years of prison time if she is found guilty. This latest flurry of persecution is a continuum of the country's troubling history of suppressing press freedom.

The most high-profile case against Ressa, who is Filipino-American, concluded last year when she was found guilty of cyber libel. After an eight-month trial, Ressa, alongside Rappler journalist Reynaldo Santos Jr., was handed the verdict by the Manila Regional Trial Court on June 15. Ressa denied the charges, and both were released on bail pending appeal. However, they face up to six years in prison unless all appeals are rejected. The case against Ressa and Santos involves the latter's article published in 2012 by Rappler, which made allegations of businessman Wilfredo Keng's ties to then-Philippine Chief Justice Renato Corona. Santos' article also alleged Keng's involvement in illicit activities that include drug and human trafficking.

Based on information published locally by the Philippine Star in 2002 and an intelligence report by the National Security Council, Santos's piece was published approximately four months before the Cybercrime Prevention Law came into effect in 2012. Its republication in 2014 due to a correction of a typo allowed for the court to give its guilty verdict to Ressa and Santos Jr. retroactively. The case has garnered attention and criticism from local and international media communities. Ressa herself claims the verdict and the numerous charges against her and Rappler are politically motivated. In her statement to the BBC, Ressa lamented, "I think what you're seeing is death by a thousand cuts — not just of press freedom but of democracy."

A Dangerous Place

Since his election in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs has drawn criticism both nationally and abroad. According to The Guardian, tens of thousands of deaths in the Philippines are estimated to be the result of extrajudicial killings prompted by the president's anti-drug crackdown. Rappler has been at the forefront of extensive coverage and criticism of the campaign. The correlation between Rappler's reporting and the number of charges against Ressa has fueled the narrative of intimidation

tactics by the Philippine government against the free press.

The Philippines has a long history of suppressing various forms of free speech and political activism. The current wave of persecution carries echoes of the martial law years during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s 1980s, when journalists and activists were arrested and interrogated by the military and a media lockdown was implemented as newspapers and radio stations were ordered shut.

In more recent years, hundreds of farmers, trade union leaders, activists and environmentalists have been targeted by the Philippine government. According to a report by the UN Human Rights Office, at least 248 activists have been killed in the Philippines between 2015 and 2019. While Maria Ressa's high-profile case has regenerated national and global outrage, it is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how treacherous an environment not only the media, but human and democratic rights defenders have to navigate in the country.

The Philippines ranks 136 out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. After the 2009 massacre of 32 journalists in Maguindanao province ordered by a local warlord, RSF has regularly deemed the country as one of the most dangerous places in Asia for journalists. Adding insight to Maria Ressa's criminal libel case, the organization noted that "Private militias, often hired by local politicians, silence journalists with complete impunity." Freedom of the press is guaranteed under the country's constitution, yet in 2018, the Philippine Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility tallied 85 attacks on the media by the Duterte administration, including death threats, killings and attempted murder.

President Duterte's public remarks against the media also contribute to the grim state of press freedom in the country. In 2016, the president stated: "Just because you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you're a son of a bitch. Freedom of expression cannot help you if you have done something wrong." In 2018, responding to a Rappler reporter, Duterte was captured saying, "you have been throwing trash… If you are trying to throw garbage at us, then the least that we can do is explain how about you? Are you also clean?"

The Cybercrime Prevention Law, which was used to convict Ressa, has itself been criticized by the public as having the potential to further threaten freedom of speech and expression. Signed into law by then-President Benigno Aquino III on September 12, 2012, the legislation was primarily established to address crimes such as hacking, identity theft, child pornography and cybersex. Its additional provisions caused worry amongst the public for expanding its legal parameters to include any libelous speech or statements made by citizens on their private social media accounts. Senator Tito Sotto, who at the time was being attacked on social media for alleged plagiarism, is noted for suggesting the inclusion of the libel provision in the law. According to GMA News Online, "There were fears that even retweeting an offensive comment could land one in jail."

Since the implementation, the law has been cited to charge journalists other than Ressa for cyber libel, including Ramon Tulfo and RJ Nieto. Prior to Ressa's verdict, Councilor Archie Yongco, from the province of Zamboanga del Sur, was found guilty of cyber libel in March 2020 based on a scathing Facebook post against a rival politician. Although he deleted his post just minutes after its publication, screenshots of his comments were used as evidence in the case. Yongco faces up to eight years of imprisonment and is the first individual to be given a guilty verdict under the Cybercrime Prevention Law.

A Series of Threats

The guilty verdict against Maria Ressa and Reynaldo Santos Jr. was compounded by a series of legislative threats against the media in 2020. On July 10, the House Committee on Legislative Franchises voted against renewing the franchise

license for the broadcasting network ABS-CBN. Ressa, commenting on the closure of the broadcaster, stated: "what happened to ABS-CBN can happen to all of us. Journalists, we have to hold power to account.… We need to continue to demand accountability."

Shortly after the closure of ABS-CBN, there were public concerns over the introduction of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 that came into effect on July 18. The act allows the state to arrest and imprison suspects without a warrant. The alarm among citizens came from the act's expanded definition of terrorism that broadly includes "engaging in acts intended to endanger a person's life" and causing damage to public property. Similar to the provisions of the Cybercrime Prevention Law, the new legislation poses threats to users on social media who express political sentiments or dissent. In this case, however, fears are not related to being accused of libel but of so-called red-tagging — the practice of targeting or blacklisting suspected members of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army, both of which have been declared as terrorist organizations by the government.

The legislation, compounded by the Duterte administration's worrisome human rights record, incited widespread fears of the decline of freedom of speech and expression. Social media users who criticize the government also voiced concern over the act, especially since the head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Lieutenant General Gilbert Gapay, expressed interest in including social media in the ambit of the law. Local and international press freedom advocates have filed petitions with the Supreme Court in Manila to reject the legislation, calling it unconstitutional.

After nearly a year of grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic downturn caused by lockdown measures, the Philippines continues to navigate numerous challenges. Maria Ressa's and Rappler's legal battles, as well as the continuous frictions between the Duterte administration and the media, exacerbate fears over the erosion of democratic rights and press freedom during these uncertain times.

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Germany's Handling of the Pandemic: A Model of Incompetence?

Hans-Georg Betz
March 15, 2021

In this super election year, Germany's ruling party faces public discontent over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is an unwritten rule in politics: If you are incompetent, at least you should not be corrupt. It seems nobody ever informed the German Christian Democrats that this was the way of things. How else to explain why Christian Democratic MPs thought it was perfectly fine to take advantage of Germany's COVID-19 crisis to line their own pockets? In German, we have a word, "Raffzahn," to refer to somebody who cannot get enough, never satisfied with what they have. In the concrete case, a member of the German Bundestag from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) pocketed €250,000 ($298,000) in commissions for brokering a deal involving the procurement of FFP2 face masks by the federal and the state governments.

Another member, who so happened to serve as deputy leader of the Christian Democratic parliamentary group, this time from the Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU's Bavarian sister party, appears to have made similar deals. Both were exposed and were ultimately forced to resign from the parliamentary group and leave their parties. End of the story, or so the Christian

Democrats hoped. But this Maskenaffäre (masks affair) continued to provoke strong emotions. In the process, it not only severely damaged the CDU/CSU's image, but also caused a significant loss of trust in the party.

The mask affair is not the only scandal that has haunted the party. Another controversy has been smoldering for some time now, involving dubious business relations between CDU MPs and the quasi-dictatorial regime of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's strongman. A few days ago, one of the MPs involved in the affair relinquished his mandate. Two other MPs are being investigated by the public prosecutor's office in Munich on charges of corruption. Apparently, payments were made to the MPs in exchange for their keeping quiet about the dismal human rights record of the regime in Baku. Pecunia non olet, as they used to say in ancient Rome — money does not stink — not even in the offices of the Christian Democrats.

A Super Election Year

Unfortunately, this year is what in German is known as a Superwahljahr — a super election year. In September, Germans are called upon to elect a new federal parliament. In the meantime, a number of Germany's Länder, the regional administrative units that constitute the federation, will elect their regional governments. The process started with elections in two southwestern regions, Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz, over the weekend. With a population of more than 11 million, Baden-Württemberg is the more important state; Rheinland-Pfalz's population amounts to a mere 4 million.

In addition, Baden-Württemberg used to be a CDU stronghold. In the 1970s, the party routinely scored more than 50% of the vote, with a high point in the 1976 state election which saw the CDU gain over 56%. From then on, things started to go downhill. In the first election in the new century, the CDU still commanded roughly 45% of the vote; by 2016, it reached rock bottom, at 27%. It could not get any worse, or so it seemed. It did. The latest pre-election polls had the CDU at 24% of the vote. On Sunday, the party lost roughly 3% compared to the previous election, which left it with roughly what the polls had anticipated.

The situation in Rheinland-Pfalz was similar. In the 1970s, the CDU gained on average around 50% of the vote. By the new century, its support stood at 35%; 15 years later, at 32%. Pre-election polls had the party at around 29%, with a downward tendency. And fall it did: With a loss of around 4% of the vote, it scored a historic low. At the same time, in both Länder, the radical populist-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) returned to parliament, even if significantly decimated. It should also be noted that a large number of people in both states voted by mail, in many cases weeks before the election and before the disastrous masks scandal. Otherwise, the CDU losses would probably have been even greater. Hardly surprising, the dominant issue in these elections was COVID-19 or, more precisely, the government's handling of the pandemic, particularly after the second wave hit the country in late fall.

By now, the judgment is in, and it is devastating on many accounts. You know that something has gone terribly wrong when those who used to admire you, such as the British, now express either derision or, worse, pity; or when Germany's leading news magazine Der Spiegel feels the need to ask why the United States — once jeered for its lack of preparedness during the Trump administration — "is so much better when it comes to vaccinating."

A recent account of vaccination data collected and put online by Germany's leading public television channel, ARD, proves the point. Germany is far, far behind countries such as Israel, Great Britain, the United States, Chile, Hungary and even Greece — the country Germans love to denigrate as mismanaged and corrupt. At the beginning of March, merely 3% of the population had received the vaccine in Germany, and this despite the fact that the first

vaccine to be certified was a German co-production.

Appearance vs. Reality

The pandemic has brutally exposed the fundamental difference between appearance and reality. For long, Germany has promoted itself as a model to follow — the famed "Modell Deutschland" — or at least was promoted by outsiders as such. The perhaps most prominent promoter was Michel Albert, the former head of the French General Commission for the Modernization and Equipment Plan. In his 1991 book, "Capitalisme contre capitalisme" ("Capitalism Against Capitalism"), he postulated the superiority of "Rhenish capitalism" over the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. The book was translated into several languages and proved highly influential. One wonders whether Albert's analysis would be the same today. I somehow doubt it.

Central to progress in any kind of capitalist system is innovation, what the prophet of innovation, Joseph Schumpeter, famously characterized as "creative destruction." New technologies and particularly digitalization have advanced with dramatic speed over the past two decades, making innovation absolutely crucial for a country's competitiveness. This is a painful lesson Germany has been forced to learn as the pandemic progressed. As an article in the country's leading business newspaper, Handelsblatt, warned last year, Germany was falling farther and farther behind with respect to innovation. Among the reasons are, most prominently, a dearth of top research, high-tech investments and, last but not least, openness to the world. For Germany to regain its competitive edge, the author charged, politics had to wake up from its Dornröschenschlaf (Sleeping Beauty's slumber) and provide necessary measures.

A year later, politics has still not completely woken up; or, perhaps, it has woken up but is fundamentally incapable of addressing the myriad of problems and challenges it confronts. Examples abound, some tragic, others bordering on the ridiculous and the grotesque. Take the case of inoculations. The program started a couple of weeks ago. It progressed at a snail's pace. In the face of massive public attempts to secure an appointment, the server crashed and phone hotlines were overwhelmed for hours on end. In the meantime, letters designed to inform the over 80-year-olds could not be sent, among other things because authorities lacked the necessary information regarding age. As a result, in some cases, authorities guessed the age of potential recipients on the basis of their first names. Adolf and Adolfine — a sure bet the person is eligible for priority vaccination.

Take the case of COVID-19 tests as another example. Bavaria introduced them in the late summer of 2020, with suboptimal results, to put it kindly. Test results were supposed to be delivered within 48 hours. In reality, it took up to a week, the result of a technical glitch at the private server provider in charge of the tests. The experiment turned out to be a major debacle, with doctors having to cancel appointments and health authorities going incommunicado. In the new year, German authorities once again took up the question of testing in a lengthy debate that took several weeks. Finally, in early March, Germany's health minister from the CDU, Jens Spahn, announced that the government had ordered hundreds of millions of test kits. Critics were quick to point out that Germany lacked the capacity to carry out the tests.

In an earlier article on Angela Merkel's legacy (she leaves office in September), I have suggested that her place in history will be judged by the way she handles the pandemic. By now, it is apparent that the chancellor's COVID-19 crisis management has been nothing short of disastrous. In early February, Merkel conceded mistakes but insisted that on the whole, the government's cautious and hesitant approach had been justified. The fact is — and German media have pointed it out on numerous occasions — that many of the problems linked to the pandemic are the result of years of neglect during Merkel's mandate, particularly when it comes to Germany's digital

infrastructure. Compared to other countries in the European Union, Germany is a "digital developing country," an assessment recently made by the Boston Consulting Group and widely commented on in the media. In fact, it seems that over the past decade or so, Germany has fallen even more behind other countries, such as Estonia.

The pandemic has brutally exposed to what degree Germany was lagging behind its main competitors — at least five to 10 years, as one observer asserted last year. The impact is felt every day in offices, labs and particularly schools. Last year, an EU education report noted that in 2017-18, only 9% of Germany's elementary students had access to a digitally well-equipped school. Once the pandemic forced schools to shut down and go online, the consequences of Germany's digital divide became glaringly obvious, to the detriment of the youngest generation.

Don't Expect Too Much

It is becoming increasingly clear that Angela Merkel's time in office has been characterized by a degree of Panglossian complacency combined with a cautious and hesitant don't-rock-the-boat mentality that left the country largely unprepared to deal with this pandemic in an efficient, effective and competent way. The most recent example is who gets to be part of the vaccination program. While family doctors and general practitioners have strongly expressed their desire to be part of the roll-out, the government continued to prefer public vaccination centers, thus ignoring viable options to accelerate the pace of immunization.

It was only after protracted negotiations between the federal government and the Länder that an agreement was reached to open the vaccination campaign to private practices starting in mid-April. At the same time, Spahn, himself heavily criticized for the test kit disaster, dampened expectations given the bottlenecks in the procurement of vaccines. As the health minister put it, "One has to be a bit cautious with regard to the management of expectations." In other words, don't expect too much — a perfect characterization of the government's dealing with the pandemic over the past several months.

The result has been growing popular discontent. In early March, a large majority of respondents in a representative poll expressed dissatisfaction with the organization of the vaccination campaign, the supply of testing kits and the way the vaccines were procured. At the same time, in a second poll, almost half of respondents said they were dissatisfied with the work the Christian Democrats did in government (a bit more than 40% said they were satisfied). And as a result of the Maskenaffäre, trust in the Christian Democrats has plunged to record lows.

In German, we have the word, "richtungsweisend" — pointing to a direction or setting the trend. Ulli Hoeness, the iconic former president of Germany's most successful soccer club, Bayern München, once proclaimed that "the trend is your friend." This might be true for Germany's premier soccer club, but it is certainly not true of the Christian Democrats. The results of the two elections last weekend portend ills for the federal vote later this year.

They also do not bode well for the reputation of Angela Merkel, who is likely to be remembered primarily for her (mis)handling of the coronavirus crisis, for failing to halt or reverse the Christian Democrats' downward spiral at the polls and, last but not least, for being incapable of preventing the AfD from establishing itself in Germany's party system. As the good book says, "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" (Daniel 5:27).

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Why the US Return to the WHO Matters

Andreas Rechkemmer
March 18, 2021

The return of the US to the World Health Organization is vital in tackling the coronavirus pandemic.

In compliance with major statements made repeatedly during his electoral campaign, US President Joe Biden, on his first day in office on January 20, signed two important executive orders — among 15 others, a record number — signaling the United States' return to the international arena, to global cooperation and multilateralism. One of these orders was for the United States to rejoin the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, and the other was to reestablish the country's full membership and support to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Both acts were hugely symbolic, especially since they occurred within hours of Biden's inauguration, as they set a fundamentally new tone in US foreign policy and sent a strong signal to the world, paraphrased as: We are back, count on us. But other than being symbolic, these acts constitute a material and substantial backing of global efforts to address two of the 21st century's most severe world crises — the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change — under the aegis of the United Nations.

When the Trump administration announced in July 2020, in the middle of the most devastating pandemic in at least a century, that the US would withdraw from the WHO — having already frozen payments of mandatory membership dues and thereby violating international law months earlier — that move was widely regarded as not only hugely counterproductive but as outright insane.

The World Needs the US as Well

Clearly, the country hit hardest by the pandemic — both in terms of total infections and deaths — is better off as a member of the very global community that ensures the fast sharing of research, data and best practices, coordinates responses, and comes together to devise evidence-based solutions to the world's most pressing public health issues, be it malaria, tuberculosis, HIV or COVID-19. But the international community needs the US as well.

In fact, the US has been the single most important independent variable in international relations and global affairs since President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signing of the Declaration of the United Nations on January 1, 1942. Hence, a WHO without the active participation and support of the US government is unthinkable. This engagement extends well beyond funding. Since its inception in 1948, the US has been the single largest contributor to the WHO — which budgeted $4.84 billion for the biennium 2020-21, not including COVID-19-related expenses — with a steady share of 22% of the organization's assessed core budget and significant additional voluntary contributions made every single year.

Yet the active support of medical research data, analysis, know-how, logistics, supplies and people power to the WHO's multifold programs and emergency operations by the US, such as during the West African Ebola crisis of 2013-15, is priceless and virtually irreplaceable. Indeed, a great sense of relief was voiced in unison by scientists, senior government officials and UN leaders alike when the Biden administration applied common sense and restored the United States' bond with the WHO on the day of its inception. This step will have an immediately relevant and measurable impact on the global response to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

With the unfreezing of previously withheld payments and the allocation of additional, fresh sums of money targeted at global health emergency relief efforts, research and

development, and the provision of supplies and teams, the global fight against COVID-19 will experience an important boost. This will be particularly important in the context of WHO's COVAX initiative, which is a historic, unprecedented fundraising effort to make effective and safe vaccines available to all countries, especially developing ones. Moreover, COVAX entails a proprietary vaccine development program, including the building of manufacturing capabilities, and provides technical and logistical support to countries in need.

COVAX Initiative

The new US administration has quickly become COVAX's largest funder and pledged to donate surplus vaccine stocks in addition to its financial contributions. Also, efforts to assist developing countries by deploying on-the-ground technical assistance where needed are underway.

However, COVAX still has a long way to go to meet its goal of buying supply so that 2 billion doses can be fairly and equitably distributed by the end of 2021. To date, financial support by OECD countries to the facility has been lukewarm at best, although the US and Germany stand out. The apparent lack of solidarity and tangible support by wealthy nations is disappointing and recently prompted UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to call global vaccine distribution "wildly uneven and unfair," describing the goal of providing vaccines to all as "the biggest moral test before the global community."

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic with its rapidly-emerging mutations and variants, quick, unequivocal and substantial support — both financial and technical — to developing countries and those behind in getting access to effective vaccines is not only a moral obligation for developed countries, but also a mere matter of rationality and self-interest.

As long as over 100 countries globally have not even received a single dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, even the most ambitious and aggressive vaccine rollout campaigns in wealthy countries may be in vain as new variants of SARS-CoV-2 can emerge and cause new viral strains at any time. The Biden administration, along with other governments, is well advised to massively support multilateral solutions and collective action. It is the only reasonable, promising approach to tackling the world's biggest crises in the 21st century.

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The ICC Has Stepped on a Political Minefield in Palestine

Hassan Shad
March 24, 2021

The ICC inquiry into alleged war crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian Territories will be undermined by the US and Israel.

The rapidly-evolving geopolitical equation in the Middle East just got another layer of complexity added to it. Earlier this month, Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), announced the launch of an investigation into alleged war crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian Territories since 2014. The prosecutor's decision, important no less from an international accountability perspective, may end up putting the ICC in the crosshairs of regional politics.

The ICC, which tries individuals rather than countries, is the world's first-ever permanent court with jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and the crime of aggression. The court's decision has come in the

wake of important developments in the Middle East. These include the US potentially rejoining the Iran nuclear deal; the much-vaunted Abraham Accords signed by Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in 2020; the Saudi-led war in Yemen that continues with no end in sight; and Iran's engagement in proxy warfare in the region. The ICC's intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — one of the most complex international disputes — has added a new ingredient to an already simmering stew.

During its early years, the ICC — created through the Rome Statute in 1998 — largely focused on atrocity crimes in Africa. The court was criticized for what was perceived as a bias toward that continent. Recently, the ICC has greenlighted investigations into alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

But with no military force to enforce its decisions, the ICC has, over the years, meandered through terrain beset with political uncertainty. It has faced off against belligerent administrations and received relentless pushback from world leaders caught in the crosshairs of its legal processes. With 123 countries accepting jurisdiction to date, but with major powers like the US, Russia and China not a party to the Rome Statute of the ICC, the court has been called out as lacking wider international legitimacy.

Yet, the ICC is trying to fix a broken international criminal justice system, albeit in a manner that does not necessarily bode well for its own future. With pronouncements such as the one in respect of the situation in Palestine, the ICC could end up stirring a hornet's nest or, at best, catapult some fleeting global attention to the neglected Palestinian crisis.

The US Response

The Biden administration's response to the ICC investigation came as a surprise to internationalists, who were hoping for some pivoting of the rules-based international order vociferously eroded by the US under former President Donald Trump. These hopes were dashed when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken unequivocally opposed the ICC's decision to investigate the Palestinian situation. He based the US decision on two overarching principles: First, Israel is a non-party to the ICC and second, Palestine (which has accepted the ICC's jurisdiction) is not a sovereign state and is therefore "not qualified to obtain membership as a state."

This line of reasoning is deeply problematic. It strikes at the very heart of the ICC's jurisdiction, which extends to the territory and nationals of state parties to the court. By virtue of Palestine accepting the ICC's jurisdiction in 2015, all alleged crimes committed in the Palestinian Territories by the Israel Defense Forces and Hamas — the militant Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip — theoretically fall within the ICC's jurisdiction. Bringing Israel within its jurisdiction was the main reason behind the Palestinian Authority's decision to make Palestine a state party to the ICC.

Secretary Blinken's statement calls the decision to investigate Israel unfair. It also confirms the US commitment to stand for Israel's security. This is a veiled warning to the ICC that it will not get far with its inquiry. After all, an ICC investigation will require Israel's cooperation and US neutrality. With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outrageously calling the ICC move "pure anti-Semitism," the fate of the investigation has been effectively sealed before it even started.

International Criminal Justice

In other words, the ICC inquiry — notwithstanding all the braggadocio of international accountability — will be undermined by the deep-rooted security embrace between the US and Israel. The ICC prosecutor said the investigation in the occupied Palestinian Territories will be conducted "independently, impartially and objectively, without fear or favor." Yet, by wantonly brandishing the ICC as a political instrument — something that it is not — the US and Israel will surely launch an all-out

effort to delegitimize the international criminal justice enterprise.

Blinken also warned that unilateral judicial actions by the ICC can "exacerbate tensions and undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution." The portrayal of the ICC as an impediment to a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be a gnawing concern for the international community.

Will Israel now weaponize the ICC investigation to deny Palestinian statehood while claiming that the court is impeding efforts toward that end? With the edifice of international justice having been eviscerated by the Trump administration, coupled with the US and Israel now renewing their vow against the ICC, the future of criminal justice in the occupied Palestinian Territories appears bleak. The slowly churning wheel of international criminal justice, manifested by the ICC, just got another spoke thrown in it that may well end up permanently jamming it.

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Bangladesh Celebrates 50 Years of Independence

Atul Singh & Priyajit Debsarkar
March 25, 2021

In 2021, Bangladesh is celebrating liberation, remembering genocide and moving closer to India.

On March 26, Bangladesh will be celebrating the golden jubilee of its freedom. Few outside South Asia remember that Bangladesh was once part of Pakistan. From 1947 to 1971, modern-day Pakistan was West Pakistan and Bangladesh was East Pakistan. They were both incongruously part of the same new country even though they were more than 2,200 kilometers apart.

A Tortured Past

Soon after Pakistan's creation in 1947, the east was subjected to discrimination and repression. East Pakistanis demanded the recognition of Bengali as an official language. Their western brethren rejected that demand. In March 1948, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, visited the eastern part of the country for the first time and emphatically declared that "the state language of Pakistan [was] going to be Urdu and no other language, and anyone who [tried] to mislead [them] was really the enemy of Pakistan."

Jinnah's view that Pakistan would not remain unified without a single national language did not take into account East Pakistani aspirations. Protests broke out in Dhaka, the capital of modern-day Bangladesh, and the situation remained volatile till 1952. That year, the constituent assembly declared Urdu to be Pakistan's national language. This caused students in Dhaka to protest and clash with security forces. Hundreds were injured and five died during the clashes. Today, the United Nations marks February 21, the day of the Dhaka killings, as International Mother Language Day.

For the next two decades, West Pakistan continued to oppress East Pakistan. It became the dominant of the two halves of the country. Its military was dominated by Punjabis and Pashtuns. Its bureaucracy was staffed by muhajirs, the Urdu-speaking refugees who had fled west from India. Bangladeshis found themselves increasingly marginalized in the power structures of the new state. Jinnah's two-nation theory assumed all Muslims were equal in a new Islamic nation. Instead, in this new state, taller and fairer Muslims were more equal than shorter and darker Muslims.

West Pakistan continued the British policy of economic exploitation of East Pakistan. Between

1947 and 1970, only 25% of industrial investment and 30% of imports went to East Pakistan, which provided 59% of the exports. West Pakistan gorged on the meat, leaving only bones for East Pakistan. West Pakistanis did so because they saw their eastern brethren as culturally and ethnically inferior. East Pakistanis seethed but could do little against a state controlled by an ever more powerful military.

On November 11, 1970, a major cyclone hit East Pakistan. With winds over 240 kilometers per hour, it left 500,000 people dead and 2.5 million homeless. West Pakistan responded slowly and poorly. As little relief trickled in, resentment grew. Things came to a head in the 1970 elections. Many parties divided the vote share in West Pakistan. In contrast, the Awami League, led by East Pakistani leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a resounding victory in the national election. He had campaigned on the plank of Bengali autonomy. This was unacceptable to General Yahya Khan, the president of Pakistan, who instituted martial law. Protests erupted in East Pakistan. Emulating Mahatma Gandhi, Rahman called for a civil disobedience movement on March 7, 1971.

Campaign of Terror

Khan and Rahman met from March 16 to 24 but failed to come to an agreement. On the night of March 25, Rahman was arrested and Khan launched Operation Searchlight to restore the writ of the federal government. In reality, it was what the BBC has called a "campaign of terror." Members of the Awami League, members of the intelligentsia, the Hindu minority comprising 20% of the population in East Pakistan and other perceived opponents of the West Pakistani regime were mercilessly killed.

Troops indulged in "kill and burn missions," pogroms and mass rape. About 200,000 to 400,000 women and girls were raped. Anthony Mascarenhas, a courageous Pakistani reporter from a small community of Goan Christians in Karachi, broke the news to the world. On June 13, 1971, The Sunday Times published his story titled, "Genocide." Mascarenhas was not far off the mark. This story captured global attention. George Harrison, the lead guitarist of the Beatles, along with Indian classical music maestro Ravi Shankar and other friends, organized a concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden on August 1.

Not only journalists and artists but also intelligence officials and diplomats became increasingly disturbed about West Pakistani actions in East Pakistan. Archer Blood, the US consul-general in Dhaka, sent a telegram to Washington that has since come to be known as the "Blood Telegram," the subject of a multiple award-winning book. He accused his superiors of failing to prevent genocide. In his view, US President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger supported a military regime in West Pakistan that was crushing democracy and slaughtering innocent people. The two hated Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi whom they saw as a strong Soviet ally and who had termed West Pakistani brutality a "genocide" as early as March 31, 1971. Nixon and Kissinger labeled Blood "the maniac in Dhaka," recalled him to Washington and continued to back its Cold War ally in complete disregard of its wanton use of violence.

West Pakistani brutality triggered "the largest single displacement of refugees in the second half of the 20th century." An estimated 10 million East Pakistanis sought refuge in India, forcing the country to intervene. Initially, India backed Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi guerrilla resistance movement. Then, it prepared for war. When West Pakistani aerial strikes hit 11 air bases in India on December 3, 1971, Indian troops invaded East Pakistan. On December 16, Dhaka fell and 93,000 West Pakistani troops surrendered. With the war over, Bangladesh was born.

Different Memories

The 1971 war has left different memories in the three countries of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, the war itself is seen as

one of liberation, though different parties spin the narrative to suit themselves. Rahman's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, is prime minister, a position she has occupied since 2009. For India, the war is often regarded as the nation's finest moment. It liberated David from Goliath and won its greatest military victory. In Pakistan, the war is airbrushed out of history, but its military elite has never forgotten its humiliating defeat. It embarked on using asymmetric warfare by using state-sponsored terrorism against its bigger neighbor, India. Pakistan has also sought to cultivate strategic depth by dominating Afghanistan to counter New Delhi.

In contrast to Pakistan, Bangladesh retains a close bond with India. Both countries share many commonalities. Both nations have settled their border disputes peacefully by signing the historic 2015 Land Boundary Agreement. India transferred 111 enclaves comprising 17,160.63 acres to Bangladesh, while the latter transferred 51 enclaves comprising 7,110.02 acres to India. Residents of these enclaves were offered citizenship of either country and, though it is early days yet, the agreement has held up remarkably well.

Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia. India has given away millions of COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh for free. South and Southeast Asian nations, including Pakistan, have also benefited from India's generosity that has been termed "vaccine diplomacy" in many circles.

This diplomacy has worked exceptionally well with Bangladesh. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to be the guest of honor on March 26, Bangladesh's national day. In his first overseas visit since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Modi will visit Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's memorial, two historic temples and sign a deal or two. It almost seems that this golden jubilee is rekindling an old love affair.

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