

DEMOCRACY IN PERIL



Issue 5 – January 2022
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FROM THE EDITOR

In our first issue of Sustainable Development Observer for 2022 we focus on the theme of 'Democracy In Peril'. Unfortunately we cannot avoid taking a dim view of the current state of democracy because the very people who preach it have weaponized it, thus making campaigns for democracy seem hypocritical in nature.

We have reproduced (on this page) a section of an article from the American ozy.com social media site, that gives an unique insight into the practice of democracy in India that reflects the true nature of a democratic society. While it is true that India has a thriving middle class of about 600 million, yet, there is almost an equal number of people who live in abject poverty, which successive Indian governments since independence have failed to address adequately. This is in fact the theme of this issue, where we question whether the type of democracy - India and the West have - need to be embedded with a development rights perspective, that China is advocating at the moment.

In my article on "geo-political battle in Asia" I address this issue, while Simone Galimberti argues that democracy needs a new social order. David Robbie from New Zealand looking at the recent independence referendum in French-ruled New Caledonia looks at how the imperial power manipulated democracy to achieve their objective and deny the indigenous people their freedom. The article on Myanmar, we hope would raise the question whether the political campaign to unseat a military regime could solve the country's poverty problem? In fact, is it making it worse?

We also have an interesting viewpoint from Dr Ram Puniyani on whether Indian democracy is under threat from the government of Prime Minister Modi. And a view point from America by Albenaz Azmanova and Marchall Auerback who argues that America is a country ruled by an Oligarchy and it is a disfunctioning democracy, as shown by the Capitol Hill insurrection.

Our focus article this issue is about the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize - though the two recipients from Russia and Philippines are worthy winners for fighting for press freedom in their own countries - yet, we question whether Wikileaks founder Julian Assange should have been given the award because he exposed much more powerful global forces that are threatening our freedoms by practicing "watchdog" journalism to its core. By giving him the prize, the Nobel committee would have expressed a more powerful message on behalf of global democracy.

Dr Kalinga Seneviratne - Editor

Cover Photo Credit: Biden's Democracy Summit (top) - Council of Councils, and Red Shirt pro-Democracy protests in Bangkok (below) - Kalinga Seneviratne

Something To Think About

India - The Democratic Bulwark

The numbers are unparalleled - yet they don't tell the whole story. More than **600 million voters** queued up at more than a **million polling booths** over six weeks to register their ballots in the country's 2019 national elections - no other democratic exercise in the world comes close.

But to truly appreciate the uniqueness of the modern Indian experiment, consider this: It's the only major postcolonial nation that gained independence in the 20th century and has since been a consistent, multi-party democracy with peaceful transfers of power. Its military - one of the world's most powerful - has never attempted a coup. As many as **37 parties** are represented in its directly elected lower house of Parliament. Like other major democracies, though, India is riddled with flaws, in particular its deep economic divides, religious fissures and casteism that persists despite laws banning discrimination. Still, India's resilience makes it an exemplar for other young democracies.

What makes modern India even more remarkable is that it has built its achievements with the kind of ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity that has made many nations splinter. India's independence was accompanied by the **bloody convulsions of partition**, when the subcontinent was cleaved into Hindu-majority but secular India and an Islamic Pakistan, sparking the largest mass migration in modern history.

Today India, with the mighty Himalayas as its crown and the Indian Ocean splashing at its feet, has **19,500 languages** and far too many gods and religions to count - with different food habits and film industries every few miles. Especially since 2014, the country has witnessed increased religious fissures. Yet for the most part, the country has balanced its complex identity with its soaring ambitions better than many other nations can boast.

The country is now a bigger economy than Britain, which ruled over it just 73 years ago. With the world's fifth-largest GDP, India was the world's fastest-growing major economy before the pandemic struck, driving it into a recession. But India's economic fundamentals are strong. Its middle class of more than 600 million people represents a giant market that the world's biggest companies and investors are eager to tap.

With an education system that has produced some of the corporate world's biggest figures, from former Pepsi chief Indra Nooyi to Google's boss Sundar Pichai and Microsoft's CEO Satya Nadella, and you have a recipe for success that few nations can match.

Source: ozy.com (USA)



US Hosts Summits Promoting Democracy But 83 are Missing from List of Invitees

By Thalif Deen

New York - A head of state, who presided over an authoritarian regime in Southeast Asia, was once asked about rigged elections in his country. “I promised I will give you the right to vote,” he was quoted as saying, perhaps half-jokingly “But I did not say anything about counting those votes.”

When the Biden administration hosts two virtual Summits on Democracy, most of the world’s authoritarian and family run countries, whose elections, if any, were largely fraudulent, have been barred from the meetings scheduled to take place December 9-10.

The US has invited 110 of the 193 UN member states for the two summits that will focus on “challenges and opportunities facing democracies and provide a platform for leaders to announce both individual and collective commitments, reforms, and initiatives to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad,” according to the US State Department.

The non-invitees include some of America’s strongest political and military allies in the Middle East and Africa, including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE)—who are also some of the most prolific markets for US weapons.

Amongst Middle Eastern allies, Iraq and Israel are on the invitee list. But Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is on the blacklist.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is out, so is Russia, two permanent members of the UN Security Council. But in a resounding political slap to PRC, the Republic of China (Taiwan) has been invited to the summit.

In South Asia, the non-invitees include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka but India and Pakistan have been invited. In Southeast Asia, Singapore, a close US ally in the region, is not on the list of participants. Also blacklisted are the military regimes in Myanmar and Sudan.

US President Joe Biden said last February: “Democracy doesn’t happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it.”

Since day one, according to the State Department, the Biden-Harris Administration has made clear that renewing democracy in the United States and around the world is essential to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time.

The summit is expected to focus on “challenges and opportunities facing democracies and will provide a platform for leaders to announce both individual and collective commitments, reforms, and initiatives to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad.”

For the United States, “the summit will offer an opportunity to listen, learn, and engage with a diverse range of actors whose support and commitment is critical for global democratic renewal.” It will also showcase one of democracy’s unique strengths: the ability to acknowledge its imperfections and confront them openly and transparently, so that we may, as the United States Constitution puts it, “form a more perfect union,” the State Department said.

In advance of the first summit, the US has consulted with experts from government, multilateral organizations, philanthropies, civil society, and the private sector to solicit bold, practicable ideas around three key themes: defending against authoritarianism; addressing and fighting corruption; and promoting respect for human rights.

At the summit, world leaders will be encouraged to announce specific actions and commitments to meaningful internal reforms and international initiatives that advance the Summit’s goals. These pledges will include domestic and international initiatives that counter authoritarianism, combat corruption, and promote respect for human rights.

Civil society will be represented on panels and in townhalls as a part of the official program. Their inclusion is based on a variety of factors including geographic representation, political context, and subject matter expertise.

The virtual Summit is to be followed, in roughly a year’s time, by an in-person Summit.

Meanwhile, the United Nations, which is one of the strongest advocates of multiparty democracy, once made an unsuccessful attempt to bar military leaders from addressing the world body.

In 2004, when the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor to the present African Union (AU), barred coup leaders from participating in African summits, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan of Ghana singled it out as a future model to punish military dictators worldwide. Annan went one step further and said he was hopeful that one day the General Assembly, the highest policy making body in the Organization, would follow in the footsteps of the OAU and bar leaders of military governments from addressing the General Assembly.

Annan's proposal was a historic first. But it never came to pass in an institution where member states, not the Secretary-General, exercise the highest levels of political power. The outspoken Annan also said that “billions of dollars of public funds continue to be stashed away by some African leaders—even while roads are crumbling, health systems are failing, school children have neither books nor desks nor teachers, and phones do not work.” He also lashed out at African leaders who overthrow democratic regimes to grab power by military means.

Meanwhile, some of the military leaders who addressed the UN included Fidel Castro of Cuba, Col Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya, Amadou Toure of Mali (who assumed power following a coup in 1991 but later served as a democratically elected President), and Jerry Rawlings of Ghana (who seized power in 1979, executed former heads of state but later served as a civilian president voted into power in democratic elections).

As the International Herald Tribune reported, Rawlings was “Africa’s first former military leader to allow the voters to choose his successor in a multi-party election”. In October 2020, the New York Times reported that at least 10 African civilian leaders refused to step down from power and instead changed their constitutions to serve a third or fourth term—or serve for life. These leaders included Presidents of Guinea (running for a third term), Cote d’Ivoire, Uganda, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ghana and Seychelles, among others.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 26 November 2021] [Photo Credit (at top):OECD Development Matters Blog]



The Geo-Political Battle in Asia About Democracy

Analysis by Kalinga Seneviratne

Sydney - With the geo-political battle between China and the United States gathering momentum in Asia, whoever can define democracy better and demonstrate that it works for the betterment of the people, could win the battle in coming years.

One may argue that there is no such battle for democracy because it is a battle between democracy and authoritarianism with China clearly in the latter box. But, while the Covid pandemic has been devastating the world, China has moved aggressively to redefine democracy as a development right accusing the West, and the US, of weaponizing human rights and democracy.

They won a small victory at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in July last year when a resolution on the role of development in promoting and protecting human rights for the wellbeing of the “entire population” was adopted by 31 votes to 14 with even India voting for it along with other Asian countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh and Nepal. Voting against it were mainly European nations plus South Korea and Japan.

The resolution called upon the UNHRC to organize a regional seminar before the 2023 sessions to define the role of development in promoting human rights. It is in this process a new definition of democracy could be born and the Asian media need to pay attention to it because the western media would ignore it.

In a speech to the Canberra Press Club in August 2020, China’s deputy ambassador to Australia Wang Xining said, “the overarching mandate of the government, and the Communist Party of China, is to meet the ever-growing needs of our people for a better life and promote comprehensive human development and common prosperity, by eradicating poverty, upgrading productivity, optimizing the allocation and improving livelihood”. He described this as “building socialist democracy”.

Later responding to a question by an Australian journalist he said that it is the wrong attitude to say, “mine (western) is democracy and yours is not”. He argued that it is a narrow interpretation and an empty political slogan. “I think democracy is not the end, it is the means (of socio-economic development)” noted Wang.

In the opening speech to his own Democracy Summit in December 2021, US President Joe Biden acknowledged that people all over the world are dissatisfied with democratic governments because they feel these are failing to deliver their needs. “In my view, this is the defining challenge of our time,” he said. At the same time, he warned that autocratic governments “justify their repressive policies and practices as a more efficient way to address today’s challenges”.

Referring to rare bipartisan legislation he has just signed, The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Biden said: “This legislation will make a generational investment to deliver what people need most in the 21st century: clean water, safe roads, high-speed broadband Internet —all of which strengthen our democracy by creating good-paying union jobs”. He also added that soon he hopes to sign the “Build Back Better” plan, “which will be an extraordinary investment in our people and our workers”.

Interestingly, Biden’s definition of democracy seems on the same wavelength as that of China’s development rights-focused socialist democracy.

Addressing the same summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to distance India from the western origins of democracy by noting that India's democratic tradition is over 2500 years old. Pointing out to the 10th-century "Uttaramerur" inscription that codified the principles of democratic participation, he said, "this very democratic spirit and ethos had made ancient India one of the most prosperous. Centuries of the colonial rule could not suppress the democratic spirit of the Indian people".

In his surprisingly short speech, he offered India's expertise in holding free and fair elections, and warned that nations need to "jointly shape global norms for emerging technologies like social media and crypto-currencies, so that they are used to empower democracy, not to undermine it".

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government recently enacted new Internet control laws that target social media companies, digital news services and curated video streaming sites. R. Jagannathan, editor of pro-BJP Swarajya magazine while acknowledging that internet-based social media has given a voice to the voiceless in society, argues that tech platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter "are now brazen enough to censor those they disagree with". Thus, these platforms that "practice cancel culture with a vengeance" need to be regulated and "held accountable for what they do or do not".



Anti-Monarchist protestors in Bangkok, September 2020. Photo Credit Prachatai

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by western agencies and used as a weapon for human rights and democracy campaigns in Asia have come under the scrutiny of many Asian governments. They use young people, and these campaigns often spill over to the streets and create social chaos such as seen recently in the anti-monarchist demonstrations in Thailand and the democracy protests in Hong Kong. In both countries the government moved to enact authoritarian laws.

In early January, the Thai government led by former military leader Prayut-Chan-o-cha, flagged legislation to control NGO funding in the country. The NGOs Operations Act is expected to be passed by parliament soon that would require NGOs to submit their activity plans for government's approval in advance to ensure that "public order" and "good morals" are not affected. The Thais treasure their monarchy as providing social stability to the country by protecting its Buddhist and national identity.

In Hong Kong, protests that started in June 2019 against a proposed extradition treaty spiralled into violent demonstrations over months with involvement of foreigners in many spheres of the movement that alarmed the Xi Jinping government in Beijing. China accused protest leaders of meeting with US politicians in Washington, and the Chinese media compared the uprising to the 'Arab Spring' protests a decade ago that brought social and political chaos to the Middle East.

Thus, China moved quickly to crack down on the protesters with legal means, enact "national security" legislation and hold elections last year which they dubbed as "patriots only" elections. Hong Kong authorities insisted that the security law imposed in 2020, was needed to ensure stability after the protracted protests that rocked the Asian financial hub in 2019.

In 2021, the Modi government called Twitter's policies in India of censoring right-wing content as attempts to "dictate terms to the world's largest democracy" and in his Democracy Summit speech he did not pitch India as a liberal democratic alternative to China. This would leave the question open whether Asian nations could see the common ground when it comes to development rights.

While the West tries to paint it as a "debt trap", China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is increasingly seen across the region as providing opportunities to expand trade and development. On the other hand, the western alternative in the form of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is seen as what the name suggests—a military alliance that could trigger conflicts rather than development cooperation.

Earlier in January, during a visit to Colombo, when Sri Lanka asked China to help restructure its debts to the country, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a forum on the development of Indian Ocean Island countries to build consensus and synergy, and promote common development, in which Sri Lanka can play an important role. Interestingly, there is an alternative QUAD being developed between Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and China that would use the Chinese built harbours in the

Indian ocean along with the development of industrial zones around it to build a new development architecture for the region.

In a response to the Democracy Summit, China's foreign ministry in a statement released in the *Global Times* said the US is trying to "thwart democracy under the pretext of democracy". It argued that the people need to judge the success of democracy in terms of a country's development and social progress, and the delivery of a happy life for the people.

By pushing for so-called "democratic reforms" and inciting "colour revolutions", the statement argues "democracy has become a weapon of mass destruction" to interfere in other countries' internal affairs.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 15 January 2022] (Photo Credit (at the top): Wikimedia Commons)



Democracy Needs A New Social Order

Viewpoint by Simone Galimberti

Kathmandu - Amid a constellation of special commemorative days highlighting issues of global concerns, there are three, though officially unrelated to each other, share a common thread.

I am referring to Mandela Day, International Day of Democracy and Martin Luther King Day, each respectively celebrated on July 18, September 15, and the 3rd week of January of every year.

With Mandalay Day and Martin Luther King Day, the latter known as MLK Day, are a tribute to two modern history's icons, both focused on civil and political rights of those who were then second- or third-class citizens, it is essential to focus democracy, a system, at least theoretically, capable of ensuring dignity and equality to all.

That's why it was a paramount moment for the United Nations when, under the leadership of President Corazon C. Aquino of the Philippines and inspired by People's Power Revolution there, a resolution of the General Assembly, back on December 13, 2007, decided to observe a day "to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies".

This is how International Democracy Day was born. Yet yearning for democracy is not an end in itself but rather it is part of a broader effort to achieve social justice, the thread that binds these three commemorations. Claimed by many, social justice is often elusive and distant, so out of reach that citizens get disillusioned and frustrated with governments, unable to provide for it.

The state's incapacity to assure the fulfillment of its duties in terms of equality and empowerment, two key preconditions for people's ability to develop their agency and claim for their rights, essential for social justice, is at the center of the ongoing discussions on the feeble state of democracy worldwide.

Dr. Martin Luther King, and many of his civil rights peers in the USA, always linked the quest for political and civil rights with the overarching goal of ensuring Afro-Americans could live with dignity and respect.

For sure, it was a political battle, the right to vote, still a very real issue these days in the USA but then as now, it is much more than ensuring equal franchise and equal political rights. As in the case of Nelson Mandela for black South Africans, Dr. King wanted a system, not only politically but also socio-economically, where Afro-Americans could thrive and live to the fullest of their capacities and abilities.

In an unfair and deeply unjust context with unequal power relations, Dr. King claimed for special measures, “special, compensatory measures” in jobs, education and other realms” as he wrote in “Why Can’t We Wait”, one of his magisterial writings published in 1963. Yet talking about compensation or affirmative legislation is becoming more and more divisive and polarizing.

It is surely so in the United States of America, but similar patterns are to be found in any conversation about exploitation and abuses committed by the powerful towards the oppressed, peoples, their cultures, and their smashed civilizations.

Both in the case of colonialism and with it, one of the most dehumanizing “commercial” byproducts, slavery, we are nowhere near a general consensus about the moral urgency to do something to acknowledge and reverse past injustices and crimes.

Perhaps the only ray of hope is the settlement, still very controversial and disputed, that Germany decided to pay to Namibia for the atrocities, committed between the 1904 and 1908, a human carnage classified as genocide. Yet also in this case, we are talking about a ridiculously low amount, a pure symbolic 1.1 billion euro over 30 years.

Yet as important readdressing past injustices could have been and still can be, the focus of Dr. King and Nelson Mandela was not just the pursuit of tools that would have guaranteed a role as equal for their own people. It was a much deeper struggle to transform the system, not just the accommodation of millions of dispossessed and disenfranchised into a system deeply flawed at its roots.

The end goal was to create a new order, a new social contract. Social justice was at the base of this vision, and it was at the centre of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela’ civil strife and interestingly, in both cases, their attention on their domestic issues, did not preclude them from embracing it beyond their nations’ borders.

In the case of the former, his contest focused on uplifting black Americans was tied to the resistance to unequal power relations and injustices outside the USA. Dr. King, rejecting the status quo within the USA, was at the same time striving for a battle for civil and political rights aimed at creating a better and more just world.

“We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu,” Dr. King writes in a chapter of *Where Do We go From Here: Chaos or Community*. “Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.”

Human rights, people’s empowerment, income equality and fair opportunities, these are all pillars of the just society everywhere. It is a society that puts a premium on the pursuit of a common good that shines because it is underpinned by social justice, and it is powered by people’s desire to be part of the change.

It is hard to find, even in the so-called liberal democracies, political systems that are truly centred on the people’s rights to participate. This is one of the most overlooked aspects of the global human rights blueprint.

Yet achieving and implementing citizens’ rights, of political, economic and societal nature, the same rights that we normally associate to Dr. King and Nelson Mandela’s life journeys, cannot really happen unless the citizens reclaim their space to participate and their right to be involved.

We are wrong if we think there is only few ways to get in the “arena” and just few can enter it. Instead, there are many ways to involve as many persons as possible, including volunteering your time, energies, and skills on the ground to help those most in need.

Very close to it and aligned in purpose and aims, in what it is a continuum it is activism, an effort to bring systematic change through better policies.

These are some of the starting points of a journey towards higher and better forms of people’s participation. Citizens of the world need to step up.

Better and more inclusive decision making, enabling progressive public policies must come through people’s realization that participation is a goal but at the same time, a means to achieve social justice.

A true democratic system is one able to realize people’s aspirations, especially those of the left behind, not as a gift from above but as a common quest involving everyone.

As Dr. King said “now is the time to make real the promises of democracy”. Only a new framework where everyone is encouraged and inspired to participate will enable the changes Dr. King and Nelson Mandela demanded. These are still the changes we are all still desperately in need of.

** Simone Galimberti is the Co-Founder of ENGAGE, an NGO partnering with youths living with disabilities. Opinions expressed are personal.*

[IDN-InDepthNews – 17 January 2022] [Photo credit(top): The King Centre]

New Caledonia Vote to Stay with France Is a Hollow Victory It Will Only Ratchet Up Tensions

by David Robie



Keeping the peace ... French police in Noumea for the third and final independence referendum. (Photo Credit: Caledonia TV screenshot APR)

Auckland - “Loyalist” New Caledonians handed France the decisive victory in the third and final referendum on independence it wanted in 12 December vote.

But it was a hollow victory, with pro-independence Kanaks delivering Paris a massive rebuke for its three-decade decolonisation strategy.

The referendum is likely to be seen as a failure, a capture of the vote by settlers without the meaningful participation of the Indigenous Kanak people. Pacific nations are unlikely to accept this disenfranchising of Indigenous self-determination.

In the final results on Sunday night, 96.49 per cent said “non” to independence and just 3.51 per cent “oui”. This was a dramatic reversal of the narrow defeats in the two previous plebiscites in 2018 and 2020.

However, the negative vote in this final round was based on 43.9 per cent turnout, in contrast to record 80 per cent-plus turnouts in the two earlier votes. This casts the legitimacy of the vote in doubt, and is likely to inflame tensions.

One of the telling results in the referendum was in Tiendanite, the traditional home village of celebrated Kanak independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou. He negotiated the original Matignon Accord in 1988, which put an end to the bloodshed that erupted during the 1980s after a similar failed referendum on independence. In his village, it was apparently a total boycott, with not a single vote registered.

In the remote northern Belep islands, only 0.6 per cent of residents cast a vote. On the island of Lifou in the mainly Kanak Loyalty Islands, some of the polling stations had no votes. In the Kanak

strongholds of Canala and Hiènghe on the main island of Grande Terre, less than 2 percent of the population cast a vote.

The result will no doubt be a huge headache for French President Emmanuel Macron, just months away from the French presidential elections next April. Critics are suggesting his insistence on pressing ahead with the referendum in defiance of the wide-ranging opposition could damage him politically.

However, Macron hailed the result in Paris, saying, "Tonight, France is more beautiful because New Caledonia has decided to stay part of it." He said a "period of transition" would begin to build a common project "respecting the dignity of everyone".

Pro-Independence leaders denounced the result, with the seven-party coalition steering the boycott declaring that the referendum was not in the spirit of the 1998 Noumea Accord and the United Nations resolutions on the territory's decolonisation.

A leading New Caledonian pro-independence leader, Roch Wamytan, who was a signatory for the 1998 Noumea Accord which provided for three referendums by 2022, said his side would not recognise the referendum result, describing it as illegitimate and bogus.

French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the left France Unbowed (La France Insoumise) party, said the outcome was a catastrophe. He added that the government had destroyed the consensus process by imposing a referendum date and triggering a huge boycott by the pro-independence side.

Pro-independence Kanak parties had urged postponement of the referendum due to the COVID crisis in New Caledonia, and the fact the vote was not due until October 2022. The customary Kanak Senate, comprising traditional chiefs, had declared a mourning period of one year for the mainly Indigenous victims of the COVID surge in September that had infected more than 12,000 people and caused 280 deaths.

While neighbouring Vanuatu also called for the referendum to be postponed, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) provided a ministerial monitoring team. The influential Melanesian Spearhead Group (comprised of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia's independence coalition), refused to recognise the "unilateral" referendum, saying this was "a crucial time for Melanesian people in New Caledonia to decide their own future."

A coalition of Pacific civil society organisations and movement leaders joined the opposition and condemned Paris for "ignoring" the impact the health crisis had "on the ability of Kanaks to participate in the referendum and exercise their basic human right to self-determination."

A trio of pro-independence advocates had also travelled to New York last week with New Caledonia Congress president Roch Wamytan and declared at the United Nations that a plebiscite without Kanak participation had no legitimacy and the independence parties would not recognise the result.

Pro-independence leaders insist they will not negotiate with Paris until after the French presidential elections. They have also refused to see French Overseas Minister Sebastien Lecornu, who arrived in Noumea at the weekend. They regard the minister as pandering to the anti-independence leaders in the territory.

Another referendum is now likely in mid-2023 to determine the territory's future status within France, but with independence off the table. Some of France's overseas territories, such as French Polynesia, have considerably devolved local powers. It is believed New Caledonia may now be offered more local autonomy than it has.

New Caledonia is critically important to France's projection of its Indo-Pacific economic and military power in the region, especially as a counterbalance to growing Chinese influence among independent Pacific countries. Its nickel mining industry and reserves, important for manufacturing stainless steel, batteries and mobile phones, and its maritime economic zone are important to Paris.

Ironically, France's controversial loss of a lucrative submarine deal with Australia in favour of a nuclear sub partnership with the US and UK enhanced New Caledonia's importance to Paris.

The governments in Australia and New Zealand have been cautious about the referendum, not commenting publicly on the vote. But a young Kanak feminist artist, Marylou Mahé, wrote an article widely published in New Zealand last weekend explaining why she and many others refused to take part in a vote considered “undemocratic and disrespectful” of Kanak culture.

"As a young Kanak woman, my voice is often silenced, but I want to remind the world that we are here, we are standing, and we are acting for our future. The state's spoken word may die tomorrow, but our right to recognition and self-determination never will."

** The writer Dr David Robie is editor of Asia Pacific Report and founding editor of Pacific Journalism Review and former director of the Pacific Media Centre.*

[IDN-InDepthNews – 15 December 2021]

Arrest of Popular Benin Leader Evokes Protests of Lawyers for Democratic Opposition

By Lisa Vives



Supporters of Reckya Madougou gathered outside the court in Porto-Novo when the trial began. (Photo Credit: AFP)

New York - Reckya Madougou, one of the strongest challengers to Benin's autocratic leader, Patrice Talon, will be observing the next election from her cell in jail. The 47-year-old activist was found guilty of conspiring to assassinate political figures and sentenced to 20 years behind bars.

Madougou was the head of the party Les Démocrates and had been the face of “Don't touch my constitution!”—a civil society campaign that rallied against leaders seeking to extend their reign under the guise of constitutional reform.

The movement spread across West Africa. Supporters say she could have been Benin's first female presidential candidate from a major party. But Madougou's historic bid for the presidency ended abruptly when security agents arrested her after a rally protesting the president's controversial electoral reforms.

Madougou was one of several Benin opposition leaders banned from running in an election in April in which Talon won a second term with 86 percent of the vote.

Critics say Talon, one of the richest men in Francophone Africa today, has eliminated almost all possibility of legitimate opposition. The judiciary's independence has evaporated. Talon's former personal lawyer became president of Benin's Constitutional Court.

A new judicial body, the Economic Crime and Terrorism Court, or Criet, has targeted Talon's political rivals. After the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights repeatedly ruled against his administration's policies, Talon's government prevented the court from hearing cases brought against him by individuals and nongovernmental organizations

“The arbitrary arrest of opponents has led to the degradation of democracy in Benin,” said Oumar Ndong, academic director of the African Center for Strategic Intelligence in Dakar, Senegal.

“There was no justice,” said Essowe Batamoussi, the judge who fled Benin and has applied for asylum in France, in an interview with the Washington Post. “We received an empty file and a threat: If we did not put her in jail, we were in danger.”

Benin was long praised for its thriving multi-party democracy in a troubled region. But critics say the West African state's democracy has steadily eroded under Talon, a 63-year-old cotton magnate first elected in 2016.

"It's a sad day for our justice system," one of her lawyers, Robert Dossou, told the AFP news service. "I maintain there is no proof."

[IDN-InDepthNews – 14 December 2021]

Urban Poverty Rates in Myanmar Set to Triple, Warns New UN Survey

By Caroline Mwangi

Yangon/ New York - By early 2022, nearly half of Myanmar's 55 million population—some 25 million people—will be living below the national poverty line, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). A survey leaves no doubt that the country's poverty headcount is likely to return to levels not seen since 2005, effectively erasing 15 years of pre-pandemic economic growth.



Children carrying buckets of water Photo Credit: UNDP Myanmar

"The rising levels of poverty is not just about the lack of incomes to survive but we are also seeing a significant risk to nutrition, health and education, which will negatively impact on the human capital of the next generation," said the survey report. It adds: Urban poverty in Myanmar will triple under the combined threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing political crisis.

The People's Pulse Survey, a poll of respondents across Myanmar taken in May and June of 2021, measured the socioeconomic situation of households since the political transition in February 2021. Kanni Wignaraja, Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, expressed alarm at Myanmar's rapid descent into a state of fragility. "A slide into poverty of this scale could mean the disappearance of the middle class - a bad omen for any rapid recovery from this crisis," she noted.

According to the survey, States such as Chin and Rakhine, already in the grip of poverty prior to the pandemic and the military takeover, are projected to retain high poverty levels. But in major urban areas like Mandalay and Yangon, there will not only be more poor but those already poor will fall further below the poverty line.

The survey indicates that the textile, tourism, hospitality, and construction sectors have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic and the political upheaval, as have small and medium enterprises. These industries are concentrated in Myanmar's urban areas, where congestion, poor infrastructure, and limited access to piped water and other services are exacerbating the spread of the virus.

The survey also indicated a mass depletion of household savings, with about one-third of families in urban areas using savings to supplement their reduced incomes and half claiming to have no savings left. Some 27 percent of urban households report having sold a motorbike, often the main mode of transportation, to make ends meet.

Cash is in increasingly short supply. Myanmar's largest Bank, KBZ, has been limiting cash withdrawals to approximately USD120 a day in the local currency, adds the survey. Meanwhile, international remittances, a safety line for many vulnerable households, have been reduced by 10 percent.

The report warns that the rising poverty rates could produce severe knock-on effects for the country's overall development.

"We estimate that the country needs to see 4 per cent of GDP per year spent on social safety net measures. In a context where the economy is contracting sharply and revenues are collapsing, the absence of urgent remedial social investment could see households stuck in permanent poverty for many years to come."

[IDN-InDepthNews – 28 December 2021]



The Opposition in India Should Focus on Restoration of Democracy

Viewpoint by Dr Ram Puniyani

New Delhi - One will be amazed to compare India of today with the same a decade ago. BJP's (Bharatiya Janata Party) one of two major political parties in India getting a majority in the Lok Sabha (2014) has changed the political, social and economic scenario in an adverse direction. The rising prices, the free fall of the economy with GDP at an all-time low, with India falling down on hunger index and the massive rise in poverty-unemployment along with rising of corporate might reflects the economic plight of the citizens.

The erosion of democratic ethos, parliamentary practices, the decline in the autonomy of democratic institutions like Election Commission, Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Intelligence (CBI) and the role of a section of the judiciary in not preserving values of the Indian Constitution are out in the open.

The state of federalism is worrying again and many of the regional parties-states are feeling that Union Government is trampling over their rights. This has been most manifest in the Corona vaccination drive as one example. The social plight of Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities and the ruling parties' imposing Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), has made it clear to most sections of society about the need to have a Union Government which adheres to the norms of the Indian Constitution, pluralism and is inclusive.

BJP is a party that has the solid multipronged backing of 'Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh' (RSS), its lakhs of swayamsevaks (volunteers) and thousands of Pracharaks (propagandists). They claim to be working for a cultural organization but swing to the electoral arena in elections. The media's large section and IT cell have been built as a strong citadel for promoting BJP's electoral prospects.

The other powerful support comes from the corporate sector, which has determined to see Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, for the last couple of decades. On top of it BJP has raised a strong electoral mechanism from booth level to the top which ensures exploiting all the possibilities of victory of BJP even in an adverse situation. To add to its strength is its ways of making MLAs (Members of

Legislative Assemblies) to walk over to BJP to form Governments even when it is in minority, as we saw in the case of Goa, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh.

Two examples of its winning elections are its alliances and overwhelming resources. As for alliances time and over again, the likes of Late Ram Vilas Paswan stands out. Winning over-ambitious leaders is best exemplified in the case of Jyotiraditya Scindia. So, despite a large section of dissatisfied population, BJP has been increasing its grip over the electoral power in Centre and in many states. The amount of resources and efforts put in Bengal elections was phenomenal, still, it showed that a determined citizenry can ensure that all these actions may not succeed.

The opposition parties on one hand have not yet fully woken up to the fact that opposition unity based on the platform of plural, democratic agenda is the key to keep this party away from the seat of power. The results of the Assam elections should be an eye-opener, where despite a higher voting percentage Congress+ lost and a BJP+ polling less number of votes is occupying the seat of power. The main reason was the inability to form a joint alliance despite having a similar, though not exactly the same, agenda. The party of Akhil Gogoi, which contested separately did affect the results adversely.

There are many parties that make the show of coming for alliance but put forward such hard bargaining conditions that alliance is not struck, and the democratic vote is divided to the advantage of BJP. The case of AAP and Congress in the previous Punjab-Goa assembly elections is one such example.

So where does one go from here? In a recent article in Times of India, MP Pavan Varma, who was earlier expelled from the JDU (Janata Dal United) argues that regional parties do not add up to the pan India whole and for an effective opposition the role of Congress is central and crucial. He points out that "Congress is still the principal opposition party in states as far apart as Kerala and Assam. Even when reduced to just 52 seats in Lok Sabha in the 2019 parliament elections, it garnered 12 crore votes (BJP got 22 crore votes) and 20 % of the electoral vote share.

The joint alliance of regional and national parties is being recognized as the need of the hour more than before. The mismanagement of Corona has dented the carefully crafted charisma of Modi and even those who used to parrot the formulation that "jitega to Modi hi" (Modi alone will win) and that there is no alternative to Modi, realize that the dictatorial style and the highhanded pursuit of the sectarian nationalist politics of present regime are ruining the country all round.

The problem is that the fragmentation of opposition forces and egos and political ambitions of many of the leaders heading the coalition are so rigid that the alliances do not happen and a triangular fight ensues and BJP is by and large the beneficiary.

The oldest party of India, which had a central role in getting the country independence, should be realizing that the individual ambitions of the leaders have to be accommodated partly in the larger framework of principles of Indian Constitution. The economic agenda has to be inclusive the way UPA I (Congress with support of left) was focusing on the Rights-based approach of vast sections of the population.

Interestingly if the opposition unity does not come through and BJP with twin support of RSS and Corporate succeeds in repeating its performance of last two general elections, the worsening of the plight of the country is writ on the face of the country. Attempts should be intensified to build bridges between regional parties and the nationalist party. There is a need to evolve a minimum common program of saving the country from the agenda of sectarian nationalism, the marginalization's of religious minorities: Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis and women in general.

In a true spirit of Indian nationalism, all the activists of social movements also need to support such an initiative, as even the space for social movements needs to be reclaimed while saluting the young student-youth leaders who are taking all their might to articulate the democratic rights and ambitions of the common man.

** The writer is a former professor of biomedical engineering and former senior medical officer affiliated with the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (now Mumbai) and also a social activist and commentator.*

[IDN-InDepthNews – 10 July 2021] {Photo Credit(on top): RSS march in India – Hindustan Times}



Behind January 6 Insurrection: America Is an Oligarchy, Not A Functioning Democracy

Viewpoint by Albena Azmanova and Marshall Auerback

New York/ Brussels - While the majority of Americans deplored the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, it was troubling to see a YouGov poll indicating that 1 in 5 voters approved of the assault. Their attitudes were buttressed by a significant number of House and Senate Republicans who have egged on the matter by continuing to call into question the legitimacy of last November's election result. This is a sign that the rot in the American political system goes deep.

Upgrading the physical security around the country's political institutions is of little long-term value, especially if the activities that occur within them continue to manifest ongoing dysfunction worthy of a banana republic.

Let this be our wake-up call, America's "Beirut blast." The bomb explosion that devastated large parts of Beirut last summer was not an isolated, unfortunate occurrence, but the profound manifestation of decades of incompetence, complacency, and corruption in the Lebanese government - an outcome of the ruling classes' criminal neglect of essential public needs.

By the same token, the events of January 6 should be viewed as the point U.S. political dysfunction reached its breaking point. While the country still appears to remain economically powerful, it has become politically weak and socially fragile in ways characteristic of a society in decline.

The focus on the relatively small group that broke into the Capitol as a result of lax security is akin to focusing on the Beirut blast wreckage to the exclusion of all else. Far more significant are the surveys of representative samples of Americans that reveal deepening mistrust of the core institutions and a growing commitment to sectarian interests which have, in many parts of the nation, superseded commitment to the republic itself.

This sheds a different light on the events. While the spark that ignited the violent pro-Trump upheaval was the incumbent's allegations that the November Presidential election was fraudulent, for many the assault on the Capitol was also an insurgency against the entire political class. "All these politicians work for us. We pay their salaries, we pay our taxes. And what do we get? Nothing. All of them inside are traitors" - as a member of the mob stated.

On this particular point, the grievances of the violent mob and the findings of scholars align: America is an oligarchy, not a functioning democracy, as the detailed study by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page argued in 2014. Thus, much as this was an assault on American democracy, the storming of the Capitol was also a sign that American democracy had already failed. Surely, these clumsy “revolutionaries” did not storm the Capitol because they are living the American Dream - and they are blaming, unsurprisingly, the whole political class for their malaise.

Whenever economic explanations of this radicalization are attempted, inequality is singled out as the root of working-class discontent. Commentators from Joseph Stiglitz to Thomas Piketty or Emmanuel Saez relentlessly hammer on one theme above all others: an economic inequality that has deep roots in the political system. A cross-party consensus is now emerging on fighting inequality through redistribution - from raising the minimum wage to increasing unemployment benefits.

One reason why inequality has attracted so much attention is that it is easily measurable. Indeed, reports of the top 1% of Americans taking \$50 trillion from the bottom 90% easily appeal to our sense of injustice. However, there are studies of the white working class which reveal that despite the outrage about inequality, many in this demographic still admire the rich. Additionally, the singular focus on economic inequality obscures another phenomenon - the massive economic insecurity which is affecting broader swathes of the population beyond the ‘precariat’ (those in poorly paid and insecure jobs). While insecurity is not easy to measure and report, it is in fact at the root of the social malaise of Western societies.

Seeing economic precarity as a root cause also helps to better explain why so much of the working-class radicalization has taken a turn to the right. Right-wing populists specifically evoke language that triggers conservative instincts - the evocation of family, a desire for stability, for clinging strongly to what is familiar (“Make America Great Again”), as opposed to plunging into political experimentation with something new - with the “foreign”, to the American mind, European-style social democracy (especially when combined with “woke” issues that tend to alienate).

On the other hand, many on the libertarian right champion free market fundamentalism, which fosters competitive, rather than solidaristic attitudes - especially when public goods are converted into private rents via privatization, which in turn limits access to resources that mitigate the effects of that intense competition instead of enhancing social solidarity.

Even under recent Democratic Administrations, economic recovery from the 2008 financial meltdown happened through a growth in insecure employment. The services jobs that fueled U.S. economic growth for the past 40 years - until the pandemic began to destroy them - were numerous, but of low quality. The rise of neoliberalism at the expense of the conservative-liberal divide that preceded it has enabled employers to tilt the terms of our capitalist economies heavily toward capital and away from labor, via the evisceration of unions, the deconstruction of the welfare state, and the privatization of public services.

Most importantly, funding for public services and social programs has been persistently slashed. It is this impoverishment of the public commons that has increased the importance of personal wealth in securing essential goods such as healthcare and education. Thus, economic inequality matters enormously, but as a grave symptom of a broader problem - that of massive, and growing, fragility of society as a whole. The erosion of the public sector precludes access to many of the social supports that have historically buttressed economic security.

As a result, the American economy has begun to resemble a new, modern feudalism with a small technocracy dominated by Silicon Valley tech overlords and Wall Street billionaires at the top, and a large, uneducated, rapidly growing serf class at the bottom with no social safety net to protect it. . Even if the wealth gap were to be considerably reduced by transfer from rich to poor, precarity would persist because it is rooted not in inequality, but in a depleted public sector, in a public authority that has abandoned the public and increasingly become a vehicle for predatory capitalism.

The pandemic exacerbated both the inequality and the precarity. Wall Street and the stock market have boomed over the past several months, generating affluence imbued with unprecedented levels of risk. At the same time, job growth has collapsed, and unemployment remains stubbornly high. Millions of Americans have withdrawn from the labor force, their jobs likely destroyed for good as the long-term impact of the economic shutdown wreaks havoc in many industries.

That has become a literal life consequence for working people in a system that continues to introduce restrictions to curb the pandemic. It is a particularly acute paradox in the United States, where healthcare remains largely predicated to employment via employer-funded healthcare systems.

So we have the makings of a vicious cycle: restrictions are introduced to slow the pandemic, which in turn creates further job losses, which in turn can mean loss of employment and, hence, loss of access to healthcare provision. The very policies designed to safeguard health, then, ultimately exacerbate the problem. Add all of these factors together, align it with a demagogue working to undermine an election result, and you get the ingredients for a very poisonous outbreak of the kind we witnessed on January 6.

The forces that led to the evisceration of working-class security is now extending to those ensconced in historically well-paid jobs, from lawyers to IT engineers. Even in the midst of a severe recession and a rapidly accelerating pandemic, policy makers remain remarkably indifferent to these trends and the ongoing precarity. They persist in believing that what has happened is merely a disruption to a solid structure, a deviation from normality, all of which can be rectified by the right mix of policy stimulus.

A growing political consensus in the United States to tackle inequality appears to be emerging (especially in the wake of the recent Georgia run-off election, which put the Senate back under the control of the Democratic Party). But no matter how equal society becomes in terms of wealth distribution, without a dramatic government investment in public services, notably education, healthcare provision, and job security, trust and disillusionment in American institutions will persist, and with that also the rise of militancy by a radicalized underclass.

** The writers Albenia Azmanova is an associate professor of politics at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies and author of 'Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia' (2020). Marshall Auerback is a researcher at the Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, a fellow of Economists for Peace and Security, and a regular contributor to Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute – the original producers of this article.*

[IDN-InDepthNews – 17 January 2021] [Photo Credit (on top): Crowd of Trump supporters marching on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, ultimately leading the building being breached and several deaths. C BY-SA 4.0]



UN Members Should Stand Strong on Human Rights Funding

Viewpoint by Louis Charbonneau

United Nations, New York - United Nations member countries currently haggling over the organization's 2022 budget should stand firm against Russia and China-led efforts to slash funding for UN human rights work.

Every December, diplomats on the UN General Assembly's fiscal body, the Fifth Committee, hold negotiations on the UN budget. As in past years, China and Russia have been pushing to cut funding for a number of budget items related to human rights, according to sources familiar with the discussions.

Several important investigative mechanisms established by the UN Human Rights Council are on the agenda. These include an investigation into rights violations in Sri Lanka, another for widespread abuses in Belarus, one for rights violations across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and an international expert mechanism on rights violations by law enforcement officers against Africans and people of African descent.

The Fifth Committee also needs to address funding for a UN study on missing persons and identifying human remains in Syria and for the human rights work of the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS).

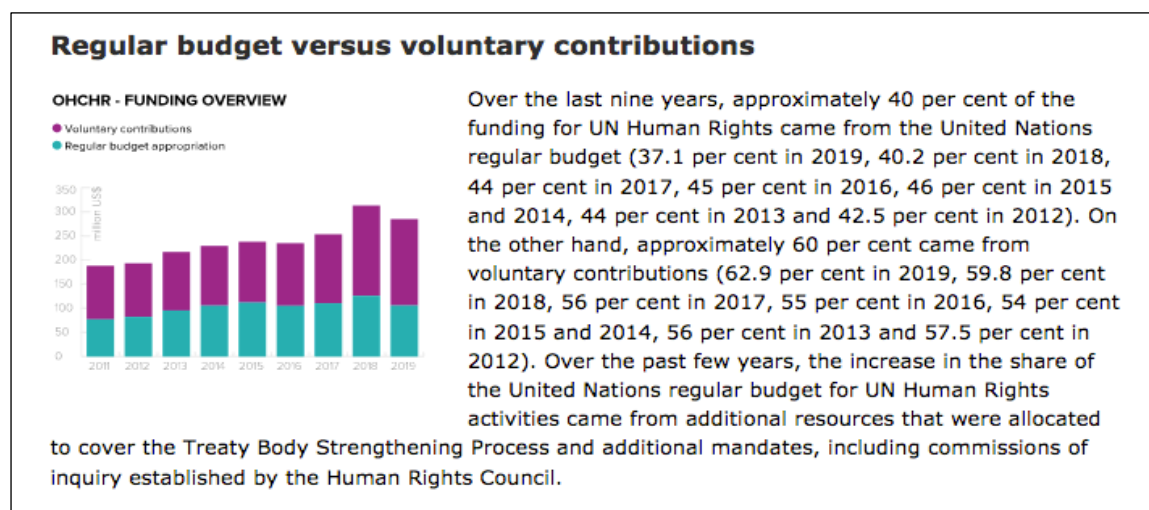
Budget negotiations around the UN's human rights pillar have become increasingly contentious in recent years as China, Russia, and their allies claim – unpersuasively- that human rights get too big a share of UN resources.

This year, the two Security Council members and Sri Lanka are fighting to cut funding and staff for the Sri Lanka accountability mechanism. Similarly, Russia and China are opposing funding for the Belarus probe, while vigorously resisting efforts to fund the UN study on missing persons in Syria. The Iranian delegation is also making a last-minute push against funding for the team of the special rapporteur on human rights in Iran.

Making matters worse, the UN's so-called independent budget assessment body is increasingly undermining efforts to fund UN human rights work by making what diplomats describe as “politicized” recommendations to reduce funding for rights-related activities.

The UN's human rights work is typically mandated by its key legislative bodies, the Security Council, General Assembly, or the Human Rights Council. Governments should continue to counter the Russian and Chinese push to defund human rights work and ensure all rights activities are fully funded. Compromising will only embolden Russia and China in their anti-rights agenda.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 22 December 2021] [Photo Credit(on top): Visit by the Secretary-General to the newly renovated GA Hall, 15 September 2014. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe]



Source: Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights of the United Nations



In India, NGOs face funding bans, reel under 'strangling' laws

For India's nonprofit sector, the new year has been a harbinger of grim news and a reminder of old struggles. Making use of a controversial law criticized by the UN Human Rights office, the Indian government in early January stripped nearly 6,000 NGOs of their permits needed to accept funding from overseas donors. India's Ministry of Home Affairs said that while it had canceled the licenses of some NGOs for violations of laws that regulate foreign donations, most other NGOs had failed to renew their old licenses.

Source: <https://www.devex.com/news/in-india-ngos-face-funding-bans-reel-under-strangling-laws-102404>

North blocks India's request for virtual ministerial on TRIPS waiver

In the face of the exploding COVID-19 cases due to the new Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and a groundswell of international support for the TRIPS waiver, the European Union and the United States along with other developed countries have blocked India's request for convening an urgent virtual ministerial conference at the WTO on the issue of the TRIPS waiver, said people familiar with the development.

Source: Third World Network - <https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2022/ti220104.htm>

Plastic Pandemic: The Ecological Fallout of COVID-19 and Policy Options for Sri Lanka

The lockdowns introduced in 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19 saw the narrative "nature is healing" gain prominence. However, the notion that nature, in the absence of people, was healing fizzled out fairly quickly with the emergence of fresh environmental challenges, most notably, the resurgence of single-use plastics. In fact, in the months following the lockdowns, reliance on plastics grew exponentially, with the scale of the negative environmental impacts far outweighing initial gains such as reduced air and noise pollution. This article examines the ecological fallout of the pandemic and suggests policy options for Sri Lanka to avert the looming environmental disaster.

Source: <http://southernvoice.org/plastic-pandemic-the-ecological-fallout-of-covid-19-and-policy-options-for-sri-lanka/>

Tourism industry needs fundamental 'rethink' in wake of COVID pandemic



In the three decades leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, world tourism grew steadily year on year. But in 2020, the industry suffered an unprecedented hit, accounting for a staggering 70% of the fall in global gross domestic product (GDP). The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has been constantly assessing the impact of the pandemic, and working hard to help kickstart the industry on behalf of millions around the world who rely on it. In a podcast interview Zoritsa Urosevic, UNWTO's Executive Director spoke in depth to UN News's Bessie Du, and highlighted the need to rethink the whole sector, boost rural tourism, and improve safety for travellers.

Listen to podcast via (11'35"):

<https://news.un.org/en/audio/2022/01/1109142>

How nature based solutions are transforming lives

Nature-based solutions is a concept that highlights the fact that people can proactively protect, manage or restore natural ecosystems, while significantly contributing to addressing six major challenges: climate change, food security, water security, human health, disaster risk, and social and economic development. IFAD has an important role to play through projects it supports, working with small-scale producers to help them adapt and build their resilience to shocks. This article provides some examples of how nature-based solutions are transforming lives.



Source: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/-/how-nature-based-solutions-are-transforming-lives?p1backurl=%252Fen%252Fweb%252Flatest%252Fgallery%253Fdelta%253D20%2526start%253D2>

'Normalise re-wearing clothes': Experts urge consumers to reduce impact of fashion on environment



SINGAPORE: Ms Taahira Mohamed Ayoob stopped buying fast fashion in an attempt to stand out from the crowd. She still wanted a variety of clothes to wear, so she turned to clothes swapping. But it has now become a way of life for her, fuelled by a desire to be more environmentally conscious.

Read More – Source: Channel News Asia https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/clothes-swapping-rental-fast-fashion-environment-impact-2392311?cid=braze-cna_CNA-Morning-Brief_newsletter_27122021_cna



Fighting for Gender Equality in Azerbaijan

Maryam Majidova is a co-founder of the Gender Hub social platform, which brings together advocacy groups, non-profit organisations, feminists, and human rights activists, to fight against gender-based violence. The platform also aims to empower women and girls and support them in overcoming gender-related challenges.

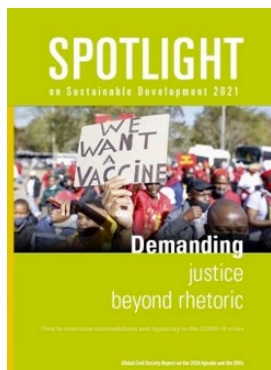
Source: UN News <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1108872>

Mass fish deaths in West Sumatra's Lake Maninjau point to extreme weather and overfishing

Thousands of fish have died in the past few weeks in Indonesia's Lake Maninjau, West Sumatra, highlighting both the environmental as well as human factors in contributing to the decade-old problem. In December, more than 1,700 tonnes of fish were found dead in the lake located about 115 km from West Sumatra's provincial capital of Padang, said authorities. The unexpected extreme weather due to climate change could be one of the causes of the mass fish deaths.

Read More – Source: Channel News Asia https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/indonesia-lake-maninjau-mass-fish-deaths-extreme-weather-overfishing-2429971?cid=braze-cna_CNA-Morning-Brief_newsletter_14012022_cna

Challenges Of Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) In The Post-COVID Era Recent Reports from International and Regional Think Tanks on SDG Issues



Download Report from -
[https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/download/Spotlight 2021_web_gesamt.c.pdf](https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/download/Spotlight%2021_web_gesamt.c.pdf)

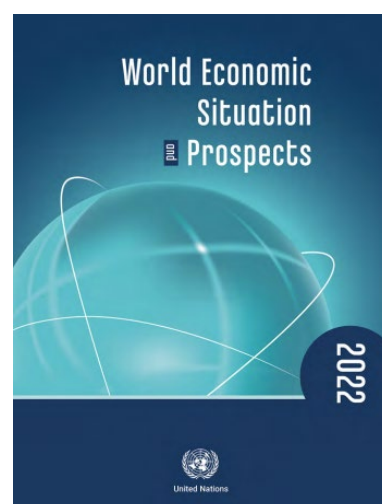
This is the sixth edition of the report Spotlight on Sustainable Development. Policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis have greatly exacerbated national and global inequalities. Blatant examples are the unfair distribution of care work, relying mainly on women and poorly remunerated if at all, and the global disparity in the distribution of vaccines. So far more than 60 percent of people in high-income countries have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, but less than 2 percent have done so in low-income countries. In view of this dramatic disparity, the "leave no one behind" commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development remains hollow.

The dominant interests of rich countries, and corporate powers continue to dominate political decision-making. Given the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis and the other unresolved global problems, most notably the climate emergency, it is high time for transformative policies at all levels. This is the key message of the Spotlight on Sustainable Development Report 2021.

According to the report, economic justice based on human rights can be achieved, but the trend towards privatizing, outsourcing and systematic dismantling of public services must be reversed. To combat growing inequality and build a socially just, inclusive post-COVID world, everyone must have equitable access to public services, first and foremost to healthcare and education. To prevent the COVID-19 pandemic being followed by a global debt and austerity pandemic, governments must be enabled to expand their fiscal policy space and properly tax multinational corporations and wealthy individuals, many of whom pay virtually no income tax at all. Fundamental reforms in the global financial architecture, including a debt workout mechanism beyond piecemeal relief measures for debt servicing, are long overdue. We offer as an alternative our "8 R"-agenda for transformational recovery.

A new United Nations report shows that the rapid spread of the Omicron COVID-19 variant has halted a rapid recovery, countering signs of solid growth at the end of 2021. The report titled, 2022 World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) cites problems contributing to the slowing down of the economy: new waves of COVID-19 infections, persistent labour market and lingering supply-chain challenges, as well as rising inflationary pressures.

According to the report, economic slowdown is expected to continue into next year. After an encouraging expansion of 5.5 per cent in 2021—as a result of sturdy consumer spending and some growth in investment, with trade in goods surpassing pre-pandemic levels—global output is projected to increase by only 4.0 per cent in 2022 and 3.5 per cent in 2023.



Download Report from -
https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/WESP2022_web.pdf



Download Report from - <http://southernvoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SDG-Implementation-Progress-Asia-Rhman-Khan-and-Sadique-2020.pdf>

Occasional Paper Series No. 67 published by Southern Voice

Southern Voice's flagship initiative on the State of the Sustainable Development Goals (SVSS) has generated country-level, evidence-based analysis to enrich the global dialogue on the 2030 Agenda. SVSS is neither a typical data-driven analysis of progress nor a traditional monitoring exercise of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Instead, through this research initiative, Southern Voice seeks to identify the 'second-generation' challenges of the global agenda along with the policy responses to address them.

The cross-country and regional analyses show that, on the one hand, national governments have made discernible progress in designing policy frameworks aligned with the Agenda. The governments have recognised the importance of not leaving the most vulnerable behind. On the other hand, weak coordination among relevant stakeholders and lack of horizontal coherence remain as challenges in achieving the Goals. Silo approaches continue to undermine national governments' ability to address systemic problems and create the necessary conditions to end poverty for all. The paucity of financial resources, along with no changes in the allocative priorities, are symptomatic of most of the

developing countries' drive towards SDGs. With these challenges in mind, the SVSS report identifies three layers of critical action and analysis.

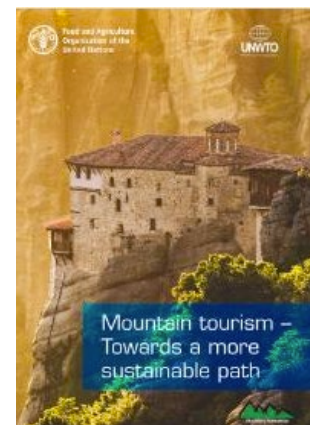
Policy Brief: Covid-19 and Transforming Tourism (United Nations Report)

Tourism, one of the most dynamic and most job intensive sectors of our times, has been one of the hardest hit by the current crisis. Millions of livelihoods are at stake and need to be supported. Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting economies, livelihoods, public services and opportunities on all continents. While sustaining the livelihoods dependent on the sector must be a priority, rebuilding tourism is also an opportunity for transformation with a focus on leveraging its impact on destinations visited and building more resilient communities and businesses through innovation, digitalization, sustainability, and partnerships. This report, published in August 2020 by the United Nations explore international collaboration in the recovery of tourism sectors worldwide.

Download Report from - <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-covid-19-and-transforming-tourism>

Mountain Tourism – Towards a More Sustainable Path

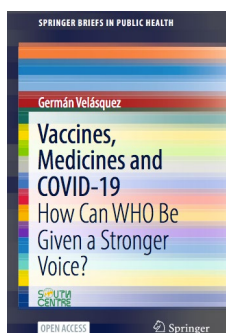
With their soaring peaks, remote locations, and majestic beauty, mountains have long been a powerful attraction for visitors from all walks of life, who are drawn by the often colorful traditions of local communities, the opportunities for sporting activities, and the spiritual solace to be found in highland landscapes. This study highlights the important role that tourism can play in valuing the natural and spiritual heritage of mountains, and the cultural diversity and traditional practices of mountain peoples. Particularly when linked to nature and rural tourism, mountain tourism can make a valuable contribution to promoting sustainable food systems and adding value to local products. Developing sustainable tourism in mountains requires reducing its negative environmental and social impacts and addressing the challenges posed by climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic has already brought about major changes in the mountain tourism sector and substantial losses for communities and businesses. However, consumer appetites for destinations that are outdoors and less crowded have increased in the wake of the pandemic, and these changes usher in new opportunities for mountain destinations to rebuild a greener and more sustainable form of tourism and rethink their products and services. This report discusses critical measures needed to sustain the sector.



Download Report from - <https://www.fao.org/document/card/en/c/cb7884en>

Vaccines, Medicines and COVID-19 - How Can WHO Be Given a Stronger Voice?

By Germán Velásquez



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The considerable health, economic and social challenge that the world faced in early 2020 with COVID-19 continued and worsened in many parts of the world in the second half of 2020 and into 2021. How can an agency like WHO be given a stronger voice to exercise authority and leadership?

This book is a collection of research papers produced by the author between 2020 and early 2021 that helps answer this question. The topics address the state of thinking and debate – particularly with regard to medicines and vaccines – that would enable a response to this pandemic or subsequent crises that may emerge. The book presents the South Centre’s reflections and studies to provide policymakers, researchers and other stakeholders with information and analysis on issues related to public health and access to medicines and vaccines in the context of COVID-19.



TAX COOPERATION POLICY BRIEF

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Global Minimum Corporate Tax: Interaction of Income Inclusion Rule with Controlled Foreign Corporation and Tax-sparing Provisions

By Kuldeep Sharma

The OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS (the Inclusive Framework) agreed on 8 October 2021 to the Statement on the Two-Pillar Solution to Address the Tax Challenges Arising from the Digitalisation of the Economy. The Two-Pillar Solution will ensure that MNEs will be subject to a minimum tax rate of 15%, and will re-allocate profit of the largest and most profitable MNEs to countries worldwide. Under these recommendations, *inter alia*, Pillar Two consists of two interlocking domestic rules (together the Global Anti-Base Erosion Rules (GloBE)), which includes an Income Inclusion Rule (IIR) to impose a top-up tax on a parent entity in respect of the low taxed income of a constituent entity.

The IIR shall be incorporated in domestic laws of opting jurisdictions, and seems to have profound interaction with the Controlled Foreign Corporation (CFC) and tax-sparing provisions. The IIR operates in a way that is closely comparable to a CFC rule and raises the same treaty questions as raised by CFC rules, although there are a number of differences between the IIR and the CFC rules. In the context of IIR, there may be a case when the Ultimate Parent Entity (UPE) is taxed on the Constituent Entities’ (CEs) income and the spared tax is not considered as covered taxes for calculating the Effective Tax Rate (ETR) of the CE.

This generates a situation for developing countries in which they have to shore up their ETR by overhauling their tax incentive regimes and retooling domestic legal framework for more effective taxation of MNEs to avoid losing a significant portion of their tax right/base to a developed country. Adoption of IIR (which is an extension of CFC rules) under Pillar Two is therefore going to create conflict with the tax-sparing rules. From the perspective of developing countries, the adoption of GloBE implies losing tax incentives as a tax policy instrument to attract foreign direct investment. This is why every country involved, but especially developing countries, should undertake a thorough examination to determine whether such measures are convenient for their interests in the long run.

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The Nobel Peace Prize to Julian Assange Would Have Given Hope for Saving Global Democracy

by Kalinga Seneviratne

Sydney - In the early 1980s when I was studying mass communications in Australia, our journalism lecturer told us that as journalists we will have to hold governments to account, and to do that sometimes we may need to depend on leaks from government officials. “You should not hesitate to use that information, while ensuring that you do not disclose the source,” he instructed us, adding, “if anyone asks you (for the source) tell them it fell off the back of a truck”.

What founder of WikiLeaks, Australian journalist Julian Assange did 20 years later was exactly that, and in the Internet age, instead of using some paper documents leaked by a government official, he used electronic documents leaked to him via computer by a US government intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning.

If this year’s Nobel Peace Prize is about promoting “Press Freedom” the Norwegian Nobel Committee has missed a golden opportunity to make a powerful statement at a time when such freedom is under threat in the very countries that have traditionally claimed a patent on it.

Assange held under torturous conditions in a high-security British prison awaiting possible extradition to the US, should have been given the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize.

The UN’s Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer has accused the British government of torturing Assange. “The purpose of what has been done to Julian Assange is not to punish or coerce him, but to silence him and to do so in broad daylight, making visible to the entire world that those who expose the misconduct of the powerful no longer enjoy the protection of the law,” he said in media statement before his trial began.

Assange has paid a heavy price for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan with the help of Manning. He is now facing 19 espionage charges for activities related to the publication of leaked classified US government information. If convicted he faces a maximum of 175 years in a US jail.

US authorities have accused the 50-year-old WikiLeaks founder of conspiring to hack government computers and of violating an espionage law in connection with the release of confidential cables by WikiLeaks in 2010-2011.

“Julian Assange committed the crime of letting the general population know things that they have a right to know and that powerful states don’t want them to know,” noted renowned American media critic Noam Chomsky in an interview on Russia’s RT channel last year.

In announcing this year’s Nobel Peace Prize to Filipino journalist Maria Ressa and Russian newspaper editor Dmitry Muratov, the Nobel Committee said that it was awarded “for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace”. They added that the two of them have fought a courageous battle for freedom of expression in the Philippines and Russia.

It is true that they have waged a courageous battle against their own governments. But these are regimes, which are not subservient to the West. Both of them, are alleged to be heavily funded by western “donor” agencies, thus, a reason for their governments cracking down heavily on both, seeing their activities as a form of espionage and a security threat.

The question that needs to be asked from the Nobel Committee is why is Ressa’s and Muratov’s activities seen as far more important to achieving world peace, than the courageous battle of Assange to exposed far more serious crimes that have far greater impact on world peace?

If charges against Assange were brought before the US courts for his publishing activity, he would be found not guilty due to the US First Amendment constitutional protections for free speech. Thus, the US security apparatus arguing that Assange’s actions compromised the safety of its personnel around the world, has defined WikiLeaks as a “non-state hostile intelligence service”. Basically their claim to be a publisher and journalist were struck down, so that espionage charges could be laid.

Amnesty International’s Secretary-General Agnes Callamard in a statement released on October 27 called on US authorities to drop the charges against Assange, and UK courts to release him immediately. “It is a damning indictment that nearly 20 years on, virtually no one responsible for alleged US war crimes committed in the course of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars has been held accountable, let alone prosecuted, and yet a publisher who exposed such crimes is potentially facing a lifetime in jail,” she said.

In January this year, a British court ruled that Assange could not be extradited to the US due to fears of psychological torture in the US prison system. But, he remains in British custody because the Biden administration has appealed against it. A two-day hearing on the appeal was heard on October 27-28 and the verdict is due in the new year.

In a statement following the January verdict, Australia’s journalists’ union MEAA said “journalists everywhere should be concerned at the hostile manner in which the court dismissed all defence arguments related to press freedom” and added “Julian has suffered a 10-year ordeal for trying to bring information of public interest to the light of day, and it has had an immense impact on his mental and physical health”.

“Julian Assange is a truth-teller who has committed no crime but revealed government crimes and lies on a vast scale and so performed one of the great public services of my lifetime,” noted fellow Australian journalist John Pilger writing in Global Research after the latest court case in London. Pointing out that the case was ignored by the mainstream media, he adds, “most people would not know that a court in the heart of London had sat in judgment on their right to know: their right to question and dissent”.

Former UK’s Daily Telegraph chief political writer Peter Osborne in a recent commentary for Press Gazette warned that, “future generations of journalists would not forgive us if we do not fight extradition (of Assange)”. He pointed out that there has been a deafening silence on Assange’s plight in the mainstream media in the UK.

Osborne argues that if it's a case of a foreign journalist held in Britain’s Belmarch Prison charged with suppose espionage offences by the Chinese authorities, for exposing war crimes of the Chinese troops, and the Chinese were putting pressure on the British government to extradite him to China, where he could face up to 175 years in jail, “the outrage from the British press would be deafening”.

“There would be calls for protests outside the prison, solemn leaders in the broadsheet newspapers, debates on primetime news programmes, alongside a rush of questions in parliament,” he noted, adding that the situation of Assange is identical to this scenario. “Yet there has been scarcely a word in the British mainstream media in his defense.”

If the UK courts agree to extradite Assange to the US, it would send a chilling message to journalists everywhere that fascism has arrived at the doorstep of the so-called “free world” and “watchdog” journalism is dead. In the meantime, President Biden and his allies will be trumpeting “free speech” at the democracy summit he has called for December 9 and 10.

** The writer is the author of ‘Myth of Free Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era’ published by SAGE(2020).*

Photo Credit (top): Collage of pictures of Maria Ressa (left) and Dmitry Andreyevich Muratov (right), winners of the Nobel Peace Prize 2021. Copyright of two photos: Nobel Prize Outreach.

[Transmitted by IDN-InDepthNews on 08 December 2021]

Update on the Julian Assange Case

On December 10th 2021, the United States government won an appeal at Britain’s High Court over the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. The ruling, which overturns an earlier decision, means 50-year-old Assange may now be closer to being sent from London’s high-security Belmarsh prison to the US, where he would face spying charges over WikiLeaks’ publication of secret military documents a decade ago.

A UK judge said he was satisfied with a package of assurances given by the US about the conditions of the detention of Assange, who watched the proceedings via video link from Belmarsh prison. These included a pledge not to hold him in a so-called “ADX” maximum security prison and that he could be transferred to Australia, where he holds citizenship, to serve his sentence if convicted. The UK court said that US assurances were enough to guarantee Assange would be treated humanely and directed a lower court judge to send the extradition request to the home secretary, Priti Patel, for review.

On December 24th 2021, Assange’s legal team has filed an application to appeal to Britain’s Supreme Court, after this lower court ruled that he can be extradited to the United States on spying charges. The lawyers on Thursday asked for permission to appeal the High Court’s ruling, arguing that the US government’s pledge that the founder of the whistleblowing website would not be subjected to extreme conditions in prison was conditional and could be changed at the discretion of US authorities.

Source: Al Jazeera

See also: Assange and the assurances of ‘civilised’ torturers - <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/11/30/assange-and-the-assurances-of-civilised-torturers>

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