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Fair Observer Monthly



June 2021

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Anna Pivovarchuk (Co-Founder & Deputy Managing Editor)

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

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Can Dyslexia Be an Asset?

John Manzella
June 4, 2021

The advantages of dyslexia are extensive, but they often are not seized if the dyslexic student does not have access to quality special educational services.

I'm a nationally syndicated columnist, author of several books and a speaker on global business, labor and economic trends. I'm also a beneficiary, not a victim, of dyslexia, a learning disability characterized by reading, writing and decoding difficulties. Why do I say beneficiary? Read on.

As a child, I experienced the difficulties of dyslexia firsthand. Growing up, I often felt dumb, lacked confidence and had low self-esteem. I couldn't read until much later than my classmates, albeit slowly, and continue to have difficulties with math. When paying bills, for example, I still say each number out loud, highlight each digit and review it several times before I hit send on my laptop.

To this day, I still have stomach aches weekday mornings Monday through Friday, but not Saturday or Sunday. This was caused by the anxiety I felt waiting for the school bus and knowing that when I arrived at school, I would not be able to complete tasks, somehow embarrass myself and feel stupid.

Before the Christmas vacation in first grade, I recall being very excited hearing bells ringing in the hallway. Our teacher told us it was Santa's elves putting candy in our boots. We all darted out of the classroom into the hallway. I was shocked to find sticks in my boots. Was I a bad kid? My teacher, not being familiar with dyslexia, probably thought I was lazy.

Needless to say, I failed first grade. However, I was fortunate to repeat it at a nearby school that had an excellent special education teacher. Her

instruction, along with support from my family and friends, helped me cope, build much-needed confidence and self-esteem. My father repeatedly told me that I could achieve anything I wanted if I was willing to work hard. He also told me that if it took me twice as long as other students to complete my homework or study for tests, that's what I had to do.

Other dyslexics are not as fortunate as I was and don't have the educational assistance, emotional support or encouragement I received as a child. Consequently, it's estimated — and is no surprise — that dyslexics include over 30% of high school dropouts, 50% of all adolescents involved in drug and alcohol rehabilitation and nearly half of all those incarcerated in the United States.

The brains of dyslexics are wired differently. On the upside, dyslexics think outside the box in a non-linear way, in pictures, not words. Research indicates dyslexics are highly creative, insightful and intuitive, and are able to identify complex patterns much more easily than the average person. I credit this characteristic, which I identify as big-picture thinking, for my ability to connect the dots in seemingly unrelated economic trends and other factors.

In the United States, it's estimated that dyslexics, who may represent as much as 10% to 20% of the population, comprise approximately 35% of entrepreneurs, 40% of all self-made millionaires, and 50% of rocket scientists at NASA. Dyslexia is so common at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it's called "the MIT disease." Interestingly, years ago, the American Astronomical Society noted that astrophysicists with dyslexia at times outperformed their non-dyslexic colleagues in identifying the distinctive characteristics of black holes.

Many of the world's most famous and successful people are dyslexics. This reportedly includes Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Leonardo DaVinci, Bill Gates, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, Walt Disney, Henry

Ford, Steven Spielberg, Steve Jobs, Richard Branson, and Charles Schwab. Their genius didn't occur in spite of dyslexia but, more likely, because of it.

In addition to its advantages, dyslexics also often learn to cope with difficulties and deal with failure, which is part of any successful process. I suspect many of my early achievements were motivated by my need to prove I wasn't a failure.

The advantages of dyslexia are extensive, but they often remain untapped if dyslexic students don't have access to quality special education services. Although mandated by US federal law, students don't always get an adequate individualized education plan or the help they need.

According to Annual Performance Reports from the US Department of Education, the cost of schooling a child receiving a special education can be more than twice the average. Since poorer school districts are not as well financed as wealthier ones, and teachers are not always sufficiently trained, many children with dyslexia fall through the cracks, as the numbers above make obvious. This needs to change.

Just as important, the advantages of dyslexia will not be obtained if the child has a negative attitude or a poor opinion of themselves. I'm reminded of the wise words from Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't ... you're right."

***John Manzella** is a world-recognized speaker, author of several books, and a nationally syndicated columnist on global business, trade policy, labor, capitalism, and the latest economic trends. His views have appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Bloomberg, NPR and many other publications in the US and across the globe.

Growing LGBTI+ Hate Shows the UN's Need to Adapt

James Jennion

June 9, 2021

The persecution of LGBTI+ people is tragically under-acknowledged by the multilateral system.

Since February, security forces have arrested at least 24 people in Cameroon for alleged same-sex conduct or gender nonconformity. In Uzbekistan, videos showing the abuse, humiliation and beatings of gay men have been circulated around social media groups. In Poland, the government's ongoing campaign against LGBTI+ people continues, with proposed legal changes to prevent same-sex couples from adopting children.

The continuing persecution of LGBTI+ people is tragically under-acknowledged by the multilateral system. A failure to use the United Nations as a platform to raise these issues is a failure to understand one of its core purposes. There are no rights explicitly related to sexuality or gender identity codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1 of the declaration accounts for factors such as language, religion and nationality, but relegates sexual and gender identity to "other status."

Those who oppose LGBTI+ rights still have room to use the excuse that such rights are not fundamental, not universal or are beholden to regional and local interpretation.

Oppressive States

Free & Equal, the UN's flagship campaign for promoting LGBTI+ rights, is a welcome step for the cause, using influential artists and activists as champions. Likewise, the 2017 standards of conduct for businesses on tackling discrimination against LGBTI+ people provides more resources for countering discrimination at the

organizational level. The appointment of Victor Madrigal-Borloz as the UN's independent expert on these issues was also a commendable move, in that it made LGBTI+ rights somebody's job.

While they do show support, none of these steps do anything to modernize the fundamental architecture of the UN system. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently signed a series of constitutional amendments to introduce a formal ban on same-sex marriage, showing that LGBTI+ hate is entrenched even in permanent member states of the Security Council, the UN's most powerful branch. Campaigns and guidance may change some behavior, but they do not embed LGBTI+ rights into the UN's cornerstone principles and agreements, meaning these rights still lack basic parity of esteem with other human rights.

The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission (OHCHR) argues that a specific set of LGBTI+ rights is unnecessary. Yet their absence leaves space for oppressive states to claim that they are less important or more fundamental than other rights. A campaign to introduce and ratify a set of specific rights safeguarding all aspects of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics should be a priority for all countries. Doing so would send a strong message of solidarity to those LGBTI+ people living in repressive societies.

The Yogyakarta Principles offer a ready-made framework for codifying rules protecting sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) into universal rights frameworks. A coalition of states publicly declaring its support for the principles would pile on the pressure at the UN, as would pushing for General Assembly votes for their adoption.

There are currently 10 UN human rights treaty bodies, overseeing the protection of rights in areas including disability and migrant status. There is no treaty body safeguarding the rights of LGBTI+ people. Calls for the introduction and ratification of a new treaty providing safeguards for sexuality and gender identity would send a

powerful message of support throughout the multilateral system.

National Level

Alongside multilateral action, countries should be stepping up their game at the national level. Having robust policies on support for LGBTI+ rights would bolster countries' credibility and authority when pushing for reform at the UN level. For instance, Germany recently announced comprehensive new measures for the promotion of LGBTI+ rights abroad.

Other states would do well to follow suit, providing comprehensive diplomatic training on LGBTI+ issues so that in-country staff can better understand the challenges and potential remedies around LGBTI+ persecution. Shoring up embassies' commitment to offer support and protection for those facing persecution will also send a strong message to host governments that LGBTI+ discrimination will not be tolerated anywhere.

Those countries with strong track records of support for LGBTI+ rights should also be working harder through existing UN mechanisms. More action should be taken through existing UN fora. The UN General Assembly's Third Committee and Human Rights Council sessions should be regular venues for raising these issues.

Here, sustained diplomatic and reputational pressure should be applied to countries that continue to persecute people based on their sexuality and/or gender identity at an institutional level. Using these venues to declare the many and varied forms of LGBTI+ persecution as a global crisis would demonstrate solidarity to those facing persecution and send a strong message of resolve to those perpetrating it.

The resistance of certain states to particular rights is not a reason to believe that some types of discrimination are unavoidable. It is imperative to speak louder. More liberal countries that advocate for these rights should use every avenue to translate their vocal support into action, leading to tangible and long-lasting reforms at the

UN and state levels. The current lackluster approach is a shame to all countries that purport to support equality for LGBTI+ people. They must do better.

***James Jennion** is a foreign policy analyst and adviser based in the UK. He is the 2021 human rights fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.

How the Radical Right Bullied Professors in 1920s Austria

Roland Clark
June 10, 2021

In the 1920s, university leaders in Austria proved willing to sacrifice academic standards and the jobs and physical safety of their staff in order to placate violent bullies.

As universities across the United Kingdom scramble to use the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to sack unwanted lecturers and professors, it becomes increasingly urgent to remember the history of labor organizing in higher education. What has and hasn't worked in the past?

The University and College Union is currently fighting job cuts and the closure of courses, departments and even entire campuses at 16 universities across the country, including the universities of Chester, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Portsmouth and Sheffield. Teaching has finished for the year in most places, so the strikes, boycotts and protests are relying primarily on the assumption that it is possible to shame university managers into upholding long-cherished norms about the intrinsic value of education. In several cases, the cuts are a response to the UK government's decision to reduce funding to the Performing and Creative

Arts, Media Studies and Archaeology by half. The wave of redundancies is seen as evidence that many university leaders value profit and political expediency more than research and education.

Whether a strategy of petitions and public shaming will work remains to be seen, but the way that universities responded to political and economic pressure during the crisis of postwar reconstruction does not bode well for the unions. In 1920s Austria, university leaders proved willing to sacrifice academic standards and the jobs and physical safety of their staff in order to placate violent bullies on the radical right.

Austria in the 1920s

Austrian universities struggled to stay open during World War I, welcoming women and refugees as students and offering "war degrees" for soldiers who could take crash courses and simplified exams while on leave from the front. Once the war was over, students flooded back to campuses, many of them veterans who had been forced to postpone their studies during the war. Whereas before the war students had come from across the Habsburg Empire, now that the empire had collapsed, university admissions officers privileged students who were citizens of the new Austrian Republic.

A reforming, left-wing government in Vienna tried to reorganize the education system and bring institutions of higher education under the control of the Ministry of Education. Outside of Vienna, in particular, many university leaders resisted centralizing efforts in the hope that the republic would collapse and be absorbed into a greater German nation-state. As old power structures crumbled and new, ethnically-based democracies were established across the region, right-wing students attempted to take advantage of the upheaval to impose their agendas on universities.

Antisemitic riots and violence against Jewish students plagued universities in at least 11 European countries during the early 1920s, as students demanded that Jews be banned from

attending universities and that Jewish or left-wing professors be expelled. Students targeted individual professors, including celebrated scientists such as Albert Einstein and Julius Tandler, disturbing their lectures and vandalizing laboratories. Despite condemning the violence, in the vast majority of cases, university leaders made concessions to the students by preventing Jews from sitting their exams and, in some cases, even introducing strict quotas on the number of Jews allowed to enroll.

Alfons Leon

The case of Professor Alfons Leon at the Technical University in Graz is particularly instructive. An acclaimed researcher in technical mechanics with a host of accolades to his name, Leon was dean of the School of Civil Engineering for three years. His state-of-the-art laboratory was the envy of his colleagues.

But, in 1922, he insisted that students who were war veterans sit rigorous exams when some of the other professors had been willing to let them pass without having studied the material. Leon was a known socialist and the disgruntled students began sending him threats and complaining about him to the university. The students were members of the same right-wing fraternities that were responsible for the antisemitic riots. That November, they challenged one of Leon's teaching assistants to a duel. As the duel was clearly directed at Leon himself, he refused to allow his assistant to fight, which the students took as an insult to the honor system that fraternity life was based on.

Rather than support their professor, the university leadership launched an inquiry into Leon's alleged misconduct and forced him to take a leave of absence. The investigation lasted 10 years, with Leon making skillful use of the university's established rules and procedures to keep his job and insist that he had done nothing wrong.

In the process, it became apparent that several of his senior colleagues supported the students because they were alumni of the same fraternities

that were persecuting Leon. Professor Fritz Postuvanschitz, in particular, led the attack on Leon because he had refused to fabricate evidence that would have helped Postuvanschitz's son escape being convicted of fraud. Other senior figures in the university sided with the students because they sympathized with their right-wing politics and disliked Leon as a graduate of Viennese universities they saw as their rivals. Eventually, Leon was forced into early retirement, but only after the collapse of democracy in Austria and the rise of an Austrofascist government.

Lessons for Today

Leon's story teaches several lessons that are still relevant today. First, it reminds us that universities are eminently political places, where personal ambitions, petty jealousies and party politics frequently matter more than credentials or upholding academic standards. Second, it reveals how easily university managers are manipulated by student violence, especially when those students are supported by influential voices in the community. Third, it shows that it is indeed possible to resist managerial bullying by appealing to labor laws and following established procedures, even though doing so might be exhausting, detrimental to one's health and, ultimately, futile. But fourth, and most importantly, it shows that even when one occupies the high moral ground, it is often impossible to shame university administrators when they cherish political power and entrenched interests over what they claim to be the values of their institutions.

For those lecturers fighting for their jobs today, Leon offers hope that resistance is possible, but also a warning that exposing management's cupidity and disrespect for academic values might not be enough.

***Roland Clark** is a historian of fascism, anti-Semitism and religion in modern Eastern Europe.

Why Do So Many Athletes Have Mental Health Issues?

Ellis Cashmore
June 16, 2021

What were once seen as vulnerabilities or deficiencies are now regarded in a similar way to an anterior cruciate ligament injury: fixable.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche didn't have the afflictions of athletes in mind when he wrote, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger," though many athletes who have surfaced from depression actually appear to be fortified by the ordeal. Others suffer, often in silence, and never fully recover.

We don't know how Naomi Osaka, the world number 2, will react to "the long bouts of depression" she has experienced since 2018. The Japanese tennis player was a 20-year-old when they started. She is now 23 and faces something of a crossroads, having withdrawn from both the French Open and, more recently, the WTA German Open. She now has to decide whether to enter Wimbledon, which starts on June 28.

Osaka may storm back powerfully, bursting with confidence and fresh resolve, as Nietzsche would have predicted. She could also recede into obscurity, like another young tennis player, Andrea Jaeger, who was ranked number 2 at the age of 16 and looked set for superstardom, but retired at 19 in 1986, a victim of what was then called "burnout." Now, we have a more sophisticated understanding of why some professional athletes, particularly young ones, suffer inwardly: anxiety, stress and depression that affect the rest of the population may be more prevalent in sports.

Athletes operate in a risk-riven, competitive environment that deliberately cultivates aims, targets and achievable goals. Reaching goals is

rewarding, but falling short can be devastating. Even a single defeat can be ruinous. There is also a ceaseless series of expectations. Literally everyone, from the people who serve in the canteen to journalists who report to the media, harbors expectations. In themselves, expectations have no potency, but the manner in which competitors assimilate and respond to them is crucial. Some athletes thrive, while others wither. Responding to the expectations of others is the mainspring of depression. Yet, sometimes, the condition seems unrelated to athletic performance and is barely intelligible.

Robert Enke

The case that alerted the world to the problem of mental illness in sport was that of 32-year-old Robert Enke, one of Germany's leading football stars. Widely tipped to be the number-1 goalkeeper in the national squad for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, Enke walked onto the tracks in front of an oncoming train in 2009. The football world was stunned: why? After all, he was an affluent, young sports celebrity with a chance of winning one of the most coveted prizes in sport.

Enke's wife, Teresa, revealed that he had been tormented with depression for years. He tried to hide his mental condition, fearful it might damage his professional career. Worse, he thought it might cause authorities to take away his 8-month-old daughter, whom he and his wife had adopted earlier in 2009. The couple lost their 2-year-old daughter through a rare heart condition in 2006.

As a youth, the precociously proficient Enke was often required to play in teams with older players and his father, Dirk, told how his son grew anxious. "There were always crises back then because he was scared that he would not be able to keep up with the older ones ... He did not have faith in himself," Dirk said in 2009. Of course, most top athletes do have faith in themselves. They are usually self-confident and often ebullient. Or at least they appear to be. Enke probably did too. Like other athletes, he learned to conceal his apprehension.

Medicalizing Mental Illness

Athletes are coached to do this: If they can't hide their emotions, they won't last long in sports. This should make us wonder not why there is so much mental illness in sports, but why there is so little. In the 20th century, mental illness carried a stigma, especially in sports. But we've now transmuted what was once seen as a weakness into an illness, much like physical ailments. The process is known as medicalization: We treat mental illness as we would diseases. Whether or not the reader accepts that depression and associated mental disorders are, in fact, illnesses or just cognate — that is, related in certain respects — to illnesses, the reality is that this is how they are diagnosed and treated.

Today, issues and problems that have origins in social, cultural or environmental conditions are viewed and treated as medical ailments. One of the beneficial consequences is that much of the disgrace has been removed, leaving athletes who have suffered to open up about their experiences. They share a common matrix: a culture that inhibits, yet promotes illness. The ethos of mastery, striving and bearing pain mitigates against admitting a susceptibility to attacks that can neither be seen nor beaten with sheer persistence or the kind of hard work urged by coaches. The same ethos fosters ambition and an achievement orientation satisfied only by levels of attainment reached by the elite few.

Most sports careers involve unexpected reverses brought about by defeats or injuries. Mental health problems are regarded in a similar way to an anterior cruciate ligament injury: fixable. Tyson Fury first won the world heavyweight title in 2015. He then sunk into depression and binge drinking, but resumed his boxing career with renewed vigor. Kelly Holmes self-harmed with scissors for two months in 2003. A year later, she won two gold medals in the 800 meters and 1,500 meters at the Olympics. Five-time Olympic swimming gold medalist Ian Thorpe lost motivation completely, retired in 2006 but later returned, yet without ever finding his best form.

Some never quite recover. Michael Yardy interrupted his tour of India with the England cricket team, suffering from depression in 2011. He didn't play for the national team again. Other athletes, such as rugby's Jonny Wilkinson and cricket's Marcus Trescothick, simply lived with mental health conditions from childhood and learned to tolerate the symptoms to a greater or lesser extent.

Who Wants to Be a Sports Star?

Of the myriad causes of mental illnesses, Naomi Osaka's is unusual: She says finds the media demands unbearable. Major sports are now part of the entertainment industry and their stars are warrantable celebrities. Audiences want access to all parts of their lives, public and private. Osaka has made her commitment to Black Lives Matter clear. She may feel that, as a black woman, she is inordinately questioned about her loyalties, though she hasn't said as much and appears comfortable making her convictions known.

But she won't expect any special considerations from tennis authorities, who broker lucrative broadcasting and sponsorship deals on the understanding that players will cooperate. Osaka is presumably bright enough to realize that much of the \$37 million she earned last year was made possible by her media presence. Actually playing sports is just part of the Faustian pact.

All of which prompts an obvious question: Who would want to be a top sports star in an environment so competitive that mental disorders go with the territory? There are obvious benefits: money, fame and a job that pays for doing something you would have probably carried on doing for fun even if you weren't getting paid. But the point about pursuing something for fun is that you don't get paid for doing it. Once you do, it becomes a job of work. Many, perhaps most, athletes don't enjoy competing. Andre Agassi famously hated tennis. Other athletes, including Barcelona's Lionel Messi, are physically sick before competitions.

In May, Olympic bronze medal-winning hammer thrower Sophie Hitchon announced her retirement, aged 29. “I have never really done it for the love of the sport or the enjoyment,” she explained. “I do it because I was good at it, and was succeeding at it.” Hitchon’s approach may not be representative, though I suspect it is.

No rational person willingly wants to train repetitiously every day, risking physical injury, sometimes resulting in death and always facing the possibility of mental indispositions — unless they are succeeding and, presumably, making a good living from it. The recent life-threatening cardiac arrest suffered by Denmark’s Christian Eriksen at the UEFA European Championship reminds us that being fit, well-dieted and regularly tested is no defense against the intensity of constant competition. Polish footballer Robert Lewandowski recently issued the reminder, “we’re humans, we’re not machines.”

So, Osaka’s options are either to overcome her anxieties with the media or cease playing, at least till such time when she is able to cope. This sounds like a pitiless pair of options, but there seems little latitude. Her premature retirement would be an awful loss to tennis. But is money and success worth it, if the price is her mental health?

It’s not a rhetorical question: Many athletes and entertainers persist with their careers despite depression. They include Katy Perry, Bruce Springsteen and Gwyneth Paltrow. All three have found relief, sometimes through medication or therapy. Lady Gaga has integrated her experiences with mental illness into her work. At 35, she is the youngest of the group. It’s an age when most athletes have either retired or are contemplating it, and perhaps the relative brevity of a competitive career increases the mental duress. I don’t know whether these entertainers would endorse Nietzsche’s apothegm, but all of them have had long, garlanded careers. Mental illness didn’t become a salient influence on any of their lives.

Mental health is a corner of the sports landscape that was ignored for many decades.

While a fuller understanding of the causes of depression involves analysis beyond the physical, the newfound confidence of athletes like Naomi Osaka to disclose their mental problems is due in large part to a medicalized understanding of its status and public acceptance that it is treatable.

***Ellis Cashmore** is the author of "Elizabeth Taylor," "Beyond Black" and "Celebrity Culture."

Joe Biden Faces Many Challenges in Latin America

Leonardo Vivas

June 17, 2021

As Latin America faces economic challenges, social unrest and rising authoritarianism, the region needs urgent US attention after four years of neglect.

Donald Trump, the 45th US president, broke with decades of a relatively bipartisan foreign policy consensus by wreaking havoc on US bilateral relations with China and the European Union. Latin America was an exception to the Trump playbook.

It is true that US relations with Mexico were rocky during the beginning of the Trump administration. Immigration from Central America and Mexico was a bone of contention. Paradoxically, despite a tumultuous beginning, both leftist Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Trump found a strong common ground to work together. In fact, Lopez Obrador developed a close relationship with his US counterpart.

The Mexican president might even have wanted Trump reelected. AMLO, as Lopez Obrador is popularly called in Mexico, took longer than most world leaders to recognize Joe

Biden's election victory in November 2020. Curiously, AMLO and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro recognized Biden's win after hesitating for six weeks and receiving much criticism. The AMLO-Trump camaraderie indicates that Trump made no radical break in US policy toward Mexico despite his inflammatory rhetoric.

The same holds true for Venezuela. Trump regularly called for action against this oil-rich nation and threatened military intervention, but the main thrust of his policy was to tighten sanctions imposed by his predecessor, Barack Obama. Only with Brazil and Colombia did Trump change US policy somewhat. Trump saw Bolsonaro as a fellow populist of the right and embraced the Brazilian leader in a manner previous administrations would not have. Trump was also very supportive of the right-wing government of Colombia because of ideological reasons.

What Issues Need Urgent Attention?

Unlike US policies toward the EU, China and Iran, President Biden's Latin America policy does not need radical redefinition. Yet the Biden administration will have to address some issues in the short term and others in the medium or long term.

There are three pressing short-term issues in the region that will require Biden's attention. The first is the US border problem with Mexico. If Mexican authorities stop the flow of immigrants from Central America, the United States will have less of a crisis on its southern border. The second issue is the shoring up of weakened regional institutions, especially the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). The third issue involves developing a comprehensive policy to manage the Venezuelan crisis.

The first issue involving the southern border has reached crisis proportions because Mexico and Central American states have responded inadequately to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a public perception in these countries that

the US will pursue a more open-border policy under Biden, leading to immigrants flocking to the US. The border issue has dented Biden's popularity and many Americans believe it has not been handled well. In fact, March was the worst month in US history regarding the number of child refugees knocking at the US border. It was nearly 19,000 in that month alone.

The key to any solution is held by Mexico. The country controls the flow of immigrants from Central America and can restrain people from reaching the US border. During the last three years of the Trump administration, the United States and Mexico had an informal agreement, as per which the latter served as a secondary gatekeeper for the US border. Mexico regulated the flow of immigrants to the US border and even absorbed significant numbers of migrants itself. This mechanism stopped as soon as Biden entered the White House. Mexico would use the resuscitation of this mechanism as leverage to gain concessions on other issues.

On December 29, 2020, the US Department of Homeland Security announced that Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras had signed the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA). The ACA was significant because more than 71% of migrants apprehended on the US southwest border came from these three countries. The ACA aimed to confront "illegal migration at the source" from a region in Central America that has come to be known as the Northern Triangle. Waves of migrants are fleeing poverty, violence and other challenges in this region and making their way to the US. The longer-term solutions that stop such waves of migrants will require resources to mitigate poverty and violence and will have to wait.

The second issue facing the Biden administration is restoring the influence of the OAS and the IADB. During the 1990s and the 2010s, these two organizations increased in importance. They were able to promote democracy and economic growth in the region. The OAS played a key role in political crises such as Peru in 1992 and Honduras in 2009. The

Inter-American Human Rights Commission and Inter-American Court of Human Rights, two institutions created by the OAS, promoted and protected human rights in the American hemisphere. In recent years, both the OAS and the IADB have weakened.

The late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez and his allies created new regional organizations to counter the OAS and the US. These organizations, such as UNASUR, ALBA and CELAC, sought to limit US influence in the region. Today, they have withered away. Yet the polarization in the region has chipped away at the credibility of the OAS. Its capacity to mediate in conflicts or mobilize the region on important issues has been affected. The OAS has been largely silent on the COVID-19 pandemic, raising questions about its irrelevance.

As well as the OAS, the IADB was born with very strong regional roots. By the end of the 20th century, the bank incorporated new members from outside the region. European nations, Japan and even China joined the IADB. Political controversies have plagued the organization for years. In recent times, they have gotten worse.

In 2019, Venezuela's opposition leader, Juan Guaido, whom many countries recognized as interim president, appointed Harvard University economist Ricardo Hausmann as the country's representative to the IADB. China sided with Nicolas Maduro's Venezuelan regime and barred Hausmann from attending the IADB meeting in Chengdu. In response, the IADB canceled its meeting in China that was meant to mark its 60th anniversary. Needless to say, recent developments have weakened the IADB.

The Biden administration will need to relaunch both the OAS and the IADB. Washington will have to restore their credibility and efficacy. Both organizations will be essential for solving the longer-term issues facing the region.

The Venezuela Conundrum

The third issue that the Biden administration has to address is Venezuela. As per many analysts,

the country is on the brink of collapse. Criminal gangs and other armed non-state actors control not only remote parts of Venezuela but also shantytowns and working-class neighborhoods in the national capital, Caracas. The economy is in a dire state. US economic sanctions and reserves mismanagement have led Venezuelan oil production to fall to its lowest level since the 1940s.

After low figures of infection in 2020, COVID-19 has now spiraled out of control. In per capita terms, Venezuela has vaccinated the least number of people in Latin America. Even Haiti is doing better. As per *The Lancet*, "Venezuela does not have a known national COVID-19 vaccine plan, and the supply of vaccines is spasmodic, insufficient, and unplanned." The reputed publication also observes that "the health-care system has collapsed and is incapable of responding to the ever-increasing number of patients who require hospitalisation."

Maduro has rejected most plausible options for mass vaccination. Only the Venezuelan elite, Maduro's close supporters and the regime's Cuban advisers have been vaccinated. The government rejected a deal with opposition leader Guaido to import the AstraZeneca vaccine through the COVAX mechanism of the United Nations at the last minute. Despite popular clamor for mass vaccination, it is unclear how the process will advance even though the funding for vaccination is available.

Hunger has been on the rise and diseases like malaria are back. Such is the dire state of affairs that Venezuelans are fleeing the country. Over 5 million of them have left. This has led to the worst refugee crisis in the Western Hemisphere and rivals the Syrian crisis. Countries in Latin America have largely been hosting these refugees, but they are increasingly overstretched. Emulating the Biden administration, Colombia has designated "temporary protected status" for Venezuela.

The Maduro regime has lost control of the country. Its military strikes against armed groups

are only exacerbating an already terrible situation. The military's offensive against Colombian illegal armed groups near the Venezuela-Colombia border has led to more Venezuelans fleeing the country. Venezuela's recent economic measures to revive the economy such as reversing Chavez's total control over PDVSA, the state-owned oil company, and privatization of a selected number of state-owned enterprises have not worked. The government suffocates business and has no talent for economic management.

Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic has benefited the government in one significant way. By imposing a radical quarantine, the Maduro regime and its cronies exercise tight social control over the population's movements in areas of their control. After putting the ruling elite in a difficult position and isolating it internationally during 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, the opposition has run out of steam. Nominally led by Guaido, the opposition is highly fragmented and has failed to come up with a common strategy.

Trump's "maximum pressure" policy of using sanctions to topple Maduro's regime did not work. Cuba, Russia and China have ganged up to support Maduro and ensure his survival even as Venezuela increasingly becomes a failed state. The Biden administration needs fresh thinking and a new strategy for a state that is threatening the stability and security of Latin America.

What Are the Long-Term Challenges?

If short-term prospects are grim for Latin America, then the mid-term ones are anything but rosy. The commodities boom that enabled the region to grow continuously for nearly two decades is over. This boom brought tens of millions out of poverty. As per the International Monetary Fund, Latin America bounced back from the COVID-19 in 2020, but the pandemic's resurgence "threatens to thwart an uneven recovery and add to the steep social and human costs."

Countries like Peru, which managed to grow at high rates despite a dysfunctional political system, have plunged back into grinding poverty and, lately, political chaos. The prospects in most other Latin American countries are similar. Economic hardship will inevitably heighten social and political tensions. Over the last two decades, many protests that mushroomed across the region against corruption or injustice quietened as public services improved. When the pandemic recedes, these protests may come back with a vengeance, reclaiming the relative prosperity the people have lost.

Economic woes might also create new perils for democracy. Already, there is a worldwide trend of declining democracy. In Latin America, countries like Brazil, El Salvador and Nicaragua are worrisome examples of this trend.

Bolsonaro, the populist right-wing politician, famously won the Brazilian election in 2018 on an anti-corruption agenda that implicated a host of politicians, including former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who was the most popular politician in decades and whose policies brought millions out of poverty. Bolsonaro has rolled many of those policies back. More importantly, he has mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 490,000 Brazilians have died. This number is the second-highest after the US. With more than 17.5 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, Brazil ranks third-highest in the world. Protesters blame Bolsonaro's disastrous policies from downplaying the threat of COVID-19 and opposing lockdowns to mishandling vaccination and causing the near-collapse of the health system.

In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has strengthened his grip over the legislature and the judicial system. His party has voted to "remove the magistrates of the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court." Earlier, Bukele ordered heavily armed troops to occupy the parliament to pressure legislators into voting to better equip the troops.

If the threats to democracies in Brazil and El Salvador come from the right, those to Bolivia

and Nicaragua come from the left. In Bolivia, former President Evo Morales began dismantling democratic institutions when he sought to win a fourth consecutive term in 2019. In doing so, he contravened the provisions of the constitution. Bolivians had voted against Morales' attempt to amend the constitution so that he could run for a fourth term, but he got around this vote by appealing to the nation's highest court that was packed with his cronies. After a disputed election, Morales fled to Mexico after the military asked him to stand down, and Jeanine Anez took over as interim president. Anez promptly set out to persecute and prosecute Morales and his supporters.

Another election followed in 2020 and the socialist candidate Luis Arce won. He had served as economy minister under Morales. As president, Arce has turned upon Anez and other political rivals. They have been arrested for participating in a coup against Morales. This cycle of political vendetta has left Bolivia highly polarized, and the country's political crisis is far from over.

In Nicaragua, the decades-long president, Daniel Ortega, just recently imprisoned the four most important contenders of the opposition, in practice moving into a one-party system. Mexico also faces challenges too, but in more milder forms.

Finally, there remains the thorny issue of Cuba that every US president since John F. Kennedy has had to face. In 2016, Barack Obama tried to turn back the clock on the Cold War by visiting Cuba and inaugurating a new era of engagement. Trump reversed almost all of Obama's policies. Now, Biden has to craft a new policy on Cuba, a country that remains influential throughout the region. Along with Venezuela, Cuba is a magnet for attracting the attention of the two big external powers: Russia and China. This tripartite meddling of Russia, China and the US in Latin America could sow instability in the region.

Already, Cuba is facing its worst economic crisis since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The new generation of Cubans has lost faith in the communist regime. The Cuban leadership is going through a highly choreographed transition of power to a younger generation. Given the flux, the Biden administration would be well advised to bide its time. Eventually, it may want to craft a new policy that avoids the bitter confrontation of the Trump era and the open engagement of the Obama years.

In the long-term, the Biden administration needs a robust OAS and a strong IADB to restore democracy and rebuild the economy in Latin America. The region will need a robust reconstruction plan once COVID-19 recedes. If the US ignores Latin America, Russia and China will continue to make inroads. They will undermine the relative stability Latin America has enjoyed for the last few decades. Biden has no choice but to pay attention to a region that lies in the same hemisphere as the US and remains crucial to American strategic calculus.

***Leonardo Vivas** teaches international politics at Emerson College and is a consultant for Freedom House.

The Reality of Abortion in Northern Ireland

Julia Canney
June 18, 2021

Consistent vetoes have blocked the power-sharing government from passing abortion reform in Northern Ireland.

In April, the UK House of Commons formally approved a new directive requiring Northern Ireland's Department of Health to take "concrete steps" to ensure full abortion services in the north before summer. The directive, which came after years of pressure from inside and

outside the north, is the result of the Northern Ireland executive's delay in commissioning services that were formally decriminalized in 2019.

It is time for Northern Ireland's secretary of state, Brandon Lewis, to ensure that reproductive rights in the north are safe, legal and accessible to all who need them. The complicated politics of Northern Ireland have led to this dilemma of jurisdiction. The House of Commons was able to decriminalize abortion services in the north specifically because there was no sitting Northern Ireland executive in Stormont. However, now that there has been a sitting government in Stormont for over a year, many are calling for an end to the executive's stall tactics.

How Did We Get Here?

Abortion services in the United Kingdom were legalized by the 1967 Abortion Act. Despite the fact that Unionists in the north of Ireland repeatedly call for increased recognition as part of the UK, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has refused to allow this to extend to reproductive rights. Northern Ireland remains home to one of the most restrictive abortion regimes in the world, forcing pregnant people to travel across the Irish Sea to access services.

UN committees and the Human Rights Council have released numerous reports stating that the UK has been breaching the rights of pregnant people in the north by limiting their access to abortion services. These same reports were a driving force behind the 2018 referendum on abortion in the Republic of Ireland, which passed affirmatively with nearly 70% of civilians supporting wide-reaching abortion reform. Pregnant people in the north have been forced to travel either to the republic or to mainland UK, which presents an enormous barrier to access.

Despite the majority of Northern Ireland's citizens saying that they would like abortion to be legalized, consistent vetoes by the DUP have blocked the power-sharing government from passing abortion reform.

Lack of Government: An Opportunity

The legacy of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland requires a power-sharing government between the nationalist and unionist communities. This means that neither party can be in position without the other. While this has been the reality for the past two decades, the issue rose to prominence in January 2017, with the resignation of the nationalist Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness as deputy first minister. This led to the collapse of the executive in Stormont, which continued until January 11, 2020.

During this period of three years, the country had no power-sharing assembly to carry it through Brexit negotiations with the European Union, deal with rising turmoil in the north over the impact of these talks, and no opportunity to potentially build on momentum around abortion rights coming from the Republic of Ireland.

The collapse of the executive allowed the British Parliament to pass legislation legalizing gay marriage and abortion in the north, bringing it in line with mainland UK laws, the Republic of Ireland's laws since 2018 and international human rights norms. The move — which is only possible due to the legacy of The Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement, which allows for direct rule from London — was cause for enormous celebration by abortion rights activists.

The proposal from Labour MP Stella Creasy was supported by 332 votes to 99, which forced decriminalization on October 21, 2019, if the Northern Ireland government was not restored. Despite attempts by the DUP to form a government in order to avoid the decriminalization, Michelle O'Neill and Sinn Fein resisted efforts, allowing the laws to be passed. Notwithstanding arguments against direct intervention from Westminster, the decision was applauded by pro-choice activists across the island.

The new directive requires the Department of Health to take "concrete steps" to ensure full abortion services in Northern Ireland before the summer. This comes after pressure from within and without, with the Northern Ireland Human

Rights Commission recently issuing legal action against the Stormont executive over the delay in commissioning services.

What Does the Decision Mean?

Over a year and a half after the British Parliament decriminalized abortion, the UK government has formally reprimanded the Northern Ireland executive for “dragging its feet.” Parliament has formally approved regulations that enable Secretary Lewis to roll out abortion services across the north. This move is long overdue and is a response to stall tactics by the DUP government over the past year.

The delays have meant that the burden has fallen on health trusts to carry out interim services for abortions up to 10 weeks, forcing pregnant people seeking terminations beyond 10 weeks to travel to mainland UK for services. Without adequate funding or resources from the Department of Health, these trusts have been had to either provide limited services or suspend them altogether.

The Northern Irish executive must move, without delay, to create an abortion regime that adheres to international human rights norms and that is accessible to all those who need to access care. However, it appears unlikely that the two majority parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein, will be able to reach an agreement on the services after the resignation of First Minister Arlene Foster. Her successor, Edwin Poots, caters toward the hyper-Christian base of the DUP, publicly opposing adoption by gay couples, supporting conversion practices and restrictions on abortion.

Through the rules that govern the Northern Ireland executive and power-sharing agreement, Lewis has both the legal authority and the financial abilities to “compel Stormont to commission full abortion services if there is no movement by the summer.” However, in the absence of clear decisions from Lewis, coupled with a Stormont executive that refuses to move forward with their own directives, the responsibility has fallen on community organizations such as the Alliance for Choice to

provide access to abortion services across the north.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the fact that health professionals are already stretched thin throughout the north. Many of them do not have the financial or staffing resources to continue to provide services for those seeking an abortion. While a truly free, safe and legal abortion regime will look different everywhere, it is clear that the current model in the north is not working. In the absence of appropriate action from the Northern Ireland executive, and to assume the burden from already-stretched-thin community organizations, Secretary Lewis must act now to create a government-financed and government-run centralized model for abortions without restrictions in the north.

***Julia Canney** is a practitioner and advocate with expertise in gender, violence prevention and transitional justice.

The US Must Commit to Protecting Central Americans

Yael Schacher & Rachel Schmidtke
June 21, 2021

If Biden is serious about providing protection to Central American migrants, his administration must more clearly and consistently articulate its commitment to this goal.

Recent comments by US Vice-President Kamala Harris over migration from Guatemala are part of an unfortunate pattern. Like Harris, other members of the Biden administration have been telling Central American migrants — many of whom are forced to leave home — “do not come” to the United

States because they will be turned away at the US-Mexico border.

Harris walked back these statements last week, partly in response to criticism from groups like Refugees International that swiftly highlighted the right to seek asylum and international protection. In an interview following her trip to Guatemala and Mexico, she said, “Let me be very clear, I am committed to making sure we provide a safe haven for those seeking asylum, period.” But it remains an open question whether this commitment will be reflected in concrete policy change.

It is time for the United States to show a stronger commitment to the protection needs of Central American migrants. The Biden administration can do so by taking five important steps.

Rights of Central American Migrants

First, the administration must commit to increasing resettlement. Politicians who want to emphasize protection sometimes speak about having migrants apply for asylum from home. This confuses asylum, which is requested at the border or from within the US, with resettlement, which is usually applied for from a third country rather than the home country, where it is too dangerous for people seeking protection to await processing.

Unfortunately, no significant US refugee resettlement program for Central Americans currently exists. Harris did not discuss plans to create one, even for the women the administration acknowledges flee violence in Guatemala. The statement that Guatemalans should not come undermines not only the right to seek asylum under US law, but it also bolsters a long history of American refusal to recognize Guatemalans as refugees or the role of US policies in causing forced displacement in the region.

The Biden administration has allocated some additional refugee visa slots for Central Americans and established a Migration Resource Center in Guatemala to advise people about the

availability of refugee resettlement. However, much more needs to be done by the State Department, Homeland Security (DHS) and Congress to build a substantial resettlement program for Guatemalans. The administration should work with Congress to ensure that more Central Americans are referred and are eligible for refugee resettlement.

Second, the United States must make it possible for additional at-risk youth from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala to qualify as refugees through the Central American Minors (CAM) program. On June 15, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced an expansion of the renewed program, which existed under the Obama administration. It allows parents based in the United States to apply to have their children come to the country from Central America as refugees.

This is welcome news. But the devil is in the details. It remains to be seen if, unlike during the Obama-era CAM program, significant numbers of Guatemalan parents will actually be eligible and helped to apply and if US officials sent to interview children will recognize them as refugees. It is also unclear if, this time around, the US government will ensure the safety of children while they are interviewed in Guatemala and provide them with needed support after they arrive in the US. The Biden administration must revise eligibility, retrain adjudicators and commit resources to make this program a true pathway to security for Guatemalan kids.

Third, the Biden administration must also restore asylum at the border. Harris’ description of the border as closed does not accurately represent precisely what is happening, only further adding to the confusion. On the one hand, newly arriving migrants cannot ask for asylum at ports of entry along the US southern border and they could be expelled under an unjustified COVID-19-related order. On the other hand, the administration has exempted unaccompanied minors from Central America from this order and is admitting rather than expelling the majority of

arriving families. Yet single adult asylum seekers who enter between ports of entry are an enforcement priority. These migrants are either expelled without any screening for their protection needs or detained at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities for long periods.

Further, the Biden administration recently announced that asylum-seeking families admitted at the border will have their cases adjudicated on a faster timeline in immigration court without ensuring they will have access to counsel. Refugees International encourages the administration to end the COVID-19 expulsion policy, process asylum seekers at ports of entry, release asylum seekers to pursue their claims at their destination locations, and expand access to legal counsel for asylum seekers.

Fourth, the Biden administration must listen to the voices of Central Americans. Harris' comments will likely do little to affect migration and may take away from other issues that are of the utmost importance for Guatemalans. Smugglers are not swayed by such remarks and continue to profit off a booming business that feeds on the lack of legal pathways available to Central Americans.

Guatemalans themselves often have no control over the conditions that force them to migrate, little of which have to do with US immigration policies. Two devastating hurricanes, pervasive violence and crime, and endemic corruption are some of the main reasons why people flee. These drivers will take years to diminish. In the meantime, the United States should work to build trust with Guatemalan civil society and prioritize support to areas that Guatemalans are specifically calling for help. Most notably, the US needs to support Guatemala in reducing corruption, as several prominent organizations in the country have asked for.

Finally, the Biden administration must work with Mexico on a holistic approach to migration that goes beyond deterrence and the prevention of northward movement. For decades, the US has asked the Mexican government to help keep

migrants from the border through increased enforcement at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and ramped up detention and deportation in Mexico. This limits many with international protection concerns from seeking asylum in Mexico or the US.

It remains to be seen whether policy changes like the proposed US-Mexico "Operations Group on Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking" will offer protection to victims of human trafficking at the border, whose needs have been ignored in the past. On his trip to Mexico last week, Secretary Mayorkas met with officials from the National Institute of Immigration (INM), but not with representatives of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR). Nor did the delegation from the United States traveling with Mayorkas include officials focused on asylum and humanitarian concerns. In bilateral discussions about migration with Mexico, the Biden administration needs to increase emphasis on access to protection.

Following Through

If President Joe Biden is serious about providing protection to Central Americans, his administration must more clearly and consistently articulate its commitment to this goal. It must follow through on the commitment via increased access to refugee resettlement and asylum and to humble and holistic cooperation with regional partners.

Harris' approach was a political mistake and a lost opportunity. Other plans announced by the administration indicate a more productive approach that can be best fulfilled by adopting the five steps we have outlined.

***Yael Schacher** is a senior US advocate and **Rachel Schmidtke** is an advocate for Latin America at Refugees International.

Joe Biden Meets Afghanistan's Leaders as the Country Faces Collapse

Tabish Forugh & Atul Singh
June 25, 2021

The US must push through a credible peace process and back Afghan leaders with integrity if it is serious about global leadership, democracy and world peace.

The security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating dramatically. The Taliban have captured the country's border crossing to Tajikistan. Prospects of civil war have risen.

Even as the US withdrawal gains momentum, Afghan leaders are visiting Washington to meet President Joe Biden on June 25. This includes President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the chairperson of the High Peace Council for Reconciliation.

The Taliban are filling the vacuum that Americans are leaving behind. Violence has surged across Afghanistan and the government is losing territory by the day. As September 11, the deadline for the departure of American troops, draws nigh, the Taliban are becoming increasingly emboldened.

The government in Kabul has a reputation for corruption and is proving to be ineffective. People are dying every day in cities, towns and villages from terror, crime and hunger. The US is leaving behind a royal mess. If its presence in Afghanistan was problematic, its withdrawal promises to be doubly so.

Ghani Is Running Out of Time

Stakes are high in Biden's first meeting with the Afghan leaders even if expectations are low. Ghani is not an ideal interlocutor. He has presided over a notoriously corrupt administration of a failing state. Kabul's writ

does not even run in the city. Even if Biden and Ghani do a dream deal, the latter is highly unlikely to be able to uphold his part of the bargain.

Biden wants to bring back American troops and minimize the instability that will inevitably follow in Afghanistan. He needs a good partner to work with. Once, Ghani was the blue-eyed boy of Washington. His academic credentials and bureaucratic experience gave him a halo that few Afghans possessed. Ghani has squandered all the resources that the US provided him. He has few, if any, opportunities left. Ghani's government is on the verge of total collapse.

According to a new assessment of the US intelligence community, Ghani's government could collapse within six months of the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The government has lost credibility because it has failed to provide basic public services to the people. Consequently, the people have lost hope. Yet again, Afghans are voting with their feet and leaving the country in droves.

Like many African strongmen, Ghani has surrounded himself with sycophantic cronies. He sees himself as the savior and messiah of Afghanistan. The president has no idea that he has lost all credibility in his second term. His lofty rhetoric fails to reflect Afghanistan's grim realities.

Ghani is not entirely delusional, though. He realized fully well that he occupies his fancy palace in Kabul thanks to the barrels of American guns. Once the Americans leave, he is toast. Therefore, he has opposed Biden's peace plan that calls for a political settlement between warring parties, including the Taliban. Unsurprisingly, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has lauded Biden's plan.

What Joe Biden Must Do

Afghans fear that the US might be leaving their country to the mercy of the Pakistani generals. After the last Soviet troops departed from Afghanistan in 1989, the Pakistan-trained Taliban took over. This provided Pakistan with strategic

depth, jihadis to send to India and a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Washington. History might be about to repeat itself and Afghans are terrified of another tragedy.

Biden is meeting Ghani to reassure Afghans that he is not leaving them to the Taliban wolves. The official American line is that the US will continue to support the legitimately elected government in Kabul. Yet the Americans are infamous for short attention spans and Afghans fear they will be forgotten again. After all, Charlie Wilson could raise a ton of money to fight the Soviets but very little for schools or hospitals afterward. As the iconic American movie on the late congressman records, no one cared.

There is another historical parallel. When US troops left Saigon in 1975, the Viet Cong overran Vietnam. As the last American planes fly back from Bagram, the Taliban could do the same in Afghanistan. Washington must act differently this time around. The US has to back Afghan security forces, put its weight behind a people-centered peace process and uphold Biden's much-touted democracy agenda.

If the US fails, the Taliban will be in charge. Pakistan will make Afghanistan a puppet state. Bagram, the closest American airbase to China's western borders, might well fall to Beijing. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) might expand into Afghanistan too. The risks for Afghanistan, the region and the US are only too real.

In an article for The Washington Post, David Ignatius argues that "a summer of pain awaits" Afghanistan. Over the years, American leaders have found themselves in a Catch-22 regarding Afghanistan. They cannot tell the public that Afghanistan deserves American blood and treasure forever. Nearly 20 years have passed since the tragic 9/11 attacks in the United States. American troops have patrolled Afghanistan's dusty roads, fighter jets have flown endless sorties and drones have liquidated fearsome foes. Yet peace is nowhere in sight. At the same time, packing up and leaving only fuels the raging

violence further, leaves behind a geopolitical vacuum and allows rival powers leverage against American interests.

Donald Trump promised American troops would come home when he was president. Biden has set a date for the final withdrawal. By doing so, he has tied his hands. The Taliban now know that American troops are preparing to leave and will soon be gone. In their worldview, the Taliban have made history. After humbling the Soviets, they have defeated the evil Uncle Sam. They see themselves as superiors of super powers in their own backyard. With morale sky high, they have launched bold military operations to take over Afghanistan. It seems the US can do little to prevent the Taliban from taking over.

Yet things are never as dire or as rosy as they seem. Many Afghans have fought the Taliban and are willing to fight them again. The Ghani government may be incorrigibly corrupt, but its officials want to avoid the fate of the Soviet-backed leader Mohammad Najibullah whose corpse was strung for public display. Crises tend to focus minds and this might be the best time to deal with Afghanistan's manifestly flawed leaders.

Even as American troops are leaving, Biden must support Afghan leaders against the Taliban. He must make that support conditional on Ghani and his cronies leaving office by a certain date. They must put in place a more credible Afghan leadership to take on the Taliban. After all, the British replaced Neville Chamberlain with Winston Churchill during World War II. For Afghanistan, this is a time of national crisis.

The Taliban could take over much of the country but will struggle to hold it together. A civil war might break out. The disintegration of Afghanistan might move from the realm of possibility to reality. Ambitious powers in the near neighborhood will take advantage of the ensuing chaos. Unlike Vietnam, Afghanistan will not become a nation of high literacy, low infant mortality and better nutrition. It will yet again become an impoverished land where fanatics and

terrorists will find refuge and a base for their global jihadist operations.

President Biden has long declared that “America is back.” Afghanistan could smash that assertion to smithereens and demonstrate that America is just going back home. If he is serious about American leadership and holding aloft the torch for democracy, Biden cannot throw Afghanistan to the dogs of war. He has to build an international coalition that pushes through a peace process, backs credible leaders in Afghanistan and provides aerial, if not ground assistance to those putting their lives on the line against the Taliban.

***Tabish Forugh** is a policy analyst and a former Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy. **Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.

The Issue of Abortion Is a Litmus Test for the American Catholic Church

Gary Grappo
June 28, 2021

In America, the Catholic Church has seen a steady erosion of adherents to its teachings on a host of moral issues.

Ignoring warnings from Pope Francis and the Vatican, US Catholic bishops earlier this month overwhelmingly approved drafting guidance that would deny the rite of communion to public officials who do not support the church’s opposition to abortion. The decision was seen as the church’s most public rebuke yet of US President Joe Biden, only the second Catholic to occupy the White House. A drafting committee will convene to write the guidance and present a

draft to the bishops for a formal vote in November.

The sacrament of communion, or Holy Eucharist, lies at the core of the Catholic faith. The communion host, bread, is viewed as the actual body of Jesus upon consecration by the priest during Mass. Receiving it is considered a sign of a believer’s state of grace. Receipt of communion is de rigueur and almost automatic for any Catholic attending Mass. Typically, only non-Catholics and excommunicated Catholics would be formally denied communion, though those who consider themselves not in a state of grace, i.e., guilty of a serious sin, are not supposed to receive it. Abortion, among others, is considered a grievous sin.

Joe Biden is an observant Roman Catholic, having grown up and been educated in the church. He regularly attends Sunday Mass and even periodic daily services, and receives communion, which has never been denied him previously. He often quotes from the Bible and church hymns in his political remarks and is known to frequently recite the rosary, which he carries with him in his pocket.

Biden has been clear on his position on abortion. While accepting the teachings of the church, he has said that he will not impose his personal view on others and, therefore, supports a woman’s right to choose. It is precisely that position that has riled American bishops, all of whom have begun to view the issue as a litmus test for Catholicism.

Losing Their Hold

In America, the Catholic Church has seen a steady erosion of adherents to its teachings on a host of moral issues, most involving the treatment and role of sex and gender in everyday life, and abortion. American Catholics, like their non-Catholic counterparts, are all over the moral map. While practicing or observant Catholics are more likely to follow church teachings on these matters, even they have shown an independent streak by making decisions in their lives at odds with traditional Catholic dogma.

For example, the church officially opposes the use of artificial contraception, yet 99% of US Catholic women use some form of artificial birth control, according to a recent Guttmacher Institute poll. This compares with 99.6% of women with no religious affiliation, 99.4% of mainline Protestant women, 99.3% of evangelical Protestants and 95.7% with other religious connections. While this is universally known among Catholics, the church leadership nowadays usually — and wisely — avoids the subject. Moreover, there is no movement to deny communion to either these women or those who support their right to choose contraception.

The church sees its authority eroding elsewhere as well. Surveys suggest that Catholics favor allowing to divorce and remarry, and divorced Catholics who remarry to receive communion. Since 2011, a majority of Catholics have supported gay marriage, up to 69% today. Sixty percent support the ordination of women, and 62% think that priests should be able to marry.

On the controversial subject of abortion, a clear majority (56%) of Catholics support its legalization. The figure may be deceptive, however. Among Catholics who attend Mass regularly, opposition to abortion is significantly higher. Nevertheless, two-thirds of Catholics oppose overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 case in which the US Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution protects a woman's right to choose an abortion.

On the specific issue before the American bishops, 67% of Catholics oppose denying communion to Biden for his views on abortion. Worth noting, however, is that among Catholics who identify as Democrat or Democrat-leaning, 87% oppose such a ruling, while only 44% who identify as Republican or Republican-leaning do so.

Immutable Catholicism

All of this lends weight to the call among a growing majority of American Catholics for changes in their church's policies and teachings.

Yet the Catholic Church is anything but a democracy. So, Catholics are voting not only with their feet but also their dollars, either leaving the church or simply refusing to support it with their contributions. Those who strongly identify as Catholic have declined from 46% in 1974 to just 27% in 2017. Regular Sunday Mass attendance among Catholics has also fallen, from nearly 50% in 1974 to about 25% in 2012.

These numbers tell some but not all of the story behind the church's decline in the US. From 1970 to 2020, the number of priests in the US fell by 40%, not surprising given that vocations draw heavily from the church's school system, which has also suffered declining numbers. Catholic schools are closing across the country, with almost 50% fewer elementary schools and 40% fewer secondary schools in 2020 than in 1970. Catholic parishes, which typically support Catholic schools, have fallen by 15% since 1990.

With declining membership and Mass attendance have come decreasing church collections. Also, Catholics see withholding contributions as the only way to voice their opposition to church policies. The child sex abuse scandal that has wracked the church for the last 20 years has also provoked considerable outrage among Catholics of all political persuasions, especially as diocese after diocese pays tens of millions in legal settlements of child abuse cases nationwide, dating back to the 1950s. Many believe the church has yet to provide a full accounting of the priests' behavior and of the senior clerics who tolerated it.

It is this independent thought and attendant behavior that has conservative Catholic bishops worried. They fear the steady decline of Catholicism in America into the same fate as Protestantism, a cafeteria-style buffet of moral and theological offerings and teachings from which members may pick and choose. For an organization accustomed to obedience and acceptance, it is tantamount to a revolution. They have chosen to confront that revolution on the abortion battlefield.

Train Wreck or Track Change?

Though he may not have sought the position, Joe Biden represents the growing numbers of American Catholics — and most definitely Americans in general — who wish to define a defensible middle ground on abortion, a chronically neuralgically contentious issue in the US. The conservative Catholic bishops will have none of it, rather drawing a clear line brooking no viable middle ground.

In doing so, they've formally submitted the church to America's culture wars that infect so many segments of polity and society. Even more importantly for the church, these bishops threaten to divide the US institution. On one track, there is the conservative movement, a compliant core that is faithful to all the church's teachings and dogma, intolerant of any deviation, whether on abortion, married priests, contraception, gay marriage, etc. On another track, there is a more liberal version of the church, focusing on its historic mission of social justice, immigration, climate change and poverty elimination but also more tolerant of diverse views on sex and morality.

Pope Francis unquestionably knows this and is trying to avoid what may be inevitable, especially as his American bishops appear so eager for the confrontation and consequent division. Following the bishops' vote, he issued no comment. The Vatican asserted that he had already spoken on his opposition to the action. Clearly, however, their decision flouted his position and amounts to no less than a direct challenge to the pope and his authority, a rarity in recent church history.

Francis and the Vatican appear to be relying on the ultimate failure of the bishops' initiative. It would require unanimous approval by the Conference of Bishops or at least two-thirds approval followed by the pope's consent. The likelihood of either is microscopically slim.

The bishops' action is more than one of merely trying to force dogmatic adherence to church teachings. It is a barely veiled challenge to this pope whom they've viewed as out of step with tradition and steering the church down a

dangerous path of diluting the faith. Even if their measure fails, they will have established themselves as an alternative voice of the Catholic faith, thereby condemning Catholics across the country to a church divided between two versions of Jesus' "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church."

***Gary Grappo** is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korbel School for International Studies, University of Denver.

Young People Are the Key to Reconciling China and Hong Kong

Zoe Leung & Eric Yang
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Young people in Mainland China and Hong Kong must work to overcome different education systems, political traditions and historical experiences.

In 2019-20, a pro-democracy movement erupted in Hong Kong. Students from both high schools and universities took to the streets. They gambled with their futures for democratic ideals. Instead of getting inspired by the youth in Hong Kong, many of their counterparts in mainland China turned against them. Some mainland Chinese youth even supported the harsh crackdown by authorities and other repressive measures.

The divide between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong youth has reached alarming levels. Multiple surveys have revealed that almost no one under 30 in Hong Kong identifies as Chinese. The clash between these two groups has now arrived at university campuses around the world as both sides are adamant in presenting their side of the story. COVID-19 has only exacerbated

these differences. Mainland Chinese see the success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in managing the pandemic as proof of its competence. Hong Kongers do not trust their CCP-influenced government and view the measures to control the pandemic as another excuse for increased repression.

Despite the Differences

The divergent beliefs among young people in mainland China and Hong Kong assume importance in the context of new geopolitical realities. US President Joe Biden is championing a democratic agenda for the world, corralling like-minded countries to counter growing Chinese influence. Hong Kong is key in this new global struggle between democracy and autocracy. Having been under British rule until 1997, the territory is still governed by common law and has enjoyed greater relative freedom than mainland China. Now, that era seems to be ending.

Since 1997, many mainland Chinese have moved to Hong Kong. In particular, students have arrived in large numbers. At the end of 2019, more than 38,000 mainlanders were studying in Hong Kong. Greater interaction between these young people was supposed to increase mutual understanding. Instead, they still live in parallel universes. Mainland students live together, hang out with each other and tend to share similar beliefs. As hosts, Hong Kongers have made little effort to reach out.

Despite many differences, both groups of students have a lot in common. Both are tired of the rat race, the decreasing social mobility and widening inequality. Mainlanders celebrate slacking off during work. They speak of “mō yú,” a phrase that means “feeling the fish.” They also speak of “tǎngpíng,” or “lying flat.” This is a refusal to participate in the economic rat race. Hong Kongers are equally, if not more jaded about the economic system. They see the city’s economy in decline. They worry about getting decent jobs, buying an apartment and raising children. Prima facie, mainland and Hong Kong

students should be uniting around common economic concerns.

Yet Chinese and Hong Kong youth have very different perspectives. The former has strong feelings of national pride due to ideological indoctrination. For many Chinese students, the CCP has delivered good governance, economic growth and social stability. The CCP’s “performance legitimacy” has increased among mainlanders. They are wary of Western democracies that criticize the Chinese model. This wariness is rooted in an education system that the CCP developed in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

The education system highlights the “century of national humiliation” that began when late imperial China was forced to cede sovereignty and territory to foreign powers. It glamorizes the CCP-led “national rejuvenation” that entails China reclaiming its seat at the top table as a great power. Under President Xi Jinping, the CCP has redoubled its drive to promulgate nationalist education. In 2019, the government published a new outline for Chinese patriotic education that emphasizes rejuvenation even further. As per this document, national rejuvenation is “the Chinese Dream,” Xi’s pet slogan from November 2012.

A Different Reading of History

Hong Kong students have a different reading of history. In 2012, they took to the streets to protest against a proposed curriculum that emphasized China’s model of political meritocracy over the messiness of Western democracies and downplayed political events like the Tiananmen Square massacre. In 2014, students rose up again in what came to be known as Occupy Central, or the Umbrella Movement. They demanded universal suffrage as promised in the Basic Law, the city’s constitution.

Hong Kong students have a very different experience when compared to their mainland peers. Hong Kongers have opposed the CCP’s increasing interference in the territory’s governance. Mainlanders see the CCP as the

torchbearer of national rejuvenation. Hong Kong students want the autonomy and freedoms of the “one country, two systems” model to continue. Mainlanders want China’s sovereignty over Hong Kong asserted.

Importantly, young Hong Kongers are increasingly cynical of authority. They are prepared for prolonged underground resistance to the harsh new national security law. Some have adopted a destructive philosophy of “ultimate burnism” because they have lost faith in the future. Today, almost 60% of those between 15 to 30 would leave Hong Kong if they had the chance to do so.

It is clear that young mainlanders and Hong Kongers have different historical memories and political aspirations. Consequently, prospects for long-term reconciliation between the two sides appear grim. However, such reconciliation is more important than ever. Hong Kong was once a model for the coexistence of Western democracy and Chinese one-party rule. Its political fate is a bellwether for the future relationship between China and the West.

As such, it is important to build trust among young people on both sides of the divide. Only when they start understanding each other’s history and grasping their respective cultural nuances does reconciliation stand a chance.

***Zoe Leung** is the director of Track 2 Diplomacy at the George H.W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations. **Eric Yang** is an undergraduate student at Harvard College studying history and government. He is a research intern at the George H.W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations.
