

D+C

DIGITAL MONTHLY

DEVELOPMENT AND
COOPERATION

D+C

ENTWICKLUNG UND
ZUSAMMENARBEIT

E+Z

International
Journal

ISSN
2366-7257

2024 12

HEALTH

In South Africa, HIV/
AIDS is affecting elderly
people in particular

ODA AND DEBT

Debate on UN proposals
regarding international
development finance

ARBITRARY BORDERS

Lines drawn in Soviet era
now cause tensions and
violence in Central Asia



Faith and politics

Editorial

- 3 **HANS DEMBOWSKI**
We need universal values, not aggressive identity politics

Magazine

- 4 **MICHAEL MOYO**
In South Africa, senior citizens are particularly affected by HIV/AIDS
- 6 **LUKAS MENKHOFF AND RAINER THIELE**
How Africa can benefit from UN proposal on development financing
- 9 **SYINAT SULTANALIEVA**
Lasting impacts of arbitrary Soviet borders in Central Asia
- 11 **IMRAN MUKHTAR**
Pakistan suffers from poor rural infrastructure
- 13 **RAPHAEL MWENINGUWE / IMPRINT (MASTHEAD)**
Nowadays: Producing clean energy and fertiliser from waste

Debate

- 14 **HANS DEMBOWSKI**
Why right-wing oligarchs like Elon Musk favour Donald Trump
- 15 **ROLI MAHAJAN**
Lessons from Baku climate summit

Focus: Faith and politics

- 18 **KARIM OKANLA**
Voodoo is part of everyday life for many people in Benin
- 20 **INTERVIEW WITH FRANK SCHWABE**
Indigenous world views are at risk, environmentally important and rooted in spirituality
- 22 **CHRISTOPH SCHNEIDER-YATTARA AND PETER M. BORCHARDT**
Ethiopia's sacred forests
- 24 **INTERVIEW WITH DAGMAR PRUIN**
In many places, faith-based initiatives are drivers of sustainable development
- 27 **KIM BERG**
In the West Bank, Israeli settlements make Palestinian youths opt for Islamist extremism
- 29 **KHUSHBOO SRIVASTAVA**
Afghanistan's women suffer under Taliban rule
- 30 **ARJUNA RANAWANA**
New Sri Lankan president has modified his attitude towards Buddhism
- 32 **SUPARNA BANERJEE**
How Narendra Modi emphasises Hinduism is very different from how Mahatma Gandhi did it

FOCUS

Faith and politics

All religions share a set of fundamental values, such as non-violence, charity, truthfulness and environmental stewardship. This global ethic is a good basis for dialogue and cooperation, including towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, religious affiliations can be used for intolerant identity politics. Typical results are exclusion, oppression and even persecution.

Title: Various religious leaders gather in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November on the second day of COP29.
Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Bianca Otero



We need universal values, not identity politics

Humankind's religions share a common core of values, as the Swiss theologian Hans Küng prominently argued. He called it the "global ethic". It includes principles of humanity and reciprocity, non-violence, truthfulness, the equal value of every soul and environmental stewardship. Atheist philosophers agree to these values too.

The global ethic is a basis for inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. Coalitions of faith leaders indeed endorse the kind of global governance humankind needs to develop sustainably.

Unfortunately, religion has a dark side when used for identity politics. Awful examples are currently evident in Palestine/Israel, with dehumanising cruelty and innocent victimhood on both sides.

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched atrocious terror attacks on Israel. The violence was as shocking as possible. Most likely, the leaders of the Islamist militia wanted to trigger a regional conflagration. Knowing from experience that Israel's response would be brutal, they hoped to pull in Iran and its allies. The extremists thought Israel would not survive that kind of war. What Hamas wants is to liberate holy lands from "infidel rule". The leaders do not care much about Palestinians' lives, claiming cynically that martyrs go straight to heaven.

Israeli society is shaped by destructive identity politics too. In the occupied West Bank, religious Zionists have been building illegal settlements with government support for years, claiming that God promised them Palestinians' ancestral land. The stringent segregation Israel has imposed on the West Bank reminds not only South Africans of Apartheid. Annexation of the West Bank, by the way, is a goal spelled out in the coalition agreement of the right-wing government. Some Israeli ministers are publicly making plans for new Israeli settlements in Gaza.

A recent Human Rights Watch Report with the title "Hopeless, starving and besieged" provides ample evidence of inten-



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2023. Our focus section on faith and politics starts on page 17. It pertains to the entire agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals.

tional and violent displacement with return made impossible. That could amount to a crime against humanity.

When Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly in September, he once again used maps that left no space for Palestine. The West Bank and Gaza were not marked at all, with the two occupied territories being displayed as Israeli land.

It was an amazing act of chutzpah. In a time of profound crisis, Netanyahu was sticking up the finger to western governments, but also to the Arab allies he needs. All of them want the two-state solution that his government rejects. At the same time,

Netanyahu accused the UN and anyone who does not agree with him of antisemitism. "We are winning," he added.

Netanyahu's perception of antisemitism has gaps, however. He does not object to anti-Jewish slurs when expressed by right-wingers from Europe and North America. Prominent examples include Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or billionaire Elon Musk. Netanyahu manipulatively uses the notion of antisemitism to legitimise anything he does and discredit anyone who finds fault with him. When the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant in November, accusing him of the war crimes of starvation and others, he once again interpreted it as an expression of antisemitism.

This constant weaponisation makes it difficult to even say that several things can be true at once. Yes, antisemitism is an issue, but so is Islamophobia. Yes, some attacks on Palestinians serve Israel's self-defence, but too many do not. Action that suits religious Zionism, but is incompatible with international law, obviously fuels anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish feelings. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who is Jewish, warns that Israel's war is turning it into a pariah state.

Israel's staunchest supporters in the USA, by the way, are not Jews, but right-wing Evangelicals who are awaiting Armageddon, which, they believe, will start with Middle East war. Their political hero is President-elect Donald Trump, who is not known for a God-fearing lifestyle. European right-wing extremists, on the other hand, tend to hate Muslims even more than they hate Jews. They appreciate far-away Israel fighting Muslims.

Political leaders who use religion for identity politics are never true to the global ethic that is at the core of every faith. It does not matter who is doing it. Whether it is the president of the USA or Russia, the prime minister of Israel, India or Italy, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia or the supreme leader of Iran – we deserve better. Only adherence to the global ethic can help us live sustainably in peace on this small planet.



HANS DEMBOWSKI
is the editor-in-chief of **D+C/**
E+Z.

euz.editor@dandc.eu



Awareness-raising mural at a clinic on the outskirts of Cape Town in 2009.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE

Don't neglect the elderly

HIV/AIDS is still haunting South Africa, though it stopped making international headlines about two decades ago. The situation is better than it was, but there is still room for improvement.

By Michael Moyo

South Africa's HIV/AIDS scenario began to improve with the arrival of ARV treatment from 2004 on (see box). The situation remains serious, nonetheless. Today, about one in seven South Africans are living with HIV. That is the highest rate internationally, but down from about not quite one in five. A bit less than two thirds of the infected persons now get the ARV treatment that prevents the virus from triggering the dangerous immune deficiency. Patients who take the drug regularly, can live rather normal lives.

Recent research shows that the infection rate among people over 40 is one in four and thus above average (Mann-Goehler et al., 2024). About 37% of them are not on ARV medication. Unsurprisingly, the figures tend to be particularly bad in rural areas, where poverty is wide-spread, education levels are often poor and traditional norms quite strong.

The research data flesh out two connected issues, says Wade Ngoza, a doctor at Pretoria's Mamelodi Regional Hospital. The good news is that 63% of the elderly patients

are indeed getting the required healthcare. Ngoza also appreciates that the rates of HIV infections have decreased across the country, that more people know their status and that ARV uptake is holding up well.

On the downside, far too many patients are still not getting what they need, and elderly persons are more likely to be HIV positive. Moreover, Ngoza worries that there may be many unrecorded cases: "We don't know the number of seniors who are living with HIV unknowingly and untested." He does not want to see those seniors being left behind any longer.

A strong focus on the young is actually a long-standing pattern in South Africa. ARV treatment first became available free of charge in 2004. Initially, it was offered exclusively to people under the age of 40. At that time, this age cohort was also the target group for treatment messaging and HIV prevention campaigns.

The idea was that the young are the sexually most active. "Via music gigs, billboards, newspaper adverts, festivals, drama plays, HIV was messaged narrowly as a danger to young South Africans," remembers Bromley Naka, a social worker. The government expected that transmission in other demographics would stop if HIV could be eliminated in the age group 14 to 24. It was simply assumed that seniors do not engage in risky sexual behaviour or take drugs.

UNAIDS data show that persons aged 14 to 24 are indeed most at risk, accounting for about 30% of all new infections in South Africa in 2017. The implication, however, is that 70% of new infections affect other people. They obviously matter very much.

AGE-RELATED STIGMA

The belief that older people lived by higher moral standards was always wrong, says Naka. One side effect of this belief was that the stigma of infection became worse with age. The social worker reports that, out of shame, many seniors did not show up and "died needlessly in their homes."

Naka says that he knows several cases of seniors who say they were abandoned by their children when their HIV infections became known and began to get worse. Loneliness thus made the suffering worse.

Communities had a tendency to hush up things. Welele Sikhosana, a 63-year-old pastor and HIV activist, recalls: "At funerals of seniors, preachers were lying that the cause of death was malaria when we knew our elderly friends were dying of untreated HIV." He adds that it was morally embarrassing for a 65-year-old grandmother to tell her children and grandkids that she needed ARV drugs because of a new HIV infection. The family would have considered her to be a moral failure. "We were living a lie," Sikhosana concludes.

Thembi Malaika (name changed) probably got her HIV infection in her late 40s or early 50s. The retired sex worker is now 70 and lives in Johannesburg. She says that HIV programmes "badly failed the elderly from the start." Not least, people who earned their living with prostitution, as she did, were obviously at risk, and not all of them were young.

Malaika says she has helped 33 seniors over the age of 59 to disclose their HIV positive status to their families.

She is proud to have contributed to making the culture change slowly. "It was an uphill struggle," she recalls. "We were dying, came out and confronted the government." Today, billboards and TV advertising feature elderly citizens speaking about their infections and encouraging everyone to get tested and enrol for health insurance.

Though things eventually began to improve, stigma persists. When someone in their 70s gets an HIV test, they are likely to

hear disparaging remarks from healthcare staff. Moreover, Malaika knows 70-year-old persons “who are taking ARVs secretly”. They fear their grandchildren will reject them if they learn the truth.

Poverty matters very much too. Brenda Wandiswa works as a welfare manager for the government of Gauteng, the country’s wealthiest province. She points out that seniors have some of the nation’s worst rates of hunger, joblessness and homelessness. In 2019, 30% of the elderly population were estimated to lack food security. According to news reports, some senior citizens quietly starve to death in their rural cabins in Eastern Cape, the poorest province.

Such problems tend to be worst for senior citizens who are not 61 yet. At 61, they become eligible for a small government pension, starting at the equivalent of \$60 per



month. Those who lack that kind of support, but are unable to earn a livelihood, find it particularly difficult to adhere stringently to an ARV regimen. Anyone who must improvise from day to day will always struggle to stick to a routine. While the medication is available free of charge, a trip to a clinic may prove unaffordable, especially in rural areas.

ARV treatment should not be derailed by ageism, stigma and moral judgement. South Africa has made progress, but as Wandiswa can confirm, it is not there yet.

REFERENCE

Mann-Goehler, J., et al., 2024: HIV among older South Africans in rural areas.

<https://theconversation.com/hiv-among-older-south-africans-in-rural-areas-big-study-shows-theres-a-problem-thats-being-neglected-222954>

MICHAEL MOYO

is an African journalist who does not want this contribution to be published under his name because his professional situation has changed since he accepted the assignment to write this story.

euз.editor@dandc.eu

Brief history of ARV treatment in South Africa

In the 90s, South Africa became an epicenter of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. HIV is mostly a sexually transmitted disease. Intravenous drug users are at risk too, however, and so are people who need blood transfusions. HIV/AIDS initially spread fast among the black population, but largely spared the more prosperous white community.

Quite evidently, poverty, lack of education and traditional attitudes mattered very much. For a long time, however, South Africa’s government – then led by President Thabo Mbeki – stayed in denial, failing to launch the kind of science-based awareness campaigns that might have helped to motivate people to practice safe sex, especially by using condoms. By the time those campaigns started, more than a third of pregnant women that took prenatal care were testing positive.

When HIV/AIDS first started to make headlines internationally in the early 1980s, a positive HIV diagnosis was like a dreadful death sentence. There was no therapy, so patients’ health would slowly deteriorate due to an increasing number of infections one of which would eventually prove fatal.

That pattern changed in the late 1980s, when scientists

developed anti-retroviral medications (ARVs). ARVs do not heal HIV, but they suppress its consequences. For those who could afford ARVs, HIV thus became a manageable chronic disease. In was no longer deadly. The innovative pharmaceuticals were expensive, however, and protected by patents. In many high-income countries, governmental health services covered the costs.

Due to the prices, however, ARVs largely stayed unavailable where they were needed most – in developing countries and emerging markets hit by

the pandemic. South Africa was a prime example, but other African countries were affected too.

Things began to change after the Doha summit of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2001. Due to pressure from international civil-society groups and countries like Brazil and Thailand, where governments accepted the medical science and were determined to stem the health crisis, the WHO made intellectual property rights more flexible. Governments were given the right to grant compulsory production licences should any pharmaceuticals be unaffordable, but indispensable for public health. From then on, multinational pharma companies began supplying ARVs to low- and middle-income countries at much lower costs, making ARV therapy feasible there.

From 2004 on, ARV treatment was rolled out in South Africa. In retrospect, it was a great success. Nonetheless, more still needs to happen (see main story). DEM



HIV positive people rallying to demand ARV treatment in Johannesburg in 2003.



Development needs investment: Major construction site in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE

Better development financing for Africa

Given that many countries are heavily indebted, a reform of international development financing is overdue. The UN has made suggestions, but for a variety of reasons, their chances of implementation and success are uncertain.

By Lukas Menkhoff and Rainer Thiele

Africa's importance for the world and particularly for Europe has grown enormously in recent years. The continent has a population that is comparable to that of India or China, and it is still growing quickly. It could become a future market that will comprise a quarter of the world's people in 25 years. Africa is rich in natural resources, especially those that are needed for the energy transition, and it is well-suited to the climate-neutral production of hydrogen. At the same

time, Africa remains economically weak in general and is home to about 60% of the world's extreme poor, according to World Bank data. Given that economic development is based on investments and their financing, Africa should be supported with more capital, and development financing should be expanded accordingly.

The UN recently added its own recommendation to the numerous initiatives to improve Africa's capital resources (UN 2023). It was discussed at the Summit of the Future co-facilitated by Germany and Namibia at the UN in New York in September 2024. Essential components of the recommendation were incorporated into the UN Pact for the Future, which was adopted at the summit.

The recommendation to reform the international financial architecture does

not only apply to Africa, but nevertheless it contains elements that are immediately relevant to Africa's development. In the following, we will concentrate on two reform areas that relate directly to development financing: debt and international financing.

Africa currently has a strong interest in reforms in these areas. Numerous countries on the continent are overindebted or soon will be, meaning that a solution to this problem is urgently needed. Africa's scanty capital resources are under increased pressure due to the cost of a climate-neutral transformation of the economy and measures to adapt to climate change.

CRUSHING NATIONAL DEBT

The UN's recommendation contains suggestions for improvement in three areas:

- providing information to prevent over-indebtedness,
- lowering interest rates to prevent crises and
- restructuring debt to resolve crises.

The critical debt situation of many countries of the global south is a recurring and predictable phenomenon. Often it is triggered by unfavourable macroeconomic circumstances, like global economic shocks.

It is widely known that these situations can occur.

Consequently, international debt policy must take such scenarios into account in order to avoid over-indebtedness. Instead, there keep being new reasons to further increase the credit volume. It would certainly be helpful to provide all parties with better information about existing loans – as the UN paper recommends – but ultimately this remains the decision of the borrowing country and its creditors.

The aforementioned parties clearly have incentives to agree on loans that are too often too risky. To counter this trend, African countries need more independent monitoring institutions. Unfortunately, poorly functioning institutions are both a cause and an expression of a lack of development. Breaking through this negative cycle is difficult. Creditors also have a great deal of responsibility here.

The UN further proposes limiting interest payments. They are always a burden, even though actual development loans are usually granted with an interest rate of only around two percent over a 40-year period. Other loans are more expensive, including those granted by China. Loans at market conditions are even more costly.

The UN paper further recommends making a clearer distinction between liquidity crises (when long-term affordable financing can be the solution) and solvency crises (when debt write-downs may be needed). The UN argues that if interest rates had not been raised during times of crisis, but instead had been kept low, debt crises would not have occurred in many cases. These calculations are very hypothetical, however. The assumption is that the entire macro-economic policy would remain unchanged. But is that realistic? Wouldn't lower interest rates lead to additional debt and ultimately to a solvency crisis on a larger scale?

In 2020, the G20 introduced the Common Framework for Debt Treatments (CF) in order to involve more lending countries – including China – in efforts to address over-indebtedness than the leading western countries that made up the “Paris Club” at that time. As the largest bilateral creditor to developing countries, China typically rejects debt forgiveness, meaning that countries' debts get extended, but ultimately only deferred – not resolved (Horn et al., 2023). This problematic approach could im-

“Though the high need for capital for global public goods is widely recognised, it is unclear whether the proposed expansion of public development financing will succeed.”

pact numerous countries in Africa, where China has frequently provided over 25% or even 50% of public debt.

However, the recent agreement with Zambia as part of the Common Framework has raised expectations for the first time that China will participate in substantial debt relief too. Efforts to avoid isolating China and instead include it in potential solutions can therefore be successful, despite creditors' differences.

EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FINANCING

Unresolved repayment conditions make it almost impossible to grant new loans. Yet fast-growing African economies have a great need for capital. In the aforementioned UN document, many detailed proposals are linked to demands for more affordable loans and non-repayable grants.

There are good reasons to adhere to traditional poverty- and growth-oriented development financing. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share of absolute poor with an income of less than \$2.15 per day in purchasing power parity remains fixed at over one third (Baah et al., 2023). Moreover, social indicators like quality of education are still very low, which points to an ongoing need for traditional development cooperation.

To reduce currency risks for developing and emerging-market countries, the UN recommends that a larger share of loans be issued in local currencies. Since the need for capital to protect global public goods far exceeds the capacity of public institutions, the UN demands that public development financing should be used more strategically in order to activate private capital flows (“blended finance”).

Though the high need for capital for global public goods is widely recognised, it is unclear whether the proposed expansion of public development financing will suc-

ceed. For one thing, in many situations it is debatable whether current funding is being used effectively. It is doubtful to what extent the governments of partner countries could productively use additional financial resources to the proposed extent, for instance for measures to adapt to the climate crisis. For another, given the current political situation in many donor countries, majorities in favour of a significant increase in development funds can hardly be counted on. The ongoing budget negotiations in Germany are one example.

Independent from the UN recommendation, European development policy should examine its own development financing and adapt it to a changed reality (see box).

REFERENCES

- UN, 2023: Reforms to the international financial architecture. Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 6. <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/papers/10.18356/27082245-29>
- Horn, S., Parks, B. C., Reinhart, C. M. and Trebesch, C., 2023: Debt distress on China's Belt and Road. AEA Papers and Proceedings, Vol. 113, May 2023, S. 131-134. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pandp.20231004>
- Baah, S. K. T., et al., 2023: September 2023 global poverty update from the World Bank. World Bank Data Blog. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/september-2023-global-poverty-update-world-bank-new-data-poverty-during-pandemic-asia>



LUKAS MENKHOFF

is a senior researcher at the Research Center

“International Development” of the Kiel Institute for the

World Economy, professor emeritus of economics at the Humboldt University of Berlin and member of the Finance Group at HU Berlin.

lukas.menkhoff@ifw-kiel.de



RAINER THIELE

is a professor of development economics and the deputy head of the Research Center “International Development”

of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. He is the director of the Kiel Institute Africa Initiative.

rainer.thiele@ifw-kiel.de

Reality check for Europe

Calls have been coming from Africa for some time to reform international development financing. Many countries on the continent are nearly being crushed by their debt burden. A solution to this problem is urgently needed (see main text). Their demands are sometimes coupled with a reminder of the special responsibility western industrialised states bear because of their role during the colonial era. Critics also point out that the poorest countries have the fewest resources to protect themselves from the consequences of the climate crisis, which they have barely contributed to.

Europe also has demands for Africa. When it comes to debt – or limiting the debt burden, from an African perspective – widespread corruption is an obstacle from a European perspective. It causes a signifi-

cant amount of external funds to be misappropriated in a variety of ways. Most concerning, the funds are not benefiting the common good, but rather private elites.

With regard to financing – or the provision of additional funds, from an African perspective – there are demands that the money also contributes to the desired result, especially to more investment. The chances of that happening increase if there are stable institutions like a dependable legal system. But in many African countries, this is not sufficiently the case.

In many countries of the global south, there is a regular aversion to such demands, which are perceived as lecturing. This attitude is being encouraged by the increasing competition between different creditors, particularly with China. Many African countries

adopt a “neutral” position by speaking with various sides and accepting the offers that they consider advantageous.

Much speaks in favour of adapting the European strategy in the pending discussions of development financing to reality. The central aim should be to actually establish “equal footing”. On the European side, that includes accepting that African governments do not necessarily intend to implement values as Europe understands them on a one-to-one basis. It would also be naive from a European perspective to universally offer financing on favourable terms and subject to conditions. Instead, actors could take a more differentiated approach than they have in the past.

Four different financing opportunities could look as follows: first, disaster relief could continue to be provided without conditions, for humanitarian reasons. Second, investment promotion could be based on Chinese conditions. Compared

to European development financing, these tend to mean more expensive loans with greater collateral to cover payment problems. This approach would be used in purely commercial transactions – like extracting scarce resources – and creditors would largely avoid imposing conditions related to governance.

Third, when financing global public goods, especially climate protection measures, non-repayable funds are particularly appropriate. Since Europe has a strong interest in this area, conditions should be weak and could concentrate on ensuring that the funds are spent appropriately. A fourth financing pool could contain affordable funding to promote development. It would be reserved for countries that from a European perspective are moving in the “right” direction on their own in the institutional dimensions mentioned above. In Africa, this would be a relatively small group of countries. LM, RT



Under what conditions will the EU finance investments in Africa, for example in renewable energies? Wind turbines near Cape Town.



The palace of Khudayar Khan in Kokand, Uzbekistan.

CENTRAL ASIA

Soviet-era borders cause trouble today

The fertile Ferghana Valley is not at peace. Violent conflict between different nation states, to which it belongs, flares up again and again. They sometimes even involve national armies.

By Syinat Sultanalieva

In September 2022, the armies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan clashed for four days of bloody conflict. At least 37 civilians, including five children, were killed. Schools and other infrastructure were damaged. Children missed proper education for months. In Kyrgyzstan alone, an estimated 130,000 people were displaced.

A similar two-day conflict raged between the two countries in April 2021. Dozens of people died.

A different kind of violence took place in May 2020 when local people from villages in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan disagreed over who owned a spring. This conflict did not involve regular security forces, but 25 persons were seriously injured.

Violence has been recurring in Ferghana Valley since its Central Asian coun-

tries gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The valley is a fertile area, which is today divided between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the 18th century, it had been the Khanate of Kokand, until it was annexed in 1876 by the Russian Tsar Alexander II. Kokand is now an Uzbek city in the modern-day Ferghana Valley.

The current tensions can be traced back to decisions made in the 1920s. At the time, the Soviet Union wanted to maintain a strong grip on the entire territory of what had been the Russian Empire until the Communist revolution of 1917.

It is possible, but futile to discuss whether the Soviet Union was a colonial empire or not. What is certain is that it did inherit the paternalistic approach of Tsars, under whose rule Russia expanded into Central Asia in the 19th century. At the time, Russian leaders were driven by economic interests and strategic considerations. In particular, they were eager to counter the British Empire's growing influence in the region.

Echoing other European imperialists, the Tsars spoke of a need to bring civilisa-

tion to as yet uncivilised lands. The historian Jürgen Osterhammel (2005, p. 12) has defined this “civilising mission” not only as a self-proclaimed right, but even a “duty to propagate and actively introduce one’s own norms and institutions to other peoples and societies, based upon a firm conviction of the inherent superiority and higher legitimacy of one’s own collective way of life”.

Soviet leaders similarly considered Central Asia to be backward and in need of progress. They arbitrarily drew borders defining separate Soviet republics, which all, of course, belonged to the Soviet Union.

Historians disagree about what motivated the leaders in Moscow to draw the lines the way they did. While they paid some attention to the ethno-linguistic composition of the region, they also ensured that the autonomy of the new republics would stay limited. The approach was top down, echoing the practice of European colonialists who had drawn borders as they pleased in Africa without concern for existing social relations.

In pre-Soviet times, the valley’s population was highly diverse. It was a mix of nomadic Turkic-Mongol speakers and sedentary Persian communities. Different ethno-linguistic groups often lived in mixed towns and villages.

Under Soviet rule, however, three ethnic groups – the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks – were designated as distinct nationalities. New borders were drawn to create new republics that supposedly fit these newly created ethnic identities and their institutions

with newly fabricated pasts. For many practical purposes, however, the Soviet Union's new internal borders split existing communities, cutting across important social, economic and cultural ties.

Various exclaves and enclaves made matters more complex. The territories of the new republics were not contiguous, so both people and goods had to cross republic borders often. The enclaves were often located in strategically important places which contained key resources, particularly water and fertile land. Vital infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, served people on different sides of borders, necessitating inter-republic cooperation.

This arrangement allowed Moscow to maintain *de facto* control over crucial assets, even as it nominally devolved power to the republics. In practice, what was supposed to facilitate a sense of ethnic self-determination, therefore served a divide-and-rule strategy. Moscow became the ultimate arbiter whenever disputes arose. Accordingly, the Russian language became even more important than it already was.

It is telling, moreover, that Soviet authorities used Tsarist rhetoric to describe "stability". Their focus on ethnic identities reduced the role of Islam as a common denominator in the region.

As a matter of fact, border disputes erupted immediately after the 1924 division, with both the new Uzbek and the Kara-Kyrgyz republics claiming land on the respective other's territory. From 1924 to 1927, there were several attempts to adjust the borders. The negotiations involved committees from Moscow, Tashkent and Frunze (today's Bishkek). A significant update occurred in 1929 when a separate Tajik republic was established.

DIVISIVE INTERNATIONAL BORDERS

In Soviet times, only administrators really worried about the internal borders. In daily life, these boundaries remained largely invisible as people moved freely between the different republics. That changed in 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union transformed the administrative boundaries into international borders.

The materialisation of these borders led to three kinds of disputes:

- resource-management conflicts, particularly over water,

- social unrest due to restricted cross-border relations and
- official border conflicts exacerbated by increasing ethnic and national differentiation.

In retrospect, the redrawing of Central Asia's political map in the 1920s was probably the policy measure of the Soviet era that had the most lasting impact on the Fergana Valley. The arbitrarily drawn borders keep causing trouble to this day.

Vorukh is a striking example. It is a Tajik enclave surrounded by Kyrgyzstan. For



farmers in both countries, the Ak-Suu river – also known as Isfara – in Vorukh is a crucial water source. Water management remains a contentious issue for the two governments. Unsurprisingly, Vorukh was one of the main sites of the two brief armed conflicts of 2021 and 2022 that were mentioned above.

There have been several other instances of trouble. Regional tensions dramatically escalated in early 1999 when Uzbekistan, citing economic and security concerns, began closing its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has generally taken the most aggressive stance on border control, installing minefields, checkpoints and considering the construction of border walls.

Another notable incident was the 2010 ethnic violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. It highlighted the fragility of interethnic relations – as did other regrettable events in the region.

Policymakers have responded to the troubles by trying to better define and demarcate borders. That approach, however, tends to fail. By 2009, the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border in the Fergana Valley was largely defined. However, significant

portions of the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan borders remained undelimited and undemarcated. Following the 2021 and 2022 conflicts, the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border is finally being delimited and demarcated, with latest news indicating only six percent of the border remains contentious. The plan is to finalise the borders by the end of 2024.

One must ask, however, whether it makes sense to focus on separating the different communities in the Fergana Valley. Attempts to do so are at the root of disputes over resources that are intermixed with complicated ideas of national identity and have fundamentally altered the region's character. What was once a coherent unit, has become a fragmented region.

The current patchwork of enclaves and exclaves is a source of persistent tension and conflict. Resolving these issues will require not only technical solutions like border demarcation. The region needs a deeper reckoning with the colonial legacies that continue to shape it.

The recurring border conflicts in the Fergana Valley are a stark reminder of the enduring impact of colonial policies, even decades after the end of formal colonial rule. The Soviet Union's approach to national delimitation, while ostensibly aimed at empowering local ethnicities, in many ways perpetuated and even intensified colonial practices of divide and rule.

As Central Asian governments navigate these challenges, they should adopt innovative policies that go beyond the rigid ethno-national thinking of the Soviet era. They must finally recognise the region's long history of interconnectedness. The people in the Fergana Valley have complex, multi-layered identities that cannot be properly defined along ethno-linguistic lines. Policies that are based on this insight may well prove to be the key to lasting peace.

REFERENCE

Osterhammel, J., 2005: *The great work of uplifting mankind*. In: Barth, B., Osterhammel, J. (eds): *Zivilisierungsmissionen: Imperiale Weltverbesserung*. Konstanz, UVK Verlag.



SYINAT SULTANALIEVA is a Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch. sultanalievas@gmail.com Twitter/X handle: @SyinatS



Antiquated irrigation facility in northern Punjab.

RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Neglected villages

Pakistan's rural infrastructure is inadequate. That was true in 1947, when the country became independent, and in far too many areas, it is still true today. Rural communities generally lack good public services and have too few economic opportunities. Climate change is making matters worse.

By Imran Mukhtar

The 2023 census showed that 147 million people (or 61% of the population) live in villages. Due to rural-urban migration, however, the cities are growing fast. According to the central government's most recent economic survey, agriculture contributes 24% to gross domestic product and 37% to employment.

The World Bank has stated that the country's "vast and diverse rural space" has

received "insufficient attention from policymakers and investors". According to this multilateral institution, 80% of Pakistan's poor live in rural areas. The Bank's experts also noted that the neglected rural areas are important in economic, political and cultural-heritage terms.

All over the country, typical challenges in rural areas include:

- unpaved roads,
- poor and unreliable, but increasingly expensive electricity supply,
- the lack of water and especially safe drinking water, as well as
- the absence of sewerage systems.

Though most rural people depend on agriculture, many of them neither have access to markets, nor to storage facilities. Fixed-line telephony never arrived in most villages, and mobile networks remain

patchy. Access to new agricultural and other technologies is poor, and the rural economy is neither documented well nor digitised. Adding to people's problems, healthcare and educational institutions tend to be inadequate in rural settings. Pakistan is struggling with governance problems at all levels – and local governments are obviously particularly weak where infrastructure is weak.

Pakistan is a large country, and the quality of rural infrastructure differs from region to region. Of the four provinces, Punjab is the most populous and politically most influential. Even here, however, rural infrastructure is marked by considerable disparities. While the central areas have enough rural schools, hospitals, irrigation systems and roads, development has not kept up in southern Punjab. The northern part has no formal canal system, so farms depend on rainwater and – to a certain extent – tube wells.

Things are even worse in the districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the two western provinces. The scenario is particularly dark where violent conflicts have exacerbated the problems.

Gaps in infrastructure interact in several ways. They result in vicious circles that keep people trapped in poverty. Smallholder farmers thus have good reason to feel left behind in Pakistan. They must cope with water scarcity, but also with fast rising prices for inputs – such as fertilisers, pesticides and seed. On the other hand, the prices that their harvests fetch are quite volatile.

Farmers are typically not able to save money, so they cannot invest prudently. They thus lack options for coping with climate risks. Apart from the money, of course, they would also need competent advice, which they do not get.

LITTLE BARGAINING POWER

The traditional marketing system puts smallholders at a disadvantage in several ways. Farming families depend on multiple layers of middlemen, but they have very little bargaining power themselves. Since they cannot store what they produce, they must sell their harvests immediately, which is when the competition is toughest and farm-gate prices drop particularly low.

Since farmers' financial position is weak, they often need loans from middlemen to procure essential inputs. Whether the credits are in cash or kind, they further erode farmers' bargaining power. Indeed, middlemen sometimes even impose management decisions on farmers, deciding what they will grow, for example. Across South Asia, it is common to bemoan the exploitative role of middlemen. Aamer Hayat Bhandara, a co-founder of a civil-society foundation called Agriculture Republic in Punjab, says that both farmers and consumers suffer. While the former sell "at cheap rates", the latter "buy at inflated prices", he says.

To some extent, commercial banks and micro finance institutions are making a difference. However, the interest rates tend to be quite high. The more remote a village is, moreover, the less financial services are available, both of the formal or informal kind. The national and provincial governments claim to be providing maximum credit to the agriculture sector. Nonetheless, farmers are frustrated. Bhandara of Agriculture Republic categorically says that they need "more flexible terms and lower interest rates". He finds collateral requirements particularly harmful.

Experts suggest that local farmers' markets could make a difference. As they hardly exist, the monopoly of middlemen persists. They are powerful, benefit from the system and oppose change.

Better storage and transport opportunities would help too. They would improve the lot of both farmers and consumers. Far too often, vegetables and fruits rot away before they can be used.

Five years ago, a report published by the Asian Development Bank pointed out



that in Pakistan, 30 to 40% of total fruit and vegetable production is lost due to mishandling of the perishable products, poor transportation as well as inadequate storage facilities and market infrastructure. It reckoned that the country could save an annual \$1 billion if it reduced post-harvest losses by 75%.

Warehouses with proper cooling systems are needed, and so are proper packaging and specialised vehicles. Private-sector companies which earn huge profits in the food sector should become involved, says Agriculture Republic's Bhandara. In his eyes, they should also invest in capacity building and seed development in ways that increase farm productivity.

Progress is possible. In the current scenario, however, the middlemen serve an indispensable function. Without them, smallholders in remote areas would be unable to sell their produce at all and thus be limited to subsistence farming. The middlemen are also the ones who ensure access to inputs and lend farmers money.

For this reason, the middlemen cannot easily be driven out of the system, says Abid Qaiyum Suleri of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, an independent Islamabad-based think tank. However, he

sees the need "to institutionalise the role of middlemen". In particular, he wants regulations to fix commission prices.

EXTREME WEATHER

The climate crisis is compounding farmers' problems. Excessive rains, devastating droughts and worsening heat are hitting local communities.

In 2022, unprecedented floods made international headlines when one third of the country was submerged. A UN situation report of 2023 stated: "Flooding destroyed critical infrastructure nationwide – with everything from hospitals to health centres, schools, water and sanitation facilities, irrigation schemes, roads, bridges and government buildings left in ruins." Of course, such damages cause particular pain where infrastructure was inadequate in the first place.

Major disasters get a lot of attention, but harmful day-to-day impacts of the climate crisis are important too. They include crop losses, increased water stress and reduced livestock production. Volatile weather patterns, moreover, mean that planting seasons are changing. According to Pakistan's National Climate Adaptation Plan of 2023, these trends affect staple crops, which means that the nation's food security is at risk.

Climate change makes it even more important to improve rural infrastructure. Experts point out that climate-smart farming could benefit from things like GIS mapping, drones and sensor technology. Early warning systems would be good too. Unfortunately, internet connectivity tends to be poor in Pakistan's rural areas. As a result, it is not only hard to implement high-tech options. All too often, it is even impossible to make smallholders aware of possible solutions.

Experts like Bhandara are right to demand multi-stakeholder approaches to improving rural infrastructure. "We will have to bring the government, private sector, civil society, farmers and common man to one table," he says.



IMRAN MUKHTAR
is a journalist who lives in
Islamabad.

imranmukhtar@live.com

Clean energy and fertiliser from waste

EcoGen, a Malawian start-up, transforms animal waste into biogas and bio-fertiliser, providing farmers with affordable energy and sustainable farming solutions. This innovation helps reduce reliance on firewood and chemical fertilisers.

In Malawi, access to electricity remains a major challenge. As many people are not connected to the electricity grid, they must rely on alternative sources of energy. In rural areas, where the majority live in poverty, many are dependent on firewood for cooking. This widespread reliance on wood is a danger to the environment.

The country's energy crisis is what inspired Clement Kandodo, a graduate from Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Luanar), to design an innovation to meet the demand for energy. In 2016, he founded EcoGen, a start-up working with farmers under Malawi Milk Producers Association (MMPA) to generate energy out of animal waste.

EcoGen aims to produce biogas from waste to provide domestic use gas and fertiliser. The start-up made a strategic choice to work with dairy farmers because they rear cattle and have easy access to animal waste in bulk.

Godfrey Kwelete is one such farmer who is a beneficiary of EcoGen's biogas project. He has seven cattle. Each week he collects the dung from the kraal and puts it in the system digester, which produces biogas and liquid or bio-fertiliser.

"When I heard about EcoGen's biogas technology and how it produces biogas and bio-fertilisers, I decided to

inquire further," he says. "After I was satisfied with the explanation, I decided I should go for it."

With the biogas system installed, Kwelete is now able to collect bio-fertiliser which he uses in his crop fields.

"I am saving a lot of money because fertiliser is too expensive these days. Bio-fertiliser is very cheap as long as you have the materials or wastes to be used in the system," he said. Additionally, he uses the gas generated for cooking and lighting.

Patrick Jere, a livestock and poultry farmer in Lilongwe, also uses the biogas system from EcoGen and speaks of its multiple advantages.

"Having biogas system installed marked the end of using chemical fertilisers [in my farm]. Now I am using bio-fertiliser, the best and cheapest fertiliser for my farm," Jere writes on his Facebook page.

EcoGen provides different sizes of biogas systems with the smallest being six cubic metres and the biggest being 40 cubic metres. Not many farmers can afford these systems despite their advantages. For example, Kwelete has bought an eight cubic metre system and a 12 cubic metre system costing MK 288,000 (about €150) and MK 399,000 (about €205) respectively.

Wonderful Mkhutche, a communications and branding officer at EcoGen, says that the company has extended credit to farmers to enable them to access their products. The dairy farmers who are organised in cooperatives can get the biogas systems on a loan repayable in a maximum of two years.

Efforts such as those by EcoGen need to be amplified throughout Malawi. The demand for energy remains high yet fewer affordable and environmentally friendly solutions exist. The Malawian government must do more to connect citizens to electricity grids and provide alternative sources of energy. To delay this will only endanger the environment as poor people continue to rely on wood fuel.



RAPHAEL MWENINGUWE is a freelance journalist based in Malawi.
raphael.mweninguwe@
hotmail.com

MASTHEAD / IMPRINT

D+C DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION

Sustainable development requires global awareness and local action.

Vol. 51, 2024

D+C is the identical twin of the German edition E+Z

Internet: www.DandC.eu

ISSN 2366-7257

The production of this Digital Monthly was finalised on 28.11.2024.

D+C Development and Cooperation is funded by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and commissioned by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL. D+C does not serve as a governmental mouthpiece. Our mission is to provide a credible forum of debate, involving governments, civil society, the private sector and academia at an international level. D+C is the identical twin of E+Z Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit, the German edition.

We invite people who work in different sectors and live all around the world to contribute to D+C/E+Z. The editors request that no unsolicited manuscripts be sent, but proposals for contributions are welcome. After editing manuscripts according to journalistic standards, we ask the authors to approve the final texts before publishing their items. As we edit interviews for clarity and brevity, we also ask our interviewees for approval of the final manuscripts to ensure we do not distort their message. That is standard practice in German journalism.

ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL gGmbH
 Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen
 Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 40
 53113 Bonn
 Phone: +49 (0) 2 28 2 07 17-0
 Fax: +49 (0) 2 28 2 07 17-150
www.engagement-global.de

ADVISORY BOARD:

Selmin Çalışkan, Prof. Dr. Anna-Katharina Hornidge,
 Prof. Dr. Katharina Michaelowa, Dr. Susanne Neubert, Bruno Wenn

PUBLISHER:

Fazit Communication GmbH
 Executive directors: Jonas Grashey, Hannes Ludwig

ADDRESS OF THE PUBLISHER AND EDITORIAL OFFICE:
 Pariser Straße 1, D-60486 Frankfurt am Main, Germany

This is also the legally relevant address of all indicated as responsible or entitled to represent them in this imprint.

EDITORIAL TEAM:

Dr Hans Dembowski (DEM; editor-in-chief, responsible for content according to Germany's regulations)
 Editorial staff: Eva-Maria Verfürth (EMV, editor), Dr Katharina Wilhelm Otieno (KO, editor), Jörg Döbereiner (JD; managing editor), Maren van Treel (MVT, social media editor), Dagmar Wolf (DW, assistant)
 Freelance support: Malcolm Bell (translation), Claire Davis (translation), Jan Walter Hofmann (JWH; layout), Leon Kirschgens (LKI; Nowadays section), Roli Mahajan, Lucknow (RM), Ronald Ssegujja Ssekandi, Kampala (RSS; Nowadays section)
 Phone: +49 (0) 69 75 91-31 10
euz.editor@dandc.eu

Disclaimer according to § 5,2 Hessian Law on the Freedom and Rights of the Press: The shareholder of the company is FAZIT-Stiftung.

ADVERTISING AND SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE:

Fazit Communication GmbH
 c/o Cover Service GmbH & Co. KG
 PO Box 1363
 D-82034 Deisenhofen, Germany
 Phone: +49 (0) 89 8 58 53-8 32
 Fax: +49 (0) 89 8 58 53-6 28 32
fazit-com@cover-services.de

Opinions expressed by authors indicated in bylines do not necessarily reflect the views of ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL, the publisher or the editor and his team. Provided that they indicate the original source, third parties have the permission to republish in complete or abridged versions the manuscripts published by D+C Development and Cooperation and E+Z Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit. However, those who do so are requested to send the editorial office two hard copies and/or the links to the respective webpages. This general permission does not apply to illustrations, maps and other items with explicitly and separately marked copyright disclaimers.



“Occupy Mars”: Elon Musk and Donald Trump at a campaign event in Pennsylvania.

RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM

In the service of oligarchs

The winner of the US election is Elon Musk. The billionaire threw his weight (including at least \$120 million) behind Donald Trump. Based on what it costs to promote a tweet on his platform X, his social-media support for the right-wing populist was probably worth a similar amount.

By Hans Dembowski

Musk not only allowed disinformation to spread on his platform, but aggressively contributed himself. No, common people’s free speech was never at risk under President Joe Biden and would not have been under Kamala Harris as the tech oligarch claimed. What might well have been curtailed, however, is Musk’s freedom to use X as he pleases. Under Trump, that won’t change.

This single example shows that Musk’s business interest was to prevent another Democratic president. He will, moreover, be Trump’s advisor on government spending and business regulation. What an opportunity for a billionaire who profits from defence and other government contracts, too.

Other titans of Silicon Valley and Wall Street appreciate Trump’s return to the

White House for similar reasons. They do not want to be regulated and resent rules regarding corporate mergers, artificial intelligence, data safety, labour rights, environmental protection and more, as has been argued in D+C/E+Z before.

It bears repetition. In the 1990s, the superrich supported globalisation. The liberalisation of markets allowed them to pit national governments against one another when it came to big investment decisions. In the past two decades, however, the dynamics of global cooperation have changed. It is increasingly about coordinating rules to the mutual benefit of nation states, ensuring a minimum level of taxation, supporting social protection and introducing means to protect the global environment.

Plutocrats do not like this trend. They want to be free to do what they want, and they know that, in our interconnected world, nation states are too weak to regulate them. Accordingly, some of them support political forces that claim to protect the nation from evil global interference, agitating against supposedly vicious migrants and mischievous elites. In those plutocrat’s eyes, Britain’s exit from the EU was a triumph. It

reduced the reach of the EU, which, thanks to pooling the sovereignty of several nations, is still strong enough to regulate and restrict the policy options of the UK.

Whether governments say so or not, humankind needs multilateral cooperation to get a grip on huge global challenges. They include macroeconomic stability, environmental health and digitalisation, to name three. In international affairs, the next Trump administration is likely to disrupt such efforts severely.

Trade wars, for example, may drive inflation and increase unemployment. It may prove impossible to tackle the global environmental crisis (climate, biodiversity, plastic waste et cetera). Violent conflict is set to escalate. Under Trump, the US may even get pulled into another war of the kind that this erratic leader calls “never-ending”. That could happen in the Middle East, for example, and cost many American lives.

LIKELY REGRETS

For various reasons, many voters may thus regret their vote for Trump in the not-too-distant future. They probably believe that, should that happen, they’ll simply elect someone completely different in four years. If the Trump administration manages to modify institutions as planned, however, they may never get that chance.

Trump-supporting oligarchs, including Musk, by the way, may have regrets too. They probably think they are in control, but autocrats resent anyone and anything restraining them in any way. The backlash can be brutal. US oligarchs should have asked their counterparts in China or Russia.

Hubristic plutocrats, however, tend to believe that they are superior beings. Though they believe to always know best how to deal with any issue, they cannot provide the global solutions we need better than national governments can.

Elon Musk prominently wants to build settlements on Mars given that Earth is haunted by so many problems. That is no serious proposal. It is a ridiculous distraction from what humankind really needs.



HANS DEMBOWSKI
is the editor-in-chief of D+C/
E+Z.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

MULTILATERALISM

Yet again, a climate summit delivers too little, too late

After two weeks of tense negotiations, the UN climate summit in Baku concluded two days late. The final agreement sets a target of \$300 billion annually by 2035 for global climate finance. This falls short of what vulnerable nations demanded.

By Roli Mahajan

Papua New Guinea boycotted this year's climate summit in Baku, Azerbaijan. The government of the small Pacific island nation branded the global warming negotiations a "waste of time" that would only result in empty promises. In retrospect, it was not wide off the mark. The international community is still not responding with the needed urgency to the climate crisis.

Negotiators in Baku agreed on a roadmap for international climate finance. "Roadmap" is a popular term in climate-talks jargon, but it is not as strong as a binding agreement. The plan foresees \$1.3 trillion of annual climate finance by 2035, though high-income countries only agreed to "lead efforts" to pool an annual \$300 billion by that time. There is no commitment for the other \$1 trillion.

The phrasing suggests that emerging markets too should contribute funding in support of developing nations, which must adapt to the climate crisis and opt for clean-energy solutions at the same time. No doubt, they deserve support for tackling the harsh impacts of climate change, which they did not cause.

Many participants warned that 2035 is still a decade away and that the world's transition to clean energy must happen faster. Nigerian diplomats called the deal a "joke".

While the new \$300 billion promise from high-income nations is better than the previous \$100 billion, it is still \$200 billion less than the group of 134 developing countries had demanded. What was decided must thus, once again, be summed up as "too little, too late".

The annual climate summits are called COP (Conference of Parties) and involve the 198 countries that have signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Nine years ago, the COP in Paris concluded with a pledge to limit global warming to 1.5 to 2.0 degrees over the pre-industrial age. Humankind is currently on course to exceed the 2.0 limit, which would be disastrous. The reason is that tipping points would be passed after which the melting of ice shields in the Antarctic and Greenland or the thawing of permafrost in the tundra would make global heating irreversibly worse.

This year's summit unfolded against the backdrop of a dangerous political shift in the USA. Climate-sceptic Donald Trump will become president in January. To some extent, climate denialism was evident at the COP already. Azerbaijan has oil and gas resources, and setting the tone, President Ilham Aliyev called fossil fuel resources a "gift from God" on the first day of the summit. He thus fell back behind the agreement struck last year in Dubai, where the much-celebrated consensus was to "transition away" from coal, oil and gas. Aliyev did not succeed in rolling back things. This year's summit con-

firmed last year's agreement but made no progress towards phasing out fossil fuels.

There was some good news. COP29 adopted standards for a centralised carbon market, something previous COPs had not been able to achieve. However, details and transparency obligations for the emissions-trading system must yet be defined. A coherent international carbon market should help countries to implement climate policies faster and cheaper. That might accelerate progress on halving global emissions by 2030, as scientists say is necessary. Apart from money, disadvantaged countries were promised capacity-building support.

Three decades after the UNFCCC was agreed in 1992, the climate crisis keeps getting worse. The world is becoming hotter much faster than was anticipated back then, with 2024 on track to become the hottest year on record. Extreme weather is affecting an increasing number of people in ever more countries. Poor communities in low-income countries suffer most. Their climate-relevant emissions remain negligible.

The lack of progress is frustrating many. The UNFCCC process itself is increasingly in question, and COP29 hardly inspired new confidence. The final deal was imposed late, and in haste. Objections from poorer nations were ignored. The Indian delegate spoke of nations' trust in the process having become "fractured".



ROLI MAHAJAN
is an Indian journalist based
in Lucknow.

roli.mahajan@gmail.com



After Papua New Guinea suffered a devastating landslide in May, its government is no longer interested in empty climate promises.

Get the D+C app!



With our new app, you'll always
have D+C at your fingertips.

Download it here:
dandc.eu/en/app



FOCUS

Faith and politics

Voodoo is important to many in Benin

By Karim Okanla (p. 18)

Indigenous world views are rooted in spirituality and ecologically relevant

Interview with Frank Schwabe (p. 20)

Ethiopia's sacred forests

By Christoph Schneider-Yattara and Peter M. Borchardt (p. 22)

Faith-based actors as drivers of change

Interview with Dagmar Pruin (p. 24)

Hope and hopelessness in Palestine

By Kim Berg (p. 27)

Afghan women's plight

By Khushboo Srivastava (p. 29)

Sri Lankan president woos Buddhists

By Arjuna Ranawana (p. 30)

Hinduism in Indian politics

By Suparna Banerjee (p. 32)



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses the UN General Assembly in September 2023, holding a map that shows the West Bank and Gaza as part of Israel.



Dada Daagbo Hounon Hounan II, the Supreme Spiritual Voodoo Chief, in his palace in Ouidah last year.

SYNCRETISM

A holistic view of the cosmos

In Benin, voodoo is practiced as a religion – regardless of whether someone is at the same time Christian, Muslim or Hindu. However, the proliferation of more and more Christian free churches and the increase in Islamist attacks are endangering the long-standing harmony between the different religious groups.

By Karim Okanla

Benoit Sogan is a 42-year-old traditional voodoo healer. He lives on the outskirts of Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin. His small house, half of which is made of red earth and half of cement blocks, is just a short

walk from the nearby cemetery, where both Muslims and Christians bury their dead. Access to Benoit's property can prove very difficult in the rainy season, as the road leading to his house is full of potholes, bumps and red, standing water.

Nevertheless, he has many patients. Benoit takes very good care of the voodoo shrine in the small, damp room where he communicates with the spirits. Not long ago, he says, a man came to him and told him that he had received two consecutive spiritual attacks in his sleep, around 01:30 in the morning, right in the middle of his head. A few days later, the man realised that he had lost his virility; he felt very weak, as

if dark forces that he could not control were sucking away his life energy.

Benoit explains that he consulted the Ifa oracle, who told him that the poltergeist attacking his visitor in his sleep was actually a very dangerous and harmful voodoo spirit. Benoit asked the man to get corn flour, red palm oil, the local alcoholic drink sodabi and kola nuts. And, of course, a few banknotes.

A chicken was sacrificed, its blood poured into the voodoo shrine and the meat put into a calabash, which was later deposited at a crossroads under cover of darkness. This was said to be a sacrifice to appease and satisfy the voodoo deity who sent the poltergeist. Benoit also reports that he gave the man various concoctions to drink and black soap to apply to his private parts after showering. Benoit then marked the victim's body with a magical black powder in the hope that this would protect him from future attacks, as other evil voodoo spirits might try

to attack him again. “I used my ‘return to sender’ recipe,” he says proudly.

A CENTURIES-OLD RELIGION

Such a story is not unusual in Benin. It is not only here that voodoo is considered a religion that is said to be hundreds of years old. Voodoo was originally created for the spiritual protection of its believers, to promote ethnic identity and to ask for ancestral blessings. To this day, the religion continues to flourish, especially in Africa and the Caribbean. The Yoruba people in Nigeria for example believe that the voodoo pantheon, known in that country as orisa, is home to more than 400 deities.

Unfortunately, some unscrupulous voodoo priests in search of quick money sometimes use voodoo to harm people. They don’t hesitate to break the rules of their religion, and that’s when evil voodoo reveals itself. “Voodoo is like a knife,” explains Benoit. “You can use it to cut your fish in the kitchen or slit your enemy’s throat”.

The former slave port of Ouidah in southern Benin is considered the cradle of voodoo. Originally, voodoo was defined in Ouidah as a system that takes a holistic view of the cosmos and human existence on planet Earth. It encompasses all that is natural, social and spiritual in an effort to conform to the laws of nature. Consequently, the forces of nature occupy a central place in voodoo’s view of the universe. This system promotes social cohesion and mutual understanding between different groups – and is one reason why voodoo practices go hand in hand with other religious beliefs.

Voodoo devotees believe that the reason for the existence of voodoo is that it helps to create harmony and understanding within and between communities. Therefore, witchcraft is a reprehensible deviation of voodoo, as is black magic.

As a large part of African tradition was passed down orally in the past, families needed a point of reference, a strong and common symbol with which they could identify. For example, the python was the revered deity of the Adjovi family of Ouidah. Many people adopted this voodoo deity and built on it to strengthen their unity. Up to 50 families in today’s Ouidah can thus unite and assert that they obey the same voodoo god.

Since the majority of Beninese people follow voodoo in some form, those in power



have recognised the political advantages that could be gained from this religion, which is also practiced by millions of illiterate and poor people. Former President Nicéphore Soglo, who ruled Benin from 1991 to 1996, is said to have been saved from death thanks to the healing powers of voodoo after being poisoned by political opponents. To express his gratitude to the voodoo dignitaries, he officially declared 10 January of each year as Voodoo Day.

This was not enough to secure him a second term in office, but politicians have since realised that millions of votes can be won by appealing to the poor and uneducated voodoo followers in particular. Huge sums are being spent on refurbishing and renovating voodoo temples and the beach at Ouidah, where the main voodoo celebrations take place. On 10 January this year, the authorities organised a lavish celebration by the sea there. Politicians also often befriend voodoo leaders and priests in the hope of benefiting from spiritual protection of the deities.

ALL PATHS LEAD TO GOD

Because so many religions are practiced in Benin, it is often hard to tell who is Muslim, Christian, a follower of voodoo, something else or more than one thing. The people of Benin are known for mixing different religions that at first glance do not have much in common.

Some priests of the Catholic church in Benin denounce this syncretism in their sermons. Muslim clerics also strongly condemn these practices. The Protestants in Benin have a more liberal attitude. Reverend Henri Harry, a deceased leader of the Protestant church, said he saw nothing wrong with Christians visiting voodoo temples. Harry tried to be pragmatic, because for many people in Benin, all paths lead to

God. Recently, the Catholic Church has also softened its stance and is trying to integrate into local cultures and customs in order to both survive and thrive.

Since the current government under President Patrice Talon decided to officially recognise various religious dignitaries, kings and traditional chiefs, the number of temples, convents and other places of worship has exploded. Talon is a strong proponent of voodoo, but he also occasionally intervenes to reconcile the feuding Muslim communities in Cotonou, Benin’s largest city.

“Voodoo devotees believe that the reason for the existence of voodoo is that it helps to create harmony and understanding within and between communities.”

Today, new voodoo deities from Ghana, Hindu sects from India and Muslim movements such as Ahmadiyya have many followers in Benin. Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry also record a large number of believers. New places of worship, known as “churches of awakening”, are mushrooming. Many of them claim to fight witchcraft and dark forces. Some promise their followers instant wealth.

Nevertheless, many churchgoers and Muslim believers continue to visit voodoo shrines under the cover of darkness, often in search of material wealth and spiritual powers. Many are at the same time members of secret cults.

Although an interfaith dialogue is being conducted to promote peace in Benin, rifts are appearing in the harmony between the groups. Jihadist insurgents in particular, who carry out violent attacks in northern Benin, use religious hatred and negative propaganda to sow the seeds of division.



KARIM OKANLA
is a media scholar and
freelance writer from Benin.
His book “Voodoo in Benin:
a blessing or a curse?” was

published by Les Éditions du Flamboyant et Communications (Cotonou, 2023).
karimokanla@yahoo.com



“Indigenous land is not farmland”: protest during a summit of Amazonian governments in Belém, Brazil, in the summer of 2023.

HUMAN RIGHTS

“Rooted in spirituality”

Even though the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples matter very much, their cosmological visions tend to be not taken seriously. In a D+C/E+Z interview, Frank Schwabe, the commissioner for freedom of religion or belief of Germany’s Federal Government, elaborated why the rights of indigenous peoples deserve respect at national and international levels.

Frank Schwabe interviewed by Hans Dembowski

In what sense is the religious freedom of indigenous peoples at risk?

Well, in the first place, indigenous peoples themselves and their lifestyles are threatened, and that has religious connotations. The recent UN summit on biodiversity in Colombia emphasised that these commu-

nities play a vital role in the protection of ecosystems. They also contribute to climate mitigation. Indigenous systems of knowledge, however, are rooted in spirituality and not based on scientific expertise. For several reasons, their belief systems are normally not taken seriously by the majority population of the countries they live in, and they are also generally disregarded in international affairs. One can easily trace this neglect back to the beginnings of colonisation. Even today, indigenous peoples and their cosmological thinking remains largely invisible in public debate. Adding to the problems, people who consider themselves to be enlightened in a modern sense are often reluctant to think in spiritual terms at all.

Are there any consequences, for example when indigenous rights and their tradition-

al ownership are violated in the context of conflicts over land?

Yes, there are. My experience in Honduras, for example, was that state agencies often did not understand what indigenous activists really wanted. They were not demanding land titles for clearly demarcated plots. They were insisting on a discourse on how forestland should or should not be used, regardless of who owns which hectare. Social anthropologists teach us that, according to the cosmological visions of many indigenous peoples, it is absurd to draw lines to divide up land. They tend to see human beings as components of nature, rather than nature as our environment. In indigenous eyes, it is generally unacceptable to make others the objects of one’s own action. These indigenous cosmologies deserve respect, according to the International Labour Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention (ILO Convention 169).

It also states that no large infrastructure or mining projects are allowed on indigenous land unless the affected communities have given their free, prior and informed consent.

If indigenous ideas, however, are not really compatible with legal concepts of land use, that must be very difficult.

Yes, indeed, and that is precisely why my ambition is to start debate on these matters at local, national and international levels. Those debates will not immediately result in guidelines for tangible action. First of all, we really need better mutual understanding. Widening the focus of debate, however, will ultimately lead to change everywhere, even here in Germany.

“Unfortunately, it is true that action by western governments often diverges from the principles they have officially made commitments to. But what is the consequence? We cannot simply abandon the human-rights agenda, which is actually a universal agenda, adopted by the UN, and not simply a western one.”

The human rights of indigenous communities are often violated. Is it not naive to assume that governments will pay more attention to their religious freedom?

That is not what I assume at all, but it nonetheless makes sense to point out that this right too is regularly violated. Doing so serves more comprehensive debates, and it helps awareness raising for indigenous rights. One related effort was our Federal Government’s 3rd Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief. In Spanish, it will soon be published as a book, illustrated with photos taken by Paola Tamayo, the documentary-film director. It is noteworthy, moreover, that some law courts have referred to indigenous rights in their judgements after government agencies and private sector companies had ignored those rights.

That has happened in India, for example.

As a matter of fact, the judiciaries of many nations are paying increasing attention to international law. Where sovereign states have ratified the respective treaties or even codified the related rights in national law, that is obviously more likely. For indigenous

peoples and other minorities, this is a promising trend.

Repressive governments and those who support them often emphasise their own religious identity. One example was evangelical support for the destructive forest policies of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s former right-wing president.

Well, governments with autocratic leanings tend to endorse religious freedom, at least on paper, but they normally only worry about their own religion. By the way, not only right-wing populists like Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán primarily think of Christians whenever debate turns to religious freedom. Mainstream conservative parties in Europe do so too. More liberal and left-leaning people, by contrast, regularly show no interest in the topic at all. I believe it is important to explore religious freedom in every direction. It is a truly fundamental human right. Let’s not forget that humanists, atheists and non-religious people suffer discrimination in some world regions.

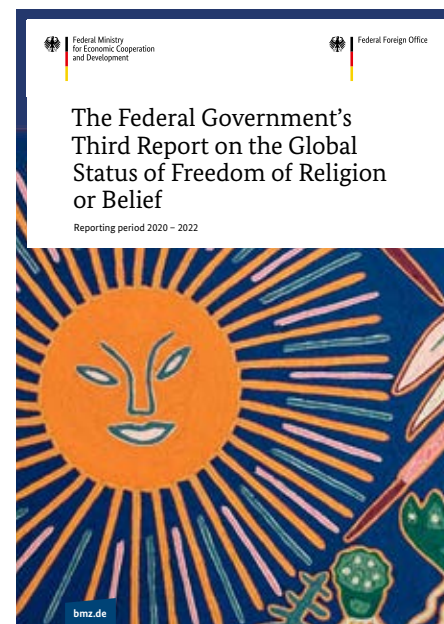
Islam looks like a threat to many Europeans, no matter what political camp they belong to. They do not see it as one of the major world religions. To some extent, inter-faith dialogue involving Christians and Muslims is helpful in this setting. Is such dialogue feasible with representatives of indigenous belief systems, even though they neither have holy scriptures nor refined theologies?

It is very complicated, but dialogue of Christians with indigenous groups has started in Latin America. Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala is an important proponent. His track record of supporting poor rural people is long, and very many of them belong to Maya communities in his country. His appreciation of their dignity and how he interacts with them has won him a lot of praise. However, we are only seeing the beginning of serious dialogue now, more than 500 years after colonisation began and brought along missionaries to the continent.

Western governments love to emphasise what they call the rules-based world order, but many people in Asia, Africa and Latin America accuse them of double standards. All too often, international agreements do not protect these people’s interest or at least do not do so effectively. When it comes

to human rights, we are often accused of hypocrisy too.

Yes, I know, and in countless individual cases those accusations are accurate. Unfortunately, it is true that action by western governments often diverges from the principles they have officially made commitments to. But what is the consequence? We cannot simply abandon the human-rights agenda, which is actually a universal agenda, adopted by the UN, and not simply a western one. In spite of western shortcomings, many people around the world acknowledge that the rule of law is comparatively strong in western countries, and that includes respect for human rights. The fact that we see room for



improvement certainly does not mean that human rights are worthless.

LINK

The Federal Government’s 3rd Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief (including executive summaries in English, German and Spanish):

<https://religionsfreiheit.bmz.de/religionsfreiheit-en/the-report>



FRANK SCHWABE is the commissioner for freedom of religion or belief of Germany’s Federal government.

<https://www.bundestag.de/services/formular/contactform?mdblId=857980>



Church forest at Mitak Amanuel Church near Debre Berhan, Amhara region.

RELIGION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The sacred forests of Ethiopia

The church forests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church are a remarkable example of environmental conservation upheld through spiritual reverence, indigenous knowledge and traditional beliefs.

By Christoph Schneider-Yattara and Peter M. Borchardt

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) is the largest of the Oriental Orthodox churches and one of the most influential institutions in Ethiopia with more than 45 million followers, half a million clergy and more than 75,000 churches and 3000 monasteries.

More than 35,000 of these churches are surrounded by sacred forests, ranging in size from half a hectare to thousands of hectares. These sacred forests are often the last remaining fragments of natural vegetation in regions that have otherwise been degraded by extensive land use. They serve as

refuges for native plant and animal species and preserve a biodiversity that would be endangered without them.

Many local farmers remember that their landscapes were once forested in their childhood – a sign of the dramatic environmental changes of recent decades. The degradation of soils is largely due to rapid population growth and the expansion of agriculture to meet food needs in areas that are often characterised by food insecurity. In addition, there is little awareness of sustainable land and forest management.

The church forests have survived mainly because of the spiritual values that the EOTC and its followers attach to them. Believers regard all elements in a church forest – trees, shrubs, grass, water, animals – as sacred. This reverence has also fostered the way of life of the monastic communities that live in many of these forests and use sustainable practices rooted in religious teachings. Although these communities

rely on the forest for their basic needs, they use its resources with restraint and respect, committing themselves to living in harmony with the environment.

This approach is a unique model for nature conservation and a complement to conventional forest management, interweaving ecological sustainability with spiritual and cultural practices.

EMPLOYMENT, TIMBER, BIODIVERSITY

In cooperation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOC-DICAC) and Bread for the World, a project has been developed to support communities in the restoration and conservation of such forest landscapes. The joint project is called the “Sustainable Church Forest Management Program” (SCFMP).

The restored forests will provide employment, timber and firewood and improve biodiversity and soil fertility in the long term. The trees also bind carbon dioxide and reduce the effects of climate change. Due to EOC-DICAC’s close relationships with local communities and their administrations at village and district level, the programme has already extended its approaches to the surrounding landscapes. EOC-DICAC also collaborates with research institutions and relevant government agencies.

However, some church forests are not clearly demarcated, which can lead to a conflict of interest between the monasteries and the surrounding communities over church resources. To mitigate this risk, the EOC-DICAC will continue the dialogue between the different stakeholders by involving church and community leaders from the beginning to achieve a common understanding of the importance of protecting church forests.

REFORESTATION MEASURES

At the heart of the programme are reforestation measures, especially for those who depend on the natural resources extracted from the church forests. It takes two main approaches:

1. Green Corridors – connecting nature and people:

To protect church forests, EOC-DICAC’s green corridors concept supports communities living outside the forests to

establish a sustainable connection with monastic communities living in the forests. Isolated patches of forest or natural habitats are connected to extensions of land of different sizes and shapes to enable the migration and dispersal of plant and animal species. Green corridors can be planned in different sizes and lengths. They can be established at regional, sub-regional and local levels. The concept provides an evaluation system for planning the corridor structures that are most suitable in terms of conservation and connectivity. These corridors play a crucial role in the restoration and upscaling of landscapes.

2. Agroforestry – a key to sustainable food security:

Various combinations of trees, crops and vegetables can be grown in the tree plantations and on the farmland between the villages and the church forests. Within the plantations, the trees can add several positive ecosystem services to this integrated agricultural concept:

- high food and nutrient diversity that is available longer into the year,
- lower risks compared to monocultures in terms of negative effects of weather and pests,
- raising the water table and reducing overland or surface runoff by creating drainage through roots,
- providing shade and reducing the evaporation of groundwater,
- fertilisation through nitrogen fixation and mulch formation through falling leaves,
- reducing soil erosion.

With these approaches, the SCFMP aims to fundamentally improve food security in the respective regions. It has reduced the number of days of hunger, increased crop yields and improved dietary diversity through the cultivation of fruit and vegetables.

It also helps to increase income by promoting sustainable agricultural practices and teaching entrepreneurial skills. It has further promoted a culture of saving. The programme focuses on women and youth by involving local women’s groups and young people who have no prospect of owning their own land in all economic activities and in the establishment of the green corridors.

In addition, the corridors and other activities are restoring and preserving ecosystems and degraded areas. They also increase the density and biodiversity of church for-



Procession on the way back from a tree planting campaign in the Mantogera church forest near Addis Zemen, Amhara region, 2019.

ests. Other benefits include the reduction of water-borne diseases and the improvement of local communities’ knowledge, awareness and skills in forestry and conservation.

PRESERVED THROUGH RELIGIOUS REVERENCE

Ethiopia’s church forests are an exceptional part of both Ethiopia’s spiritual heritage and the national Green Legacy Initiative, which is part of the country’s multi-layered response to the impacts of climate change. What makes these forests special is that they are protected not only by ecological intentions but also by a deep-rooted religious reverence, giving them a unique conservation status and framework rarely found in other conservation efforts.

Awareness and a sense of shared responsibility are crucial for the sustainable management and protection of these vital natural resources. The EOTC plays a critical role here, taking an eco-theological approach that combines traditional conservation knowledge with insights from ongoing ecological and sustainability programmes. To strengthen this stewardship, the programme partners are committed to ensuring that the EOTC obtains full ownership of the church forests so that it can effectively continue its sustainable management and conservation practices.

With the SCFMP, Bread for the World is also tapping into important indigenous

knowledge about the use of natural resources. This is the basis for the programme’s enormous potential to protect as many of Ethiopia’s church forests as possible. Strong institutional partnerships with church organisations such as EOC-DICAC and local and international partners help to promote environmental protection throughout the country and beyond. This comprehensive approach not only improves environmental protection, but also promotes peaceful coexistence and a shared commitment to Ethiopia’s natural heritage. The church forests are an example of how spiritual values and sustainability efforts can be aligned to protect ecosystems and provide a model for community-centred, eco-theological conservation efforts.



CHRISTOPH SCHNEIDER-YATTARA

is the Regional Representative of Bread for the World in the Horn of

Africa, based in Ethiopia.
csyattara@padd-africa.org



PETER M. BORCHARDT

is a freelance restoration consultant and works as a senior researcher and project manager for Bread for

the World, Plant-for-the-Planet and the Norwegian Church Aid, among others.
pbo1@gmx.de



Church development cooperation is not necessarily about praying: farmers at a coffee field school in Indonesia sharing a meal.

CHURCH DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The resource of hope

In many countries around the world, spirituality, faith and religion are deeply rooted in everyday life. They offer important access to society and can strengthen individuals and social structures. Faith-based actors, including Christian ones, play a special role in processes of social change, humanitarian aid and development cooperation, explains Dagmar Pruin, President of Bread for the World, in an interview.

Dagmar Pruin interviewed by Katharina Wilhelm Otieno

How does Bread for the World understand the role of faith, religion and religious values in development?

Faith and religion are very important in many parts of the world and are a powerful part of reality. In Europe, and especially in

Germany, we are quick to no longer attach great importance to religion. However, this is not true for the so-called global south. And I would also ask the question for Germany and Europe as to whether the secularisation discourse always correctly reflects what is actually happening. For example, we deduce from dwindling church membership figures that religiosity is declining. But that is only one level and says nothing about whether people define themselves as religious or spiritual. Development policy must take into account the fact that religion and spirituality are part of being human.

When we talk about values, partnership is important to us as a church development organisation. We work through partner organisations and do not implement projects ourselves. Our own Christian faith places us unequivocally on the side of the

poor, those who are on the margins of society. The church can only be the church if it inscribes this partisanship into its nature and organisation. This is reflected in the church's development cooperation, and much follows from this – such as the collection for Bread for the World in Protestant church services at Christmas. This is not an add-on, but rather a core concern of Christianity, as it is a partisanship for the poor.

How can religion be used in development cooperation?

In many African countries, for example, large parts of the health and education systems are run by churches. Anyone who wants to strengthen these systems will find important partners in these churches. Especially in rural regions, civil society structures – and the church is part of civil society – are essential for gaining access to people.

At the same time, we must always be aware that religion can be both part of the solution and part of the problem in development policy. Religion can be filled and lived in different ways and must therefore be regarded as ambivalent – which is why the

“The strength of religious communities lies in the fact that they can speak of the future and hope. A central message of Christianity is the hope that circumstances can change because they have already been turned upside down, and that God wants people to live in dignity and justice.”

respective contexts must be analysed carefully and assessed differently.

Can you give an example?

During the Covid-19 Church development cooperation is not necessarily about praying: Farmers at a coffee field school in Indonesia sharing a meal. pandemic, we saw that vaccination suddenly became a kind of question of faith worldwide, and scientific findings took a back seat. Many people in the global south were more likely to get vaccinated if a trusted person from their religious community had recommended it. Religious communities in particular can create trust – and this is especially important in crisis situations. However, I am not closing my eyes to the above-mentioned ambivalence.

At the same time, the strength of religious communities lies in the fact that they can speak of the future and hope. A central message of Christianity is the hope that circumstances can change because they have already been turned upside down, and that God wants people to live in dignity and justice.

What role should religious organisations play in promoting social cohesion and peace, for example?

Our work, as we and our partners understand it, is guided by the question of what creates future. And for me as a Protestant, peace, justice and the preservation of creation belong closely together as a triad when it comes to the future. Peace is more than just the absence of war; it is also about fair participation.

We can contribute to this with our partners, for example by creating spaces in which

issues can be discussed and negotiated. In addition, for lasting peace we also need a way of dealing with trauma, forgiveness and reconciliation. Churches can provide important psychosocial support here, as they are a point of contact in many crisis regions for counselling and support in dealing with issues such as death, illness and violence. When trust is shared and shaped there, people are comforted, hope grows even in the face of mass death – and a community is formed in which life can be dared anew.

Are there situations in which faith comes into conflict with development-policy goals? How do you handle such situations at Bread for the World?

We have a code of conduct that applies to church and non-church partners and regulates what to do in cases of discrimination or hostility. Moreover, I believe one of the tasks of our organisation is to create spaces in which difficult topics can and must be discussed.

It’s important to point out that we are not promoting religion, but rather development work for greater justice. We support the social and charitable work of churches – not the churches themselves. Our partner churches are independent, autonomous churches that organise their congregational life and work themselves. When their work relates to development, we step in and become a partner. In this role, we want to strengthen them. That is our important – but limited – mandate.

What organisations representing different faiths does Bread for the World work with and what does this cooperation look like?

We always look at what makes sense. Interfaith work is challenging. Such projects can of course be incredibly powerful, like when Christian and Muslim leaders in Sierra Leone agree that genital mutilation is wrong. There are other areas, however, in which it is almost impossible to find common ground for interfaith engagement. We respect these boundaries.

Can you name specific projects or examples that showcase interfaith cooperation?

We support a Buddhist-Christian cooperation between young people advocating for peace in Myanmar and a programme that brings together Christian, Muslim and Hindu groups in Indonesia. Here, too, the focus

is on dialogue and peace, as well as on topics like sustainability.

In each context, we ask who we can work with locally and where there are structures for development cooperation, which is our actual concern. Our local partners usually have a very clear idea of which other social forces we can team up with in a country to pursue a certain goal – and when this is not possible. We let our partners’ perspectives guide our actions.

What specific challenges do you face when working with organisations from other religions?

We work with other religious communities when we identify common concerns and goals. We respect different worldviews in the same way that we would like our Christian identity to be respected. The best way to approach diversity is to engage in open dialogue about intersections in our cooperation and about differences and limits.

When conflicts arise, we carefully analyse whether the situation is really a religious conflict, or if religion is being used as a vehicle and ultimately being instrumentalised to articulate something that is really entirely on a different level. Is it a struggle for the distribution of scarce resources or is it about the recognition of different ethnic identities? The conflict has to be handled differently depending on the answer.

One thing is clear: people who know their own religion well and are able to express themselves in it are much more able to defend themselves against attempts to instrumentalise their faith for power-political conflicts. A good immersion in one’s own faith protects against such misuse of religion. In that way, a good religious education can promote peace very successfully.

“We respect different worldviews in the same way that we would like our Christian identity to be respected. The best way to approach diversity is to engage in open dialogue about intersections in our cooperation and about differences and limits.”

But if we remain silent on the topic of religion or think that we can disregard it, we let forces that would reshape and dominate religion in a fundamentalist way have free rein.

What role does environmental and climate protection play in your work?

I already mentioned the triad that serves as our basic principle: peace, justice and the preservation of creation. And I think it's important to talk about creation and not the preservation of nature. With regard to achieving climate goals, we should be clear that we are also creatures. And, actually, fellow creatures: we do not rule over nature, we are not separate from it, but instead a part of it. Creation is both a gift and a task that has been given to us. This insight is viable outside of religion or in interfaith contexts whenever we talk about the role of people in shaping a sustainable lifestyle within planetary limits.

This gift gives rise to the task of protecting the earth for future generations as well. For us as a church development organisation, the topic also has to do with justice and the aforementioned solidarity with the poor: we have to work for justice between those who caused and are still causing climate change and those who are suffering the most as a result. Community comes into play here too, or in other words the realisation that there is a "we" that is greater than "I".

What overlaps and challenges do you see between feminist development policy and a faith-based organisation?

I am a feminist theologian, so I naturally feel closely aligned with feminist development policy. Feminist theology played a big role in the fight against AIDS, for example. At the same time, there are also political, cultural and religious challenges. With regard to gender equality, religion can once again be either part of the problem or part of the solution.

In the two largest religions, Islam and Christianity, there are still not many ordained women. For that reason, it is important that we support feminist theologians and queer networks in our work. Feminist theology is liberation theology.

Please explain briefly what liberation theology is.

This theological approach originates in Latin America. Its central question is what resources we have in theology and in our faith to change conditions in order to promote justice. In terms of feminist theology, this would mean looking at which biblical passages, images of God and considerations enable us to take up the fight for equal rights. Reading the Bible plays a major role in Protestantism in general. The Hebrew word for "mercy" is "racham". It has the same root as the word "rechem", which means "womb". What does this finding imply for our image of God and humanity, for our language and the shaping of gender roles?

What role do you think religion will have in development policy in the future?

I have to go back to my opening statement: religion is a dimension that cannot be ignored because otherwise we would be giv-

ing up opportunities and resources to reach people.

We are currently experiencing that development policy is being very much questioned, whether faith-based or not. This is a central part of the authoritarian-nationalist discourse. I wish that politicians would take a careful look at what we would be giving up here.

Church development agencies continue to receive a lot of donations. We should also not forget that here and in the global south there are a lot of people behind these agencies who are highly committed volunteers. Volunteer work is an unbelievably strong resource for church work everywhere.

This commitment contradicts those who claim that religion is dying out. I don't have to be religious myself to recognise why religious development policy plays a special role. Instead of opening up these side issues, we should all work together as democratic forces to resist attacks on our democracy.

I already mentioned the resource of hope. In our country too, the extreme right is using hopelessness for political gain. Religion, faith and spirituality allow people to hope again and again for a change in circumstances and to create a more just future. That is the good news that we live by – especially in faith-based development.



DAGMAR PRUIN
is the president of Bread for the World.

presse@brot-fuer-die-welt.de

Join D+C on WhatsApp!

Follow this link and subscribe to our WhatsApp channel:

<https://www.whatsapp.com/channel/0029VadzDFx002T9AJLmq31U>



D+C is also present on LinkedIn, Facebook and [www.twitter.com \(X\)](https://www.twitter.com/forumdc)



D+C Development and Cooperation



D+C Development and Cooperation



@forumdc



The Israeli Civil Administration and Israeli border police demolish a home in Al-Jawaya, a village in the Masafer Yatta region of the southern West Bank, in May 2024.

MIDDLE EAST

Living between hope and helplessness

Violence continues to spiral in the West Bank. For many frustrated young Palestinians, the search for justice leads to radicalisation.

By Kim Berg

On his Instagram channel, Alaa Hathleen shares a video of a building from which flickering light falls on the surrounding area. Over the footage, the 25-year-old trained physiotherapist writes: “Settlers burn down the house of Yousef Muhammad Al-Jabarin in Shaab Al-Batm in Masafer Yatta”. Hathleen lives in Masafer Yatta, a collection of Palestinian villages in the West Bank, south of Hebron, that are repeatedly attacked by Israeli settlers.

The area was recently thrust more forcefully into the public eye by the documentary film “No Other Land”. Released in

cinemas in 2024, it captures the violence that occurs in Masafer Yatta. “They kill the goats and sheep, cut the cables for the solar panels, destroy our olive groves and set fire to our cars or even homes,” says Hathleen. The activist documents the attacks on Instagram.

In 1981, Israel designated the area as a firing zone for military training. The twelve communities have been resisting forced resettlement ever since. In May 2022, the Supreme Court finally ruled against them. Civil-society organisations such as Amnesty International fear that evictions will now be enforced to make way for Israeli settlements.

The pressure on residents from the Israeli military has increased significantly since that ruling was delivered, as have attacks by extremist settlers. “Soldiers enter

villages at night, enforce curfews and other movement restrictions, conduct military training near living areas, confiscate vehicles and demolish homes. They make life unbearable for residents,” says David Cantero Pérez, Médecins Sans Frontières’ head of mission in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in a press release on Masafer Yatta in 2023.

“As I grew up, I constantly wondered why it is that we have no electricity, no water and no basic rights, whereas the Israeli settlers living in the immediate vicinity do,” says Hathleen. Many young people in the West Bank feel the same way. They feel deprived of their rights, at the mercy of attacks by Israeli settlers and soldiers and abandoned by their government. “Within Palestinian society, there is a strong awareness of personal rights and at the same time frustration over the inability to exercise those rights,” says Nizar Farsakh, lecturer in International Affairs at The George Washington University in Washington DC and former advisor to the Palestinian president. “There is an extreme sense of injustice, and young Palestinians in particular are rebelling against it.”

LOSS OF LEGITIMACY OF THE GOVERNMENT

For Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, there is no hope of help from their own government. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has administrative and security powers in only parts of the West Bank. In the so-called “C” areas, which make up around 60% of the West Bank, Israel has complete control. Palestinian security forces are not allowed to operate there, not even to protect their own population. In addition, the PA is contractually obliged to cooperate with Israeli security forces. This is perceived by many Palestinians as collaboration with the occupying regime and undermines their trust in the PA.

According to a survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in March this year, 84% of Palestinians want to see PA President Mahmoud Abbas resign. Only eight percent of Palestinians in the West Bank are satisfied with his work. Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff, the EU’s ambassador to the Palestinian Territories between 2020 and 2023, explains: “The government of Abbas and Fatah has lost all authority and legitimacy among the

vast majority of Palestinians. They are seen as enablers of the occupation.”

Anger over the occupation and the lack of representation by their own government prompt many Palestinians to take their fate into their own hands. “Palestinians know that they can expect no help from their own government and security forces,” says Kühn von Burgsdorff. The ex-diplomat sees this as the reason why young Palestinians, in particular, have become increasingly willing to resort to violence in recent years. “Older generations are less open to violence than younger ones because they carry the trauma of the bloodshed during the second intifada and thus want to avoid the use of violence,” Kühn von Burgsdorff explains. During the first intifada (1987 to 1993) and the more violent second one (2000 to 2005), Palestinians rebelled against the Israeli occupation.

GROWING INFLUENCE OF EXTREMIST GROUPS

The growing willingness of young Palestinians to use violence benefits militias and extremist groups such as Hamas. According to a study conducted in May by the consultancy firm Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), 34% of 18- to 24-year-old Palestinians in the West Bank would currently vote for Hamas. That would make



it the strongest force in the West Bank. Only 13% of respondents said they would vote for the ruling Fatah party.

There are also militias on the scene. For example: the “Lions’ Den” in Nablus in the central West Bank and the “Jenin Brigades” further north. Young Palestinians look to such groups for identity and a chance to express their frustration. They hope to find a community that fights for justice and self-determination. “Militias primarily developed in the Palestinian refugee camps. Palestinians living in the refugee camps have nothing more to lose; they have already lost everything,” says Farsakh.

Due to the increasing violence on both sides, radical religious forces are gaining more and more influence. Religious rhetoric

is instrumentalised by extremist Palestinian organisations as well as by the Israeli government and the settler movement in order to achieve political and ideological goals and mobilise supporters. Religion is frequently used to legitimise extreme beliefs and increasingly side-lines secular movements.

To break the spiral of violence, former EU envoy Kühn von Burgsdorff believes that Israel needs to change its position. “The problem is that the system is too profoundly unjust. The situation will only change when the structural violence of the occupation ends,” he says. In his view, the US and Europe should press Israel to give up the occupation.

There is no end to the violence in sight. Since Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent outbreak of war, the situation in the West Bank has continued to deteriorate. The recent approval of new settlements by the Israeli government has further fuelled the tense situation (see box).



KIM BERG
is an editor at the communications agency Fazit and specialises in political communication.

kim.berg@fazit.de

Annexation as a political goal

According to a study conducted in May by the consultancy firm Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), 77% of Palestinians aged between 18 and 24 rate the security situation in the West Bank as worse than it was a year ago. There are repeated violent clashes between Israeli settlers, the Israeli military, Palestinian militias and the Palestinian civilian population (see main text).

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reports that more than 720 people

were killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the 12 months following Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. That is more than three times as many as in the whole of 2022. In addition, Palestinians’ freedom of movement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is restricted by nearly 800 roadblocks.

The approval of new settlements adds fuel to the fire. In summer 2024, the Israeli government approved the construction of more than 5000 new settlement units in

the occupied territory and recognised three outposts that Israeli settlers built in Palestinian districts without a permit.

There are now more than 490,000 Israelis living in the West Bank. Dozens of settlements are classified by the UN as illegal under international law. On 19 July, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, including the Gaza Strip, to be unlawful. In its judgement, the ICJ affirmed the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination in all of its territory. Despite this, many settlers dream of annexing that territory – a process that

Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition government continues to push forward. The exclusive Jewish claim to the West Bank figures prominently in the coalition agreement.

In May, the Israeli military transferred numerous administrative powers in the Occupied Territories to an Israeli civil administration. Its leaders report to Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a representative of the radical settlers who lives in Kedumim, a settlement in the West Bank. He recently called for the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the establishment of new settlements deep in the heart of the Palestinian territories. KB



The Islamist regime is enforcing a repressive dress code, including in Kabul.

GENDER JUSTICE

The worsening plight of Afghan women

Since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, the Islamist regime has effectively erased women from public life. Femicide and other forms of gender-based violence have become more common. A recent report from a non-governmental initiative sheds light on the matter.

By Khushboo Srivastava

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index of both 2022 and 2023, Afghanistan is the worst country for women. The Taliban have systematically dismantled their rights, removing them from public life. They are denied access to education, employment and public participation. Radically restricted personal autonomy has impacts on mental and physical health, which intensify the country's numerous other crises.

Nonetheless, there are signs of women's remarkable resilience, with some en-

gaging in subtle yet profound acts of resistance. By stepping out of domestic confines, they strive for "hurriyya" (freedom) even in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

Afghan Witness is an independent organisation. It relies on Afghan and international researchers who gather, verify and document information. The project is coordinated by the British non-profit organisation Centre for Information Resilience. The 2024 report by Afghan Witness (AW) titled "The Erasure of Women" highlights the systemic repression. Over three years, the Islamist regime has not only effectively erased women from public life. The document also reveals a disturbing rise in femicide and other forms of gender-based violence.

After taking power, the Taliban fast restricted education opportunities for women and girls. By 2022, girls over the age of 12 were banned from attending school, and women were forbidden from pursuing higher education. No other country imposes

such restrictions. AW reckons that nearly 80% of Afghan girls and women have lost access to education. In some regions, studies in health sciences or religion are still allowed.

The Taliban closed schools and arrested advocates for girls' education. Early marriage and exploitation at the household level have thus become more likely. UN Women estimates that by 2026, 1.1 million girls will be excluded from school, leading to a 45% rise in early pregnancies and a 50% increase in maternal mortality.

There will be other long-term impacts too. As female persons lack income opportunities, poverty will worsen. According to AW, women have been forced out of jobs in both the public and private sectors, while women-owned businesses have been shut down. Limited job opportunities remain in sectors such as healthcare. The authors write that women's participation in the workforce has plummeted from 16% in 2020 to just five percent in 2023. The implication is that dependence on male relatives has grown, further limiting women's autonomy and making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The Taliban has imposed strict regulations on women's dress and movement, directing them to cover their bodies and faces in public. Moreover, they must be accompanied by a male guardian (mahram)

for any journey longer than 45 miles. Failure to comply results in severe punishments, including imprisonment. The AW report documents how oppressive policies have crushed the spirit of Afghan women. Male dominance is systematically being re-enforced.

Media, both digital and conventional, used to offer platforms for dissent and advocacy, but the Taliban aggressively silenced female voices. They are barred from participating in conferences, interviewing government officials or live reporting. By 2023, nearly 94% of female journalists were unemployed, according to AW. Women have also been pushed out of digital spaces. At the same time, online harassment and abuse have increased. Politically active women are targeted, and many then opt for self-censorship. Nonetheless, Afghan women in exile have set up women-centric newsrooms. They continue to cover the conditions facing women and LGBTQ+ people in Afghanistan, offering a glimmer of hope in very harsh times.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence has alarmingly surged under the Taliban. The AW authors have reviewed studies on femicide and other forms of violence, including forced marriages, sexual violence, domestic abuse and torture. Women face violence in both public and private spheres, and those who defy Taliban-imposed norms are often subjected to arbitrary arrest and public punishment.

According to AW, reports it has monitored between January 2022 and June 2024 found that at least 840 women and girls became victims of gender-based violence, and at least 332 of them were killed. The figures most likely underrepresent the true scale of the crisis, as most cases go unreported due to fear of reprisals. This is especially true as support services for victims have been dismantled. Survivors of gender-based violence have no recourse for justice.

Despite the brutal oppression, Afghan women continue to resist in whatever ways

they can. Repression has made public protests largely impossible, but indoors' activism continues. Women organise secret schools, libraries and beauty salons, for example. The risks are high.

The AW paper warns that the normalisation of the Taliban's discriminatory policies must be prevented. It emphasises the need for international support. Global institutions must step up to fund gender-focused initiatives, promote gender equality and support Afghan women in their ongoing fight for freedom and dignity.

LINK

Afghan Witness, 2024:

<https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/the-erasure-of-women>



KHUSHBOO SRIVASTAVA
is a political scientist and an Assistant Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.

krsrivastava29@gmail.com

NEW COALITION

Softened image

Sri Lanka's newly minted President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is an avowed leftist. In the election campaign, he dropped the Marxists' disdain for the Buddhist clergy, however.

By Arjuna Ranawana

At university, AKD – as the president is popularly known – belonged to a hard-left students union, and that spirit has stayed with him. Before this year's presidential election, however, he shifted to a more centrist position. The media covered his meetings with Buddhist faith leaders and published pictures of him offering gifts to monks.

AKD also softened the image of his party, the People's Liberation Front (PLF) and formed a new party, the National People's Power (NPP). He leads both, and some

people close to him serve executive functions in both as well. Despite the connection to the PLF, which has a violent past, the NPP attracted voters from the middle and upper classes who were disgruntled with former governments.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic nation. The Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist and account for about the majority of the population. Tamils, who mostly tend to be Hindus, make up 15% and Muslims not quite 10%. About seven percent are Christians.

For obvious reasons, politicians – whether Buddhist themselves or not – have sought the blessings of the Buddhist clergy. The Rajapaksa clan, which dominated Sri Lankan politics for about two decades, emphasised the Sinhala-Buddhist identity most prominently. Their influence on the

country largely resulted from the victory in a decades-long and devastating civil war against the separatist militia Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2022, however, a financial meltdown led to a popular uprising which ended the clan's grip on the country. It will take a few years for any new government to get the country back on track economically.

The new president's PLF also has a history of violent insurrection. It led uprisings against elected governments in 1971 and 1987 to 1989 but later abandoned armed struggle. In the past, younger monks often supported the PLF, but not the Buddhist establishment. That seems to have changed now, even though the establishment had long shunned the PLF after it had tried to steal a holy relic – a tooth of the Buddha – from a temple in Kandy in the late 1980s.

Sri Lankan Buddhism is shaped by various influences. Given the closeness to India, Hindu influences are evident from pre-Buddhist times. Most temples have individual shrines with statues dedicated to Hindu Gods. On the other hand, animist be-

liefs in demons and spirits have been integrated into Buddhism too. Traditionally Sri Lankan Buddhism is thus a syncretic belief system that does not draw sharp lines to distinguish itself from other world views.

Buddhism saw a revival against Christian influences in the 19th century. Henry Steel Olcott, an American pantheist philosopher, played an important role. This resurgence gave birth to the idea of Buddhist-Sinhala nationalism.

Political analyst Harshana Rambukwella links the politicised Sinhala-Buddhist identity to colonialism. The British Empire thrived on divide and rule strategies, and its censuses often did not only serve planning purposes but also helped to pit local communities against one another. Rambukwella adds, however, that the identity link between Sinhalese and Buddhism was not firm in the early 20th century.

The scholar sees 1956 as a turning point. It was the year of a major Buddhist festivity, a general election and the publication of a report that endorsed a narrative of long-standing Buddhist grievances. The guiding idea was that the British had made promises to Buddhists but had not kept them. The message of victimisation resonated with Sri Lanka's majority population. Rambukwella notes that "from 1956 onwards, you see slowly a kind of an institutionalisation and politicisation of Buddhism that was not visible before."

The constitution of 1972 gave Buddhism an elevated status, though it did not declare this faith to be the state religion. The idea was certainly to please the Sinhalese, but a side effect was a stronger sense of alienation amongst the Tamil community. Many of them had agitated for equal rights when Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain. In the late 1970s, their frustration led to an armed struggle. Both Sinhalese and Tamils are guilty of brutal violence, and political parties on both sides used it for their gain. The LTTE, which became the main Tamil militia, was decisively put down after three decades of civil war in 2009. That victory benefited the Rajapaksa clan politically.

The financial crisis of 2022, however, has ushered in a new sense of nationhood. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned and temporarily fled the country when economic hardship hurt people of all communities and income levels. AKD proved good at zooming in on their grievances. He



During his swearing-in ceremony in September, Anura Kumara Dissanayake reached out to Buddhist monks...



...as well as to Christian, Hindu and Muslim faith leaders.

built his brand and established the NPP as a force against nepotism corruption. That promise caught the attention of the nation, while he also shed his previous aversion to the clergy.

His NPP faired very well in October's parliamentary election, winning 159 of 225 seats. It prevailed in predominantly Sinhala

regions, but also in the Tamil stronghold of Jaffna. Voters have thus decisively confirmed AKD's previous victory in the presidential elections in September.

ARJUNA RANAWANA
is a Sri Lankan journalist.
arjuna.ranawana@outlook.com



Mahatma Gandhi in London in 1931: His public display of humility was quite effective politically for several reasons.

dangerous as becoming involved in armed struggle would have been. The case for non-violent action, of course, could also be made by referring to religious principles of many different faiths.

While Gandhi always unambiguously emphasised Hindu roots, he did not endorse all Hindu traditions. As some Hindu reformers had done before him, he argued against the marginalisation and oppression of Hinduism's lowest castes. He called them Harijans, which means children of God, but they now speak of themselves as Dalits, which means the broken ones. He embraced people from all castes and invited others to do so as well. Nonetheless, he never challenged the caste system per se in spite of it being exploitative and humiliating.

Gandhi normally opposed identity politics and always refused to pit one faith against another. Indeed, his intervention stopped bloody communal riots between Muslims and Hindus in Calcutta in 1947. He went to the city and announced he would stop eating until the bloodshed stopped. The message was that he would starve himself to death, and the fighting actually did end. A few weeks later, however, he could not prevent atrocious bloodshed when British India was partitioned into two separate independent nations, India and Pakistan.

As a matter of fact, Gandhi's approach to politics proved most effective in terms of mobilising the freedom movement. His clout fast waned after independence was achieved, however. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress Party, which he had inspired, opted for a technocratic, socialist form of governance that did not resemble Gandhi's original idea of small, self-sufficient village republics.

HINDU SUPREMACISM TODAY

India's current prime minister is Narendra Modi, and his idea of political action is based on the Hindutva, which basically means the supremacy of the faith. This obviously is not how Gandhi used the faith in politics. Modi, however, thrives on Hindu supremacism. His party, the BJP, belongs to a network of like-minded organisations called the Sangh Parivar. They want India to be a Hindu nation in which all non-Hindu communities are subordinate to their faith. Moreover, they aspire to some kind of world

HINDUISM

Two very different approaches

As an ancient religion, Hinduism is a very complex phenomenon. It has no central authority, has spawned many different traditions and forms of worship. Practices vary from region to region and caste to caste. The faith, moreover, can be used in quite different ways for political purposes. India's independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi, did so in a totally different manner than India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.

By Suparna Banerjee

Mahatma Gandhi cultivated his image as a deeply religious man. He benefited politically from being adored as a saint-like person. His spirituality resulted in an ostentatious humility. Gandhi dressed in a loin cloth, refraining from symbols of prestige, wealth or power. The symbolism was very effective for several reasons.

His ascetism showed that he had a connection to the many millions of poor people who populated India and, in his view, constituted the nation. It also suggested that he was not involved in the independence struggle for personal benefits, but rather in a sense of serving a higher good. At the same time, his attire resembled the one of a sage who renounces worldly goods in search of a higher, divine truth.

Even his international reputation benefited when Winston Churchill, the British leader, disparaged him as a "half-naked fakir". Indeed, his display of humility made his quip of western civilisation being a "good idea" resonate across Europe and North America.

In the subcontinent, masses of people could relate to the persona that Gandhi created for himself. It did not only make sense to Hindus. Other religions in South Asia also have traditions of spiritual renunciation and asceticism. While Gandhi always made clear that he was rooted in Hinduism, to which the majority of people in British India belonged, he relied on an inclusive idea of spirituality. He showed respect for other faiths and acknowledged shared values such as brotherly love, truthfulness and peace. His activism was thus based on moral principles that adherents of all major religions can agree on. He was, moreover, keen on finding allies from other faiths.

Gandhi adopted a political strategy of non-violent civil disobedience. It proved quite effective because it showed how ridiculous and oppressive Britain's colonial rule was. As it attracted much public attention, the Empire was unable to crush it by violent means. Taking part in non-violent action certainly required courage but was not as

leadership for Hinduism as they understand it.

To some extent, Modi uses symbols of renunciation. His followers often emphasise that he is unmarried, for example. He sometimes withdraws from public life to meditate and, during the Corona pandemic, let his beard grow long.

Rather than cultivate humility, however, Modi likes to project power and strength. Mahatma Gandhi would never have bragged about a broad chest the way Modi does. The prime minister relishes symbols of grandeur, such as the newly built Ram Temple in Ayodhya. It stands on the land where Hindu fanatics tore down the ancient Babri mosque in 1992, claiming it was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. The Sangh Parivar was a driving force of that campaign.

Modi and the Hindutva network claim to tolerate other religions. However, they demand that Hinduism be respected in return, and that basically means that anyone who belongs to a different faith in India must accept the dominance of Hinduism and its

culture. For practical purposes, this stance can turn quite violent. There have been recurring cases of lynchings after Muslims were accused of having slaughtered cows which they consider to be holy. Hate-speech and rumours are used to stoke anger and to manipulate voters. Deadly occasional anti-minority rioting keeps many people terrified.

The Hindu-supremacist camp cultivates a seemingly inclusive idea of the religion. Lower castes are invited to take pride in Hinduism. The general vision, nonetheless, remains one of rule by men from the upper castes with only few symbolic exceptions.

Modi and the Sangh Parivar use Hinduism to cultivate a sense of grievances. They suggest that India's majority multi-lingual and multi-cultural population is a homogenous entity that has for centuries suffered abuse. In particular, they fan flames of anger against the Muslim minority by claiming that the problems India faces today result from centuries of Mughal rule, followed

by colonialism and decades of what they call "inept" Congress Party rule.

This ideology fits the pattern of the kind of right-wing extremism that is currently gaining ground in many countries. These forces typically paint an excessively beautiful picture of an imagined harmonious past which, they claim, they will restore by fighting the enemies of the people. A complex historical past is explained in simplified language with an extremely narrow focus.

Hindu supremacy, however, is nothing new. Indeed, the murderer who killed Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948 belonged to this camp. He blamed the partition of India and the resulting bloodshed at the religiously inspired non-violent independence leader.



SUPARNA BANERJEE
is a Frankfurt-based political scientist.
mail.suparnabanerjee@gmail.com

Stay up to date on important topics with our newsletter. We send it out once a month in both German and English. Subscription to the newsletter is free of charge at www.dandc.eu.



Pakistan's rural population suffers from poor infrastructure.

Page 11

