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OUR VIEW
Putin's worldview is imperialist and paranoid

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NATIONALIST WARFARE

Attack on humankind

The Russian attack on Ukraine is unacceptable. Everything President Vladimir Putin has been saying in recent days shows that his mindset is narrowly nationalistic – and paranoid.

By Hans Dembowski

Putin's basic claim is that Russia is entitled to a sphere of influence, the borders of which happen to coincide with the Tsarist empire of colonial times. He argues he must defend it with military force. His attack on a sovereign neighbour, however, is not defensive at all. It is pure aggression.

The idea that Ukraine's government is only a puppet of an overbearing NATO is absurd. Hasn't NATO made it abundantly clear that it will not wage war to protect Ukraine? Has it not consistently been denying Ukraine membership? There are no accession talks. NATO has merely insisted on Ukraine's long-term right to decide what alliances it wants to join. Indeed, Ukraine's initially wavering interest in joining NATO was massively reinforced by the Crimea/Donbass crisis eight years ago, when Putin's government first violently intervened in Ukraine's domestic affairs. The plain truth is that Moscow has been making NATO more attractive by restoring its raison d'être.

Putin apologists who argued Russia had reason to worry about imperialist NATO aspirations have had a rude awakening. NATO accepts nations' right to self-determination. The Kremlin does not.

Putin actually fears western soft power more than western hard power. He does not want democracy to succeed anywhere where the Soviet Union and before it the Tsar held sway. After all, a flourishing Ukraine might give his people the idea that something better than kleptocratic and oligarchic governance is possible. His stance in domestic affairs is authoritarian, repressive and deceitful. Human rights are abused. Independent thinking is not only discouraged, but silenced. His regime does not want people to know the historic truth. It wants them to believe in nationalist propaganda. His secret services have launched murderous attacks even abroad.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

The Russian attack puts into question the multilateral order. While civil wars have devastated many countries in the past decades, wars between sovereign states have been rare. Unlike US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is neither the pretence of protecting some kind of global good nor any likelihood of the UN Security Council ever endorsing Russian action retroactively, as happened in the case of Kosovo, for example. What we are seeing is Moscow displaying the kind of imperialist nationalism that prevailed in Europe before World War II.

The bloodshed will most likely prove terrible. Violence is set to escalate. Things will surely get worse before they get better. In an important way, however, this war will be more devastating than wars were in previous centuries. We are living in the era of the climate crisis. The global community must get a grip on it, or environmental problems will spin out of control and, among other things, make violent conflict more likely.

An art teacher's response in Mumbai.

No doubt, large-scale cross-border war will exacerbate climate problems. Military operations cause massive damage and consume a lot of energy. Fighting soldiers worry about other things than net-zero emissions. Just as bad, the war distracts global attention from just how urgent it is to phase out fossil fuels. It is probably no coincidence, that Russia is a major exporter of those resources. Putin never showed any serious issue in climate matters and, in his paranoid mind, global efforts to mitigate the problem may actually look like they are part of a big anti-Russian conspiracy. The science is clear, of course. The climate crisis is real, and time is running out.

Humankind needs global action to solve global problems. That makes nationalistic action in terms of "us versus them" particularly harmful. When Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador, addressed the UN Security Council on Monday 21 February, he pointed out that borders in Africa reflect colonial empires of the past, typically cutting across areas where specific communities live. The implication is that cross-border cooperation and regional integration are necessary. There is no other way to safeguard peace and other public goods. For good reason, Kimani appealed to all governments to defend multilateralism. To start a nationalist war of choice in our era of global problems is an attack on humankind itself.

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Photo: picture-alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Rajanish Kakade

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Freedom of expression

Quality media are indispensable. People must be able to form opinions competently. They must also be free to express their views. At the same time, there must be limits to slander, fake-news propaganda and the spreading of conspiracy theories. The internet is proving to be ambivalent. On the one hand, some kinds of online exchange are excellent – not least, as some news websites are standing up to governments with authoritarian tendencies. On the other hand, the under-regulated cyber sphere gives too much scope for spreading lies and disinformation.

Title: Maria Ressa, the 2021 Nobel peace laureate.
Photo: Andreas Gebert/Picture Alliance for DLD/Hubert Burda Media

Our focus section on Freedom of expression starts on page 18. It pertains to the 16th UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): peace, justice and strong institutions.

Permanent challenge

Among the human rights, the freedom of expression is the most forceful in politics. For good reason, autocrats consider it a threat, and to feel safe, they resort to age-old repressive means. They bully independent media, detain opponents, ban civil-society organisations and apply censorship. In our time, the internet is increasingly affected too.

Democracies permit free speech, though not without limits. One person's freedom must not harm others. Accordingly, libel laws make defamation illegal. For obvious historical reasons, praising Nazi rule is forbidden in Germany.

These laws, however, do not prohibit the kind of controversial debates that mark open societies. Democracies need that kind of debate. It is what allows citizens to become politically engaged in meaningful ways. The freedom to shape one's opinion is as important as the freedom to express one's opinion. People must have access to diverse information of high quality.

Therefore, quality journalism is indispensable. Its characteristics are factual accuracy, pluralistic perspectives and reliable indication of sources. Democracies must protect it from attacks. It is plainly unacceptable, for example, that journalists keep being murdered with impunity in Mexico. In Germany, things are comparatively good. Even here, however, reporters have become used to being insulted, threatened or even physically assaulted – for example, when they cover rallies of right-wing extremists.

In the virtual realm of the internet, standards are easily breached. Online trolls are known to hound minorities, spread fake-news propaganda and undermine reasoned public discourse. In many cases, democracy itself is under attack. The Capitol insurrection in Washington DC last year, for example, was organised on social media. On the other hand, platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter also serve democratic purposes. That is the case, for instance, when civilians organise resistance to Myanmar's military junta online.

Those who are fortunate enough to live under democratic rule should support those who fight for more freedom under authoritarian rule in a spirit of solidarity. However, it is just as important to defend the freedoms of shaping and expressing opinions in places where the law guarantees free speech. Independent journalism deserves appreciation and support, and for that to happen, citizens must be media-literate. They must be able to tell serious sources of information from dubious ones.

Rule-bound governance is needed too. State agencies must be enabled to hold social-media platforms accountable for the content they publish. So far, these platforms are providing excessive space to those who distort facts, insult others and spread hate. Unfortunately, far too many people do not understand that what gets displayed on their screens depends to a large extent on corporate algorithms.

The business models of social-media platforms are designed to maximise profit, not to serve the common good. We cannot trust them to safeguard without bias our liberty to inform ourselves and express ourselves. This is a permanent challenge. Democratic states and their citizens must rise to it. Every day.

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Photo: picture-alliance/AA/Adam Abu-bashal

PS: Russia's attack on Ukraine is an example of just how relevant the focus section of this issue is. In Russia, the freedom of expression is systematically repressed. Thousands have been arrested at anti-war rallies. The regime has ordered journalists not to use words like "invasion". State broadcasters RT and Sputnik have a reputation for spreading disinformation and propaganda internationally. Independent media houses, however, run considerable risks. One example is the newspaper Novaya Gazeta. Dmitry Muratov, its editor-in-chief, was awarded last year's Nobel Peace Prize for not caving in to the regime.

You'll find all contributions of our focus section plus related ones on our website – they'll be compiled in next month's briefing section.

Svenja Schulze, Germany's new federal minister for economic cooperation and development, with Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the WHO, during a press conference in Geneva in January.

GERMAN POLICYMAKING

Towards an equitable world

Germany's new federal government took office in early December. In the Cabinet, Svenja Schulze is now in charge of economic cooperation and development. She told D+C/E+Z about her priorities. This interview was finalised shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Svenja Schulze interviewed by Hans Dembowski

The international community must cope with a multidimensional crisis. We must simultaneously stem global warming and the loss of species, stimulate economies following the slump caused by Covid-19, tackle pandemic-induced debt problems and strengthen health care. What kind of support do developing countries and emerging markets need in this setting?

Well, during the acute waves of the pandemic, immediate humanitarian relief was the most urgent need. Now a phase is beginning in which we can focus more on sustainable investments which will make developing countries and emerging markets more resilient to future shocks and will also contribute to economic reconstruction. I am thinking specifically about measures like developing local vaccine production in Africa or supporting a just energy transition. Moreover, the pandemic has made it shockingly clear that poorer nations have virtually no functioning social-protection systems. This is another challenge we must address by joining forces.

To what extent is this a matter of official development assistance (ODA), for which prosperous nations have promised to allocate 0.7 % of gross national product? And to what extent are other kinds of international financial flows needed, such as debt relief, special drawing rights (SDRs), climate finance or even compensation for crimes committed in the colonial era?

The challenges are huge, so we must make use of all financing options. I am also thinking, for example, of private investment. Many of our efforts in an area like supporting administrative reforms are geared towards making foreign direct investment in our partner countries more attractive. Such investments also create urgently needed jobs, and they make it possible for governments to cover their spending through tax revenues.

Debt relief will certainly be back on the agenda in the near future. Many governments have increased their debt in order to fund the costs of the pandemic. Now they are faced with rising interest rates, which may well lead to new financial crises in developing countries and emerging markets. Creditor nations must respond with timely countermeasures. In regard to special drawing rights, our situation in Germany is special. I would very much like for German SDRs to be used to support vulnerable countries. However, our central bank, the Bundesbank, has so far been fundamentally opposed to that, and I must respect its independence in this matter too. Other governments do not face such limitations, and I applaud them for taking the lead in using SDRs in such good ways.

How can one ensure that poor and marginalised groups – including women, ethnic and religious minorities or slum dwellers, for example – are not left behind?

We have to assess situations diligently and act with determination. People experience disadvantages for various reasons. Gender, sexual orientation, religious faith, ethnic identity, age and place of residence may all play a part. Sometimes government agencies discriminate too, for example when laws or institutions restrict the inclusion of specific groups or simply do not do enough to reduce inequalities.

The UN's 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a guideline for German policymaking on international development. The commitment to leave no one behind is essential. It

Screenshot: Video BMZ/Youtube – https://youtu.be/J2yqsfLqOX4

requires us to focus on the most disadvantaged people and not neglect any of them. That is both our aspiration and our responsibility, not only towards the people in our partner countries but also in multilateral contexts. Equal rights, equal opportunities and equal representation for everyone are crucially important. That is particularly the case when it comes to access to resources, education, health care, social protection, healthy food and participation in society.

What is the role of nation states, regional organisations and multilateral institutions?
We obviously need more international cooperation. The Covid pandemic has made it clear just how important agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, are. That goes for general coordination, but also for very tangible matters such as the distribution of vaccines. Institutions like the World Bank or UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, have made meaningful contributions towards softening the economic and social impacts of the pandemic in developing countries. We must build on this base and strengthen those agencies further. Regional organisations matter too, of course, and the recent EU-AU summit is a good example. We therefore aim to further support regional integration among our partner countries. For example, the African Continental Free Trade Area is a most promising project. At the same time, we must not neglect nation states because, for most people, they are still the most important frame of reference.

High-income countries have adopted massive stimulus programmes, but only a small share of the money has been invested in making economies environmentally sustainable. At the same time, high-income countries have been running vaccination campaigns on a scale that sub-Saharan countries can only dream of. In what sense can – and should – the G7 do things differently in the future?
The slogan for Germany's G7 Presidency this year is "Progress towards an equitable world". We intend to promote issues such as global vaccine justice or the eco-friendly transformation of economies. Last year, for example, we joined forces with other G7 nations, the EU and the World Bank and forged a partnership with South Africa designed to support the country's socially fair phase-out of coal-based power generation. We now want to roll out this initiative in other developing countries and emerging markets.

Both the global common good and the achievement of the SDGs depend on global cooperation. How is cooperation possible with big countries under authoritarian rule, such as China or Russia? Other countries, too, are increasingly emphasising national interests.
Yes, we must cooperate with authoritarian governments, such as the one in China, if we are to meet global challenges and achieve the SDGs. Climate change does not stop at national borders, nor do pandemics.

In cooperation with China, we have therefore established a centre for sustainable development in Beijing for the purpose, for example, of debating standards and practices of development cooperation with China's bilateral development agency. It is also a way to support industry associations in China in meeting sustainability standards in their global outreach.

On the other hand, we must defend the existing global development agenda against increasing reinterpretation and appropriation using narratives that are incompatible with our globally agreed values. We must speak up everywhere for our values in close unity with our partners in the EU and beyond it.

What are your top priorities?
I want to fight hunger, poverty and inequality. Moreover, I want to promote socially equitable climate action. Finally, I want to implement feminist development policies. This means that, in all our efforts, we must always pay attention to promoting women or at least involving them as equal partners. This goes way beyond women's welfare. Strong women make society strong! Countless studies have shown that there is less hunger, less poverty and more stability when women are able to assume equal responsibility in leadership roles.

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Coronavirus test centre in Buenos Aires: the pandemic has compounded the economic crisis.

IMF

Acknowledging failure

The IMF made many mistakes in its $57 billion Argentina bailout. Here are some lessons learned.

By José Siaba Serrate

In June 2018, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) lent $50 billion to Argentina. It later increased the amount to $57 billion. This was the IMF's largest loan in its history, and its 21st to Argentina.

The purpose of the bailout was to stem capital outflow, support the falling peso and encourage inward foreign investment. In exchange for the loan, the government of Mauricio Macri, who was the country's conservative president at the time, promised to cut the budget deficit and control inflation.

The programme failed. Capital flight continued, the peso kept falling, and inflation stayed high. In 2019, left-leaning Alberto Fernández was elected president and took office in December. His government cancelled the loan programme and embarked on a debt renegotiation with private creditors. At this point, the IMF had already disbursed $45 billion.

In a recent report, the IMF has itself admitted that the bailout did not work: "The programme did not fulfil the objectives of restoring confidence in fiscal and external viability while fostering economic growth."

The authors identify several major reasons for failure. In essence, they state the IMF bailout was not fit for purpose. The report admits that the strategy was "too fragile to deal with such a high-risk scenario". In other words, the IMF not only failed to take appropriate account of the range and complexity of Argentina's problems. It was also unable to cope adequately with the country's rapidly changing circumstances.

Consider Argentina's situation in the run-up to 2018. The country emerged from its 2001 default by closing a deal with her holdouts in 2016. In 2017 it was able to place 100 year debt in international markets for the first time ever. But in April 2018, there was a classic run on its currency and sovereign bonds. In view of persistent financial volatility, many Argentines converted peso deposits into dollar-based assets. As a result, the peso kept depreciating, and that made inflation spike. Moreover, Argentina's dollar-denominated public debt shot up as a share of GDP, but its fiscal resources were in pesos and limited. In this setting, a huge large loan programme – even one combined with economic reforms – was a very risky strategy.

Another problem was that, the bailout actually increased the worries of international investors and lenders. They knew that the IMF strategy might fail and, in that case, they would be last in line. Multilateral institutions are repaid first. As official money flowed without confidence having been restored, the very size of the loan programme ended up undermining its success.

INSUFFICIENT RISK ASSESSMENT

The IMF report identifies a further flaw in its lending: it should have been more realistic about the risks of failure. Setting realistic expectations could have helped to understand early on that the approach was not working. Early warnings are especially important when a country's fiscal viability is balanced on a knife-edge. "The Fund should be prepared to pull the plug on programmes whose objectives can no longer realistically be met," the report states.

Further, the authors argue that the IMF should have been more willing to push Argentina's government to use tough policies such as capital controls. In this case, limiting the outflow of hard currency from Argentina would have made sense. In 2018, Argentine officials pushed hard against such controls, not least because they wanted to display confidence. The IMF acquiesced. That was a mistake, as it has now acknowledged.

The IMF abandoned other useful policy options too quickly, according to the report. For example, it had proposed a debt operation, a provision that would have allowed the government to negotiate more lenient repayment terms in case of persisting financial problems. The Argentine officials rejected it. Such instruments might have let the bailout succeed.

Moreover, the IMF programme did not address one of Argentina's biggest problems, namely, the connection between its public debt and the dual-currency nature of its economy. Accordingly, there was no obvious tool for addressing it. When the crisis unfolded in 2018, most of the country's debt was denominated in dollars, but its GDP is mainly produced in pesos. The peso was slightly overvalued before the crisis erupted, but ended severely undervalued as the run persisted. As the value of dollar-denominated debt rose and the peso fell in 2018, the debt-to-GDP ratio soared from 57.1 to 86.3.

This was entirely a currency issue. It can be explained more than fully by the real depreciation. Fiscal policy – raising taxes and/or reducing spending – could not tackle

Photo: picture-alliance/REUTERS/Agustin Marcarian

it in a short time span. It is hard to fix a dual-currency economy if the nominal exchange rate is not stabilised first. Argentina's government, however, did not want a hard currency peg because such a peg had contributed to the devastating financial crisis in 2001. A very strong initial peso devaluation coupled with a temporary nominal exchange rate cap could have solved the problem, but it was not attempted. The IMF accepted Argentina's insistence on a floating currency regime, and that turned out to be self-defeating. Investors did not regain confidence in the economy.

As it turned out, though, the fate of the IMF programme was sealed not by markets, but by politics. When the Macri government lost the 2019 presidential primaries, the IMF programme went off the rails. The peso and the local stock market plunged almost immediately. The country's risk rating soared 14% above US treasury bonds. Its fate was finally sealed as the winners of the national presidential and parliamentary elections had other ideas. The Fernández administration finally cancelled the agreement on 24 July 2020.

This chain of events revealed a further flaw in the IMF programme. The report points out that there was no "Plan B" to put in place in case of political change, even though it was the main source of uncertainty throughout 2019.

As is true of many countries, Argentina's economic problems have become worse in the Covid-19 pandemic. The country needs a new agreement with the IMF and has recently reached a basic understanding on key policies. There will soon be another controversial programme to avoid the country getting into arrears. A new loan will pay for the previous one. No doubt, the reputation of the IMF is being diminished by its Argentina problem.

The IMF report spells out clear lessons. Bailouts should be tailored to suit local conditions, which include a country's politics. Governments should have a well-targeted plan for dealing with debt problems, including dual-currency issues. Both the IMF and its borrowers should be open to a broad range of measures for dealing with financial crises.

The IMF's mission is to restore stability in times of crisis. While Argentina's persistent crisis has absorbed IMF funds, many low-income countries need support (see contribution by Kathrin Berensmann below). Continued improvement in IMF practice is necessary to preserve the Fund's resources for where they are needed most.

LINK

IMF evaluation of Argentina bailout:
https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/12/22/Argentina-Ex-Post-Evaluation-of-Exceptional-Access-Under-the-2018-Stand-By-Arrangement-511289

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GLOBAL DEBT GOVERNANCE

Escaping from the debt trap

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly worsened the debt situation in many developing countries. According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), around 60% of the world's poorest countries are now heavily indebted, and many of them are unable to reduce their debts on their own. The big questions are how debt crises can be prevented and how a global debt governance system should be designed.

By Kathrin Berensmann

The current global debt governance system has no procedure for implementing the swift and timely restructuring of an insolvent state's foreign debt. On the contrary, speedy restructuring is often prevented by lengthy and unregulated processes, as we saw according to the IMF in Argentina, the Republic of Congo, Chad and Gambia. Slow proceedings tend to prove very costly for both creditors and debtors.

In the course of the Covid pandemic, the international community has not only made substantial financial resources available to developing countries; it has also created new instruments to prevent and manage over-indebtedness:

- First of all, the Group of 20 leading economies (G20) launched the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI). It is a debt moratorium for low-income countries (LICs), designed to ease short-term liquidity problems.
- Second, the G20 introduced the Common Framework for Debt Treatment beyond DSSI for restructuring and even cancelling an LIC's debt should that be necessary. The idea was to address insolvency and protracted payment difficulties (Berensmann et al. 2021).

Up to January 2022, many LICs participated in the debt moratorium, but only three – Chad, Ethiopia and Zambia – have requested debt treatment under the Common Framework. In every case, the IMF has noticed significant delays in implementing it. It is a very difficult task to coordinate the many parties involved (various creditors as well as their authorities).

Moreover, some private creditors failed to participate. In Chad, for example, a mining company held up the restructuring of a large private loan for a long time. According to IMF Director Kristalina Georgieva, measures are needed to implement the Common Framework fast (Georgieva / Pazarbasioglu 2021). Another disadvantage of the Common Framework is that only low-income countries are eligible.

INSOLVENCY PROCEDURE FOR STATES

An additional instrument for tackling sovereign-debt problems would be an insolvency procedure for sovereign states. The

Local newspaper in Chad – the country is heavily in debt.

approach has discussed intensively since the Asian crisis of the late 1990s. Germany's new Federal Government has expressed support for such an innovation in its coalition agreement.

The idea is to create a legal framework that would serve to clarify which creditors will be serviced to what degree – to some extend similar to private-sector insolvency. Such a sovereign-insolvency procedure would have four significant advantages:

- It would provide a predictable and transparent roadmap for debt restructuring and, when necessary, debt relief. It would therefore permit swift and systematic action.
- Unlike other instruments of global debt governance, such an insolvency procedure could involve every creditor, so they would all be treated equally. The Common Framework, on the other hand, covers only loans from private creditors and bilateral official creditors, but not multilateral financial institutions. The latter currently enjoy a preferred creditor status because their financial sustainability is considered to be particularly important.
- In principle, an insolvency procedure would apply to all sovereign states. By contrast, participation in the Common Framework is limited to low-income countries.
- Insolvency procedures would apply to every kind of debt (Berensmann 2018).

Despite these advantages, the approach remains controversial. Indeed, such a procedure would be fraught with problems. For example, enforcement under international law would be complicated and difficult. To work well, all parties involved would have to accept it and every nation would have to enshrine it in its domestic legislation. And even if that happened, we would have no guarantee that every creditor would actually commit to it.

Many debtor and creditor countries at present reject such a procedure. Some debtor governments fear they might lose access to international capital markets once a procedure starts. Creditors' skepticism, by contrast, often stems from the worry that an insolvency procedure might offer an incentive for debtor countries to have debts restructured and written off (Berensmann 2018).

Despite this criticism, an insolvency procedure for sovereign states would be an important instrument. It is missing from the toolbox of global governance. There is no other way to tackle sovereign debt issues fast and effectively with all relevant parties involved.

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Photo: picture-alliance/abaca/Petit Tesson Christophe

Indigenous Warao families from Venezuela in a shelter in Roraima, Brazil's northern state.

MIGRATION

"Some Warao will stay for good"

Over the past five years or so, a growing number of people have migrated from Venezuela to neighbouring Brazil. The share of indigenous people among them has been growing too. Carlos Alberto Marinho Cirino, an anthropologist at the Federal University of Roraima, has been paying close attention to this new migration trend.

Carlos Alberto Marinho Cirino interviewed by Lisa Kuner

Around 5,700 indigenous people have migrated from Venezuela to Brazil so far. Most of them belong to the Warao, an ethnic group whose traditional home is the Venezuelan rainforest. Why are they leaving Venezuela?

As victims of Venezuela's current political and economic crisis, they share the motivation of non-indigenous migrants. They all speak of similar problems: the lack of jobs, the high cost of living and a health system on the verge of collapse. Many flee to escape starvation. In the case of the Warao, issues are compounded by the fact that most of them already are internally displaced people. Many left their traditional homeland in the Orinoco River Delta years and even decades ago.

What awaits the migrants in Brazil?

The Warao generally cross the border into Brazil at Pacaraima, a border town. During the pandemic, the borders were closed, so the numbers decreased somewhat. But people smugglers brought in large groups nonetheless. Since the borders have opened again, legal migration has been surging anew. Many move on to Boa Vista, the state capital, and spread out from there to other places. How they are received differs considerably from state to state. In Roraima and Amazonas, the neighbouring state, the Brazilian military and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) are running refugee camps and coordinating support programmes. There are no such arrangements in other states, so local governments there have to find their own solutions.

How do indigenous migrants differ from others?

There are lots of cultural differences, and they result in prejudice against indigenous people in both Brazil and Venezuela. At the same time, indigenous people are prejudiced against non-indigenous people. Both sides are convinced that the others are bandits who want to rob them. Accordingly, migration takes place in fairly separate groups, and refugees are also accommodated in separate camps. Mixed accommodation was tested, but beset by conflicts. Even now, some indigenous migrants refuse to live in camps, preferring to sleep rough or occupy empty houses.

Why is that?

The biggest difficulty is that the camps provide a kind of accommodation that is very different from how indigenous groups traditionally live. That has various consequences, especially for people's mental health. In the camps, they live behind fences. Moreover, they have to observe rules and standards that strike them as bizarre. We impose rules on them that do not suit their way of life.

Could you please give examples?

Yes, sure. Many indigenous people complain about the boxed food they get in the camps. They say it doesn't agree with them. Some have sold their meals and used the money to buy food they are accustomed to and consider healthier. Another example is that the Warao typically live and migrate in groups of 30 to 40 people with one leader. These groups are much more complex than

Photo: picture-alliance/AP Images/Eraldo Peres

Warao after their arrival in the Brazilian border town of Pacaraima.

what we traditionally understand as a family. Our concept of the nuclear family simply does not apply.

There are frequent reports of indigenous people being mistreated in refugee shelters. Are you aware of examples?
Yes, I am. In one refugee camp in Roraima, there was a "corner of shame" where indigenous people were detained against their will. Complaints were filed, but I don't think they delivered results.

Is there any progress on catering better to the specific needs of indigenous people in the camps?
Broadly speaking, no, though there definitely are small improvements. In the refugee camps in Roraima, indigenous people now have the option of cooking for themselves in community kitchens. Moreover, the camps are now paying some attention to not breaking up groups and giving them some sense of autonomy instead.

What about social inclusion of indigenous migrants?
Well, adapting to life in Brazil is a huge challenge for them. On the other hand, the authorities must rise to challenges too. Normally, Venezuelan migrants are taken to nuclear families of Brazil's more southern regions where they find more opportunities. With the Warao, this does not work out. It is impossible to rent an apartment in a city for such large groups of people. Moreover, many of them neither speak Portuguese nor Spanish, which makes it much harder to find jobs.

What are the difficulties for inclusion at societal level?
There is a lot of prejudice and even racism. Disadvantaged Brazilians often complain that migrants get access to public services that they themselves do not enjoy. (For the situation in Brazilian slums, see Thuany Rodriguez on www.dandc.eu) Public health care is very poor in some parts of Roraima, and many people feel that Venezuelans are getting preferential treatment. There are also recurring complaints about indigenous people begging on the streets.

How have Brazilian indigenous groups reacted to the arrival of the Warao?
Initially, the indigenous groups in Roraima did not accept them as indigenous people. Nor did the indigenous protection agency Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI) feel responsible.

The Brazilian constitution recognises the rights of indigenous peoples and their traditional ways of life. Does that not apply to the migrants?
When the first Warao arrived in 2015, there was a big debate about whether they should enjoy the same rights as Brazil's indigenous groups. According to the law, they now have equal status even though they have no traditional territory in Brazil. Achieving that was a success. The Warao are now legally entitled to education, health care and even protection of their traditions and culture. However, most indigenous people in the shelters are comparatively young, because people over the age of 50 very rarely migrate to Brazil. One negative impact is that religious leadership and knowledge often stay behind in Venezuela.

How do you assess the performance of Brazil's policymakers?
Well, there is no long-term planning, basically just emergency aid, direct humanitarian assistance. It is sad and depressing to see people struggling to find any long-term prospect at all.

There is a long-term plan to include non-indigenous refugees from Venezuela in Brazil's formal labour market. What is the long-term vision for indigenous people like the Warao?
So far, there is none. At the national level, we are trying to find solutions that are as non traumatising as possible. I believe it is particularly important to listen to the Warao. They deserve our attention. They are currently trying to form a political association at the national level in order to better articulate their views and express their concerns. Of course, the Warao themselves need to develop a clearer idea of how they want to live in Brazil.

What political changes have to be made to respond effectively to indigenous migrants' needs?
Policymakers and state agencies must understand that the problem is not just one of temporary accommodation. Some Warao will definitely stay in Brazil for good. Most do not want to go back to Venezuela. Among scholars, we no longer regard their plight as a case of mere displacement. We are increasingly thinking in terms of a diaspora.

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Photo: Carlos Alberto Marinho Cirino

Preparatory class for refugee children at a school in Stuttgart.

MIGRATION AND EDUCATION

High hurdles

Germany's complex, heterogeneous education system creates huge problems for refugee children and their families. They deserve to be supported better.

By Sabrina Ferraz Guarino

In Germany, refugee children and adolescents between the ages of 7 and 15 – like all children and adolescents – are required to attend school. For those who migrate at age 16 to 18, education is not compulsory, but they can attend extra German classes and continue their education afterwards.

However, compared to pupils without a migration history or other young people with immigrant backgrounds, far fewer refugees attend upper secondary education in Germany (de Paiva Lareiro, 2019). This is the stage before tertiary education, namely career-oriented high schools (Realschulen) or academic high schools (Gymnasien).

One of the most important reasons is that newly arrived refugee children can of course barely speak German. As a result, they often do not attend regular lessons, but instead so-called preparatory or welcome classes. There, they receive intensive language instruction for a maximum of two years.

Not every school offers these classes, however, and pupils attending them study in a classroom where students differ markedly with regard to their age as well as language and education levels. This situation prevents pupils from realising their full potential during a decisive phase of their language acquisition. It diminishes the chances of an upper secondary school degree.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE DELAYED

In addition, especially in the countryside, foreign children over 16 might have to wait months until a minimum number of students is reached so that one local school can offer a welcome class. This means that – despite the right to education – they experience a significant delay regarding their school attendance.

After completing their preparatory classes, pupils can take different paths depending on their age, abilities and career goals. For example, they can apply for upper secondary education in career-oriented high schools or academic high schools, or decide to pursue vocational training at a trade school. Those who do not find a training position or need further career guidance end up in so-called transition programmes. Here, young people take part in various vocational preparation schemes, but they cannot earn a degree.

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung, an independent Germany-based foundation, young people without a German passport are at a disadvantage when searching for training opportunities. They participate in vocational preparation schemes in transitional programmes twice as often as German youth. There is an urgent need for them on the labour market, however: in 2019, the supply of vocational training posi-

Photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Wolfram Kastl

Syrian refugee taking part in a two-month training program at Volkswagen, Germany.

tions in Germany was higher than the demand (BIBB 2020).

CONFUSING CHOICES

Education policy is left up to the states in Germany, and there are no uniform, nationwide guidelines for transition programmes. Thus the offerings are vast and frequently confusing. Foreign parents and their children are often overwhelmed – as they are by the entire German education system. Many do not understand the difference between Gymnasium, Gesamtschule and Berufskolleg, nor can they make sense of the German vocational training system and its three pillars: dual training, which is divided between school and industry; purely school-based vocational training programmes; and the aforementioned transition programmes.

Therefore, some parents believe that attending university is their children's only path to stable employment. At the same time, many do not understand that not all school degrees guarantee university admission, or that it is difficult to achieve any school degree without excellent German language skills. Bureaucratic processes also contribute to the confusion; for example, pupils must re-apply to trade schools every year.

What's more, refugee parents often have high expectations for their children's school performance and career choices and put them under pressure. At the same time, they are typically unable to support their children, because they themselves are not yet familiar with the local education system and labour market shortly after they arrive. Conversely, older children often actually take responsibility for their parents, for instance by acting as interpreters when dealing with various authorities.

Other important aspects that impact the development of refugee children and adolescents, in addition to their living situation, their legal status and their parents' education level, include:

- their age when they emigrated and the regularity of their previous school attendance,
- stress during their migration,
- reorientation in multiple areas of life simultaneously (language, customs, friendships, school environment),
- recognition of prior knowledge and school certificates and
- their often precarious living situation in general.

MORE RESOURCES NEEDED

The German education system bears a special responsibility towards these young people, with regard not only to their educational, but also their social and linguistic integration. Therefore the responsible ministries should:

- allocate more resources for preparatory classes and set smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios (five to seven pupils per class, instead of 15 to 20),
- when working with parents, have greater understanding of their language barriers and lack of knowledge about the German school system,
- provide more support to pupils and their parents, regardless of their background, in the process of choosing a career path.

Furthermore, recent immigrants should be allowed to attend school after their eighteenth year with a minimum of red tape – especially if they have not graduated or their foreign transcript is not recognised. Refugees who migrated age 15 and older should also receive additional linguistic support because they have less time to prepare for the transition from school to work.

A good school education will open the door for refugees to their host country and to personal and professional development. Conversely, poor language skills, a lack of career direction and an inadequate understanding of the education system hurt their chances to participate. Because of its demographic trends, Germany needs workers from abroad. For that reason alone, German society should have an interest in integrating young refugees into its education system better than it has so far.

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Photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Ole Spata

Preventing teenage pregnancies

A high rate of teen pregnancies has officials in Ghana worried. According to the Ghana Health Service (GHS), between 2016 and 2020 more than half a million Ghanaian girls aged 10 to 19 years became pregnant. That is an average of over 111,000 teen pregnancies per year. Of all the teen pregnancies during this period, over 13,400 involved girls between the ages of 10 and 14.

Teen pregnancy is associated with a high school drop-out rate, which suggests negative consequences for the affected girls' futures. "We have seen several girls get pregnant and they are all 14 to 15 years old," says Rafiskata Mohammed, girls' education officer in north-western Ghana. "Some stay in school but many others drop out to marry. One of our female students who got pregnant moved to Accra to work as a porter, carrying burdens on her head to earn money."

The high rate of teen pregnancy is related to forced marriages involving young girls, she adds. "Even if a girl does not want to get married, the man may just forcibly impregnate her. Then the family will be annoyed and tell the girl to marry the man." The twin phenomena of teen pregnancies and forced marriages involving young girls have several causes. Many schools do not offer adequate education in reproductive health or sufficient encouragement to girls to avoid pregnancy and complete their education. Poverty, parental neglect and cultural norms also play significant roles. "If a child needs something and the parents cannot provide it, she might look elsewhere," says Winfred Ofosu, a GHS's regional director.

He adds that young girls tend to be vulnerable to persistent sexual advances: "If you are a girl and you are 'cornered' by a man who wants to have sex with you, theoretically you should be able to talk your way out of it, but in reality you don't know how and you are too young to resist." One possible solution receiving attention is to increase the age of consent to sex from 16 to 18, to match the age of legal consent to marriage. This would make sex with a child under 18 a violation of the law in and of itself. "The adult involved would not be able to argue that sex was consensual, because no one under 18 would be allowed to make that decision," Ofosu says.

Just changing the legal age of consent is not enough, says Rafiskata Mohammed. Ingrained cultural norms still force many young girls into unwanted marriages, for example. Mohammed suggests passing community bylaws to discourage such practices. Cultural norms often also impede urgently needed sex education (see Mahwish Gul in D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2020/04). The plain truth is that parents, teachers and societies as a whole have to realise, that sex education is not about having sex. It is about preparing teenagers for a responsible, safe and fulfilling adulthood - and empowering them to say "no" when they do not want sex.

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ELECTIONS

Amazingly unqualified candidate

After the disastrous six-year term of President Rodrigo Duterte, Filipinos will elect a new head of state on 9 May. There is a chance of competent leadership – but it is also possible that children of the country's worst strongmen since independence will rise to the presidency and the vice presidency.

By Alan Robles

People in the Philippines are eager to vote. When it was time to register for the presidential elections last year, they stood in crowded lines for hours in spite of the coronavirus threat. Election officials had expected 59 million citizens to show up, but 65 million did. The big question is, who will they vote for?

The election in 2016 resulted in a disaster. Rodrigo Duterte became president. The foul-mouthed, crude and brutish authoritarian only convinced 16.6 million of 55.7 million voters, but no other candidate had a better result. He took office and ran the country into the rocks. His extrajudicial war on drugs has cost at least 12,000 lives, mostly of poor urban people, according to Human Rights Watch, the international non-governmental organisation. He has eviscerated democratic institutions, weakened the economy and mismanaged the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, he looked the other way as Chinese forces encroached on Philippine territory in the South China Sea.

When he ran for president, Duterte's populist promise was: "Change is coming". He claimed he would crush crime, solve corruption and end drug trafficking within six months. None of it came true. The almost 77-year old Duterte proved to be very much what Filipinos contemptuously call a "trapo" – a traditional politician. He appointed unqualified cronies to lucrative posts, did nothing while corruption scandals erupted around him and used the laws for his personal vendettas.

His style of leadership included missing public ceremonies and airing videos of him incoherently berating the public. Once he advised Filipinos to soak their face masks in gasoline or diesel oil to prevent Covid-19. In most ways, he was worse than previous presidents, but he did excel in one area: never before were social media used so systematically to spread disinformation, fear and hate (see my comment in D+C Digital Monthly 2022/01).

Campaigning has begun.

Duterte's armies of internet trolls will certainly figure in the coming election. Two major contenders currently seem to be possible Duterte successors: current Vice President Leni Robredo and Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son of the former dictator.

Robredo is a calm and inspiring leader. She is a lawyer, but also has an economics degree and has been in government service since 1997. Strictly speaking, the job of the vice president is simply to stand by in case something should happen to the president. Robredo nonetheless managed to use her office to speak out against Duterte, which obviously earned her his hostility. Without Duterte's support she organised well-run disaster relief operations and an efficient Covid response programme. Most likely, she will face vicious online attacks.

By contrast, Marcos Jr., 64, is amazingly unqualified. His main distinction is that he is the only son of a brutal strongman who ruled the Philippines for 14 years. Thousands were murdered and tortured on his watch, and his loot amounted to billions of dollars. Marcos Jr. claimed to have graduated from Oxford University, but this was exposed as false. He only finished high school.

His running mate Sara Duterte-Carpio is the current president's daughter. Should they win, they would continue the legacy of the two most brutal leaders the independent Philippines have ever had.

Disinformation funded with Marcos has made many people believe that the years under military rule were some kind of golden era. In January, polls showed the Marcos tandem far ahead, favoured by 60 % of respondents. However, the situation is volatile and election surprises have happened in the past. It is telling that Marcos' campaign managers are steering him away from debates – they know he is incoherent and vacuous.

Whether democracy will heal or die is the question that makes the election outcome nail-bitingly tense.

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Photo: picture-alliance/EPA/ROLEX DELA PENA

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

In spite of the Taliban, engage!

In support of Afghanistan's people, the international community should re-engage in development cooperation. The education sector would be an ideal entry point.

By Conrad Schetter and Katja Mielke

Afghanistan has been isolated since the Taliban took power on 15 August 2021, with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan being denied international recognition. Sanctions that were imposed on the Taliban in 1999 were transferred to the new interim government. The downside is that the sanctions make it harder to maintain the basic infrastructures that health care, education and food security depend on.

Afghanistan's economy has collapsed. More than half of the population suffer food insecurity, with ongoing drought compounding problems (see Jörg Döbereiner on www.dandc.eu). International aid agencies struggle to keep humanitarian operations going as regular transfers of money have become impossible.

The current scenario proves two things:

- The first is that what happened in terms of reconstruction in the past 20 years did not prove sustainable. An important reason was that measures were largely foreign driven; Afghans' needs did not get enough attention.
- The second is that the international communities' sanctions offer some leverage. Policymakers should use it to interact with Afghanistan's interim government in a well-considered way. Without formally acknowledging the Taliban, the international community should expand humanitarian aid and restart development cooperation, focusing on people in desperate need.

A strategy based on multilateral aid funds looks feasible. They can bypass state agencies by directly funding UN agencies such as the Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as well as local actors and civil-society organisations. In the medium to long run, however, sanctions must be lifted for aid agencies to run regular, broad-based operations again.

Within the Taliban, there are considerable tensions between pragmatists and orthodox hardliners. Major controversies concern the justice system and the constitutional order for example. So far, there is neither a coherent approach to what role women should play in public life nor to what to do about possible terrorist attacks by militant Islamists operating from Afghanistan. Such frictions offer opportunities to exert influence – right now. The international community would be wise to signal support to development-friendly efforts of pragmatic Taliban groups.

One has to note the dilemma that foreign funding will contribute to establishing parallel structures. That will weaken the state administration, which was rebuilt with great effort in the past 20 years. The smart option would be to involve representatives of state agencies at least informally in consultations and aid delivery.

Education would be an ideal starting point for testing common ground. The Taliban announced that schools will open again on 22 March, including for girls. Disputes concern curricula and other details, but a general consensus involving the international community is obviously feasible. To build trust, international partners should provide unconditional funding for schools, initially for one year. Teachers' salaries matter – and in the longer run, options for funding infrastructure or teachers' training may arise.

At the same time, engaging in a longer-term informal dialogue is essential. There is a need to identify common denominators and differences, including in talks about women's rights and human rights. On such a basis, further cooperation regarding health care and food security might follow.

To draft a roadmap, the international community should cooperate with representatives of the interim government. Rapprochement and trust building will not be easy – but both are urgently needed.

A Taliban fighter at a checkpoint in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital.

Photo: picture-alliance/REUTERS/Ali Khara

FURTHER READING (IN GERMAN)

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DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION | D+C

Protesting against police violence in Nigeria in late 2020.

Photo: picture-alliance/AA/Adam Abu-bashal

FOCUS

Freedom of expression

Maria Ressa with Rappler merchandise at the Nobel ceremony in Oslo in December 2021.

JOURNALISM

Fighting for the factual truth

The independent website Rappler has become an indispensable source of information in the Philippines. Its relationship with social-media giant Facebook is complicated, to put it mildly.

By Emmalyn Liwag Kotte

Maria Ressa is a brave journalist who dares to speak truth to power. In December, Ressa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Her news website, Rappler, has become famous internationally. The Nobel Committee chose her and Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov of Novaya Gazeta, appreciating that both have been promoting democracy by exercising the freedom of expression and not caving in to their government's authoritarian tendencies.

Ressa is indeed used to facing adversity. "In less than two years, the Philippine government filed 10 arrest warrants against me. I've had to post bail 10 times just to do my job," she says. At one point, she and a former colleague were convicted for cyber libel because of a story they published before that crime was even defined by law. "All told, the charges I face could send me to jail for about 100 years," Ressa reckons.

Nonetheless, she considers herself lucky because international lawyers and human-rights groups help to protect her. One example is the #HoldTheLine Coalition – a global collective of 78 independent organisations. Ressa is aware that many harassed journalists do not get that kind of international attention, while "governments are doubling down with impunity."

Ressa says that 22 journalists were murdered in the Philippines from June 2016, when right-wing populist Rodrigo Duterte became president with not quite 40 % of the vote, to December 2021, when her Nobel ceremony took place in Oslo. Reports of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) show that all of them were killed in the provinces. Indeed, Duterte's track record is drenched in blood (see box next page).

Duterte's rise was hugely propelled by disinformation, with social media playing an important role. Ressa worries that extensive disinformation networks on social media are likely to affect the presidential elections in May as well (see Alan Robles on page 15 of this issue). The Rappler news website has published reports that show how digital platforms are being used to spread fake news and manipulate public opinion. In response, Facebook and Twitter have removed various fake accounts, but serious problems persist. Ressa's rhetorical question is: "How can you have election integrity if you don't have integrity of facts?"

HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL FACEBOOK

Indeed, Ressa's experience with Facebook is mixed. On the one hand, the Silicon Valley multinational has sometimes been a valuable partner, but on the other hand, it facilitates propaganda and lies.

More than 70 million people use Facebook in the Philippines. According to the Philippine Social Weather Survey, some 14 million adult individuals used this social-media platform as their daily source of news in the first quarter of 2019.

It was on Facebook that Rappler started as a community page named MovePH in 2011. It then evolved into a multimedia news website. Rappler's Facebook presence greatly helped to increase its audience in the early years. Moreover, MovePH stayed useful in terms of citizen engagement and advocacy, encouraging people to become active in the protection of human rights, civil liberties and the environment.

However, there is a much darker side to Facebook. Social-media platforms helped Duterte to narrowly win the presidential elections in 2016. According to a study published by Oxford University, fake accounts served to flood social-media networks with fake news and inflate the number of likes and shares. The authors state that trolls were hired to spread propaganda and target Duterte's opponents. As a result, Duterte appeared to be more popular than he actually was.

Of course, Duterte officials deny allegations of this kind. However, numerous reports reveal that well-organised and coordinated social-media campaigns helped Duterte win the presidency (see Alan Robles in D+C Digital Monthly 2022/01). One of his

Photo: picture-alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Alexander Zemlianichenko

campaign managers told Rappler that "influencers" with strong followings on social media worked for his team.

RAPPLER UNDER ATTACK

The internet trolling did not stop after Duterte became president. Among many others, Rappler and its staff were attacked. Patricia Evangelista, a Rappler reporter, recalls: "We were called 'liars' and 'fake news'. Our license was put in jeopardy. Many advertisers disappeared." Rappler staff were banned from the presidential palace, while she and other colleagues suffered harassment: "Because we are women, the threats included rape." Things became especially bad whenever Rappler published long investigative stories, for example on extrajudicial killings.

Evangelista praises the attitude displayed by Ressa, her boss: "At great personal cost, she did not run, she did not hide, she did not compromise." She encouraged her team in the pursuit of the truth.

To some extent, Facebook has woken up to the problems. Indeed, Rappler is now one of its partners in a third-party fact-checking programme. The goal is to prevent the spread of false news.

The background is that Rappler, in 2019, published reports that exposed disinformation campaigns that were designed to improve the image of the Marcos family. Ferdinand Marcos was the dictator who died in exile after having been toppled by the People's Power movement in 1986. His son Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. is currently running for president. Rappler revealed how social-media propaganda on platforms like Facebook and YouTube attempted to shore up the family's reputation. Relevant posts systematically denied the massive corruption and brutal human-rights abuses that Marcos Sr. was responsible for.

In response to Rappler reporting, Facebook and Twitter removed accounts favouring the Marcoses. The pattern of online disinformation looked familiar. While the family denied any involvement, the support it enjoys in cyber space resembles pro-Duterte trolling. Observers have ample reason to assume that many of the same actors are involved. After all, Sara Duterte-Carpio, the daughter of the current head of state, is running for vice president.

DISINFORMATION HAS NOT STOPPED

Some fake accounts have been shut down, but it is easy to create new ones. Disinformation and propaganda have not stopped. In late January, another Rappler article revealed that Facebook pages and accounts were supporting both the Marcos family and the Duterte administration. It stated that false claims had been pushed "more aggressively" in the second half of 2021 and were "meant to undermine the credibility of media".

To improve matters, Rappler has teamed up with partners such as the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP). In late January, they launched #FactsFirstPH. The coalition includes more than 100 groups, including from the church, the legal profession, the media and civil society.

The goal is to help to restore election integrity by ensuring the integrity of facts. The instruments for doing so include fact checking, campaigning against false claims, raising awareness for factual truth and holding online liars legally accountable.

Legislators could support this effort. Ressa wants them to pass a law that would penalise companies that allow the spread of lies and disinformation on their platforms. She wants digital platforms to be classified as publishers who are accountable for the content of their websites.

Such rules would obviously make sense internationally. A big problem is that social-media platforms are not liable for user-generated content according to US law. As the most important corporations are based in the US, the impact in terms of disinformation has been harmful all over the world.

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Awful human-rights record

Every human life matters. Under the authoritarian leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte, masses have suffered – and it is hard to keep track of individual cases.

One victim was Zara Alvarez, a teacher, human-rights activist and community organiser who helped peasants and workers claim their rights in the Philippine island of Negros. The Philippine military accused her of being a member of the communist rebel group New People's Army (NPA). She was accused of being a terrorist and was imprisoned for almost two years on trumped up murder charges. She was acquitted in March 2020 but was gunned down a few months later, at the age of 39.

Media workers suffer oppression too. One example is 23 year old Frenchie Mae Cumpio, who is in jail because of trumped up charges. She used to head a community news website and worked as a radio news anchor in Tacloban City. She was arrested together with four human-rights activists in the province of Leyte in February 2020. A fact-finding mission of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) revealed that "the evidence against her was planted and the charges of illegal possession of firearms and explosives have no basis".

Duterte's deadly "war on drugs" was terrible from the start. According to Human Rights Watch, it has claimed over 12,000 lives since he took office in 2016.

ELK

Protestors demanding freedom for Umar Khalid in Kolkata in early 2021.

TOTALITARIAN ASPIRATIONS

Digitised hate-spreading

In recent years, public discourse in India has become severely distorted. Government agencies tend to tolerate and at times promote Hindu-supremacist propaganda, which supports the agenda of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Even genocidal rhetoric is hardly sanctioned. By contrast, those who dare to criticise the government face intimidation, harassment and suppression.

By Arfa Khanum Sherwani

In December, leading Hindu supremacists met for a three-day conclave in the north Indian town of Haridwar. One demand raised was that Muslims in India should be treated the way Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority has experienced in recent years. It was a blatant call to genocidal action. After all, Rohingya people were murdered in pogroms, villages were burned down and masses had to flee the country.

The message spelt out in Haridwar was that Hindus should perpetrate bloodshed in order to entrench their lifestyle in India. Hate speech of this kind must be taken seriously, in view of the country's dark track record of pogroms (as I elaborated in D+C Digital Monthly 2020/08).

It is illegal to stir communal hatred in India. Nonetheless, the authorities did not intervene even after it became known what the extremists discussed in Haridwar. After the news had spread, the police finally arrested some participants, but it is unlikely that they will be punished. Yati Narsinghanand, the mastermind of the meeting, was granted bail in February.

By contrast, non-violent government critics often languish in jail for years before a trial even starts. One example is Umar Khalid, a prominent student activist who became a face of the protest against the anti-secular Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019/2020, in which Muslim women played leading roles.

Khalid has been detained since September 2020 and is accused of having instigated riots in the capital city earlier that year. The charge is absurd because the "riots" were actually an anti-Muslim pogrom. Dozens of people were killed, and Mosques were burned down. Two thirds of those who died were Muslims. After perpetrating violence, Hindutva hooligans can mostly expect impunity, but state action against dissidents has usually been very harsh. Like Khalid, they are often charged with a draconian anti-terrorism law called UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act).

The ideology of Hindu dominance is called Hindutva. Modi's party, the BJP, belongs to a network of organisations that insists that India must be a Hindu nation. The most influential mother organisation is the RSS, which was inspired by Italy's fascists in the 1920s. International observers tend to underestimate the totalitarian aspirations of Hindutva proponents.

The RSS has been mostly intolerant of any worldview other than its own. The RSS and its network equate "the nation" with "Hindus", but basically focus only on the upper castes. Minorities do not figure and are expected to simply accept the social order the RSS wants. Its approach to governance is at times undemocratic and at times authoritarian. The Hindutva right longs to gain total control of India's institutions, and resents to be challenged, as it was by the farmers movement or the movement against the anti-minority national citizenship law. BJP-controlled state agencies often respond with UAPA charges, accusing opponents of terrorism.

Hindutva ideology is fundamentally incompatible with India's secular constitution, according to which no religious community may be oppressed or marginalised. Modi himself is a member of the RSS. He is known for his right-wing authoritarianism and his unwillingness to disown supporters who perpetrate violence.

To a large extent, mainstream media have caved in to his government. In particular, private TV stations multiply its aggressive propaganda. These channels do not have a reputation for fact checking, but tend to accept everything the government says at face value.

SOCIAL-MEDIA MANIPULATION

At the same time, Hindutva trolls spread hate on social-media platforms. Anyone who dares to disagree with the Modi government is called "anti-national", "treasonous" or "terrorist". As the independent website The Wire, for which I work, has recently revealed, the trolls use an app called Tek Fog to coordinate their action and to make

Photo: picture-alliance/Pacific Press/Santarpan Roy

disinformation go viral. To a considerable degree, Tek Fog manipulates digital media by technological means. The multinational corporations who own the platforms hardly intervene. On several occasions they have been found to please the government, not to promote democratic public discourse. Moreover, they do not really pay attention to languages other than English.

The result is that Hindu supremacists appear to be more numerous and stronger online than they actually are in Indian society. In more ways than one, Facebook and Twitter have allowed themselves to become machines that spread hatred and to be misused to intimidate everyone who opposes the majoritarian agenda.

Targeted persons include social activists, human-rights defenders, members of opposition parties, lawyers and journalists. I have been exposed myself for a long time. Indeed, I am now on the list of the 10 Indian women who are most attacked on social media. Death and rape threats occur regularly. Last year, the Hindu supremacists launched an app called Bulli Bai on which they staged fake auctions of Muslim women, using real photos and names. Due to public pressure, the app was taken down again, but it certainly served its purpose of harassing and intimidating the minority community.

Indeed, minorities feel the impact in their daily lives. In a southern state, Karnataka, school girls and female students wearing Muslim headscarves ("hijab") were being denied entry to their educational institutions in late February. A court had passed an interim order that permitted colleges to implement dress-codes that were already in place. That order was misinterpreted, so all over the state, Muslim girls and young women were suddenly prevented from attending classes. Karnataka's Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai belongs to Modi's BJP. Hindutva proponents were forcing girls to choose between hijab and education.

Moreover, Hindutva mobs have recently disrupted Friday prayers in Gurgaon, the Delhi suburb, which has officially been renamed Gurugram. The hooligans demanded that Muslims pray indoors, though everyone knows that the mosques are too small and too few to accommodate all of the faithful on Fridays. In a similar vein, Christians were attacked when they wanted to celebrate Christmas in South Indian towns.

Things are probably worst in Kashmir. The region was previously India's only Muslim-majority state, but the Modi government dismantled its relative autonomy and put it under central rule in 2019. Repression is rife. In February, the arrest of Fahad Shah, the editor of the independent website Kashmir Walla, made headlines internationally. The New York Times spoke of "harassment and intimidation", while The Guardian stated that "a crackdown on the press in Indian-administered Kashmir continues to escalate". Indian democracy needs more attention of this kind.

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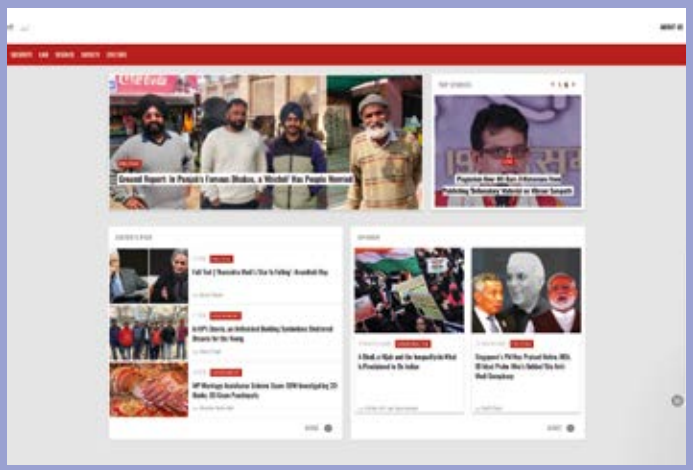
Business models matter

Online media have proven more able to resist the pressure of Hindu supremacists than mainstream media. TheWire.in, which I work for, is one of several websites that produce serious news with an eye to factual truth and non-partisan balance. Others include TheQuint.com, Scroll.in and ThePrint.in.

To some extent, our stamina results from personal commitment to professional journalistic work. It matters very much, however, that our business models do not depend on government advertising. As is true of many developing countries, such advertising has historically contributed the bulk of revenues to Indian news organisations. It typically still does, so long-established media houses are under huge pressure to toe the government line. It is no coincidence that independent news portals have proven similarly indispensable in other countries run by right-wing authoritarians. Examples include the Philippines (see Emmalyn Liwag Kotte on page 19 of this issue) and Sri Lanka (see Arjuna Ranawana in D+C Digital Monthly 2021/09).

Unlike the mainstream media, we depend on users' donations and, to a lesser extent, some private-sector advertising. Hosting a website is much cheaper than printing and distributing a newspaper or broadcasting TV and radio programmes. Accordingly, online media can spend a much larger share of their money on generating content. At the same time, we benefit from the fact that smartphones have become omnipresent. To reach a mass audience, The Wire produces content (written, audio and video) in English, Hindi, Urdu and Marathi.

According to Indian law, The Wire cannot accept donations from abroad. We are, however, allowed to sell services internationally, and anyone who wants to support our work can subscribe to our newsletter called the India Cable. It is available on Substack. AKS



Screenshot homepage TheWire.in

Screenshot: www.thewire.in

In January 2022, rising fuel prices sparked protests in Kazakhstan.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The internet is crucial

In many Eastern European and Central Asian countries, media discourse suffers from the freedom of expression not being respected. Nonetheless, the situation is not hopeless, according to Hugh Williamson of Human Rights Watch. He shared his insights in a D+C/E+Z interview.

Hugh Williamson interviewed by Jörg Döbereiner

You are observing a huge and diverse world region on behalf of Human Rights Watch. It spans eastern Europe, Russia and Turkey as well as Central Asia. What do these countries have in common?

It is fascinating to see how powerful the human right of freedom of expression is everywhere, despite people facing such huge challenges. The internet and social media have made it even more important. Authoritarian regimes feel particularly threatened, but some democratically elected governments feel threatened too. The methods used to restrict the freedom of expression vary depending on the kind of political order.

Please give examples.

In Kazakhstan, the government in January shut down the internet entirely for several days. An authoritarian state was responding in a draconian manner to peaceful protests. In Turkey, however, the opposition is systematically repressed by other means. Using the pretence of anti-terrorism legislation, the government removed legislators from parliament and even detained some of them. Most victims belong to Kurdish parties. The result is that an important minority is deprived of its fundamental right to political representation. In Hungary, a democratic EU member, the government is trying to take control of the media. The authorities used petty formalities to withdraw the license of Klubrádió, one of the last independent radio stations. The lesson is that we have to pay very close attention to what is happening, whether in Europe or other parts of the world.

In Russia, opponents of President Vladimir Putin live dangerously. One of the most prominent is Alexei Navalny. He almost died after being poisoned and is now held captive in a prison camp. Does Russia respect human rights?

Well, we are currently seeing a nadir in regard to human rights in Russia. What happened to Navalny, happens to less well-known people too. Journalists are sent to prison. The government is closing down civil-society organisations and independent media outlets. New legislation serves to undermine the rights of assembly and free expression. Putin knows that freedom of speech puts his power in question, so he does what he can to stay in control. Every passing day, life is getting tougher for the few independent media outlets that are still operating in Russia. On the other hand, Putin is taking advantage of media issues for diplomacy purposes. The most recent example is that Russia banned Deutsche Welle, Germany's public international broadcaster, from operating in Russia. At the same time, the country is promoting RT, its own broadcaster. Putin's focus is on national interests, not media freedom.

Photo: picture-alliance/dpa/TASS/Yerlan Dzhumayev

Russia's neighbour Belarus has been making headlines too. In August 2020, the re-election of autocratic president Alexander Lukashenko was controversial, and mass protests arose. Dissidents were arrested and freedom of speech was restricted. How do you assess matters there?

From the human-rights perspective, Lukashenko's decision to crush the protests was terrible. One result is that the country hardly has anything one might call an independent civil society any more. The opportunities citizens have for getting involved in public affairs have been reduced to what we last saw decades ago. Quite obviously, Russia is paying close attention. Putin fears that, one day, public protests may spread in his country, which is why he supports Lukashenko generously.

By comparison, we get far less news from other former Soviet republics. What is the scenario in Central Asia?

Well, it is a complex region. Turkmenistan stands out as a totalitarian state. It gives absolutely no scope to dissident opinions and independent media. The regime censors the internet heavily. It is even illegal to use a virtual private network (VPN) at home. Turkmenistan has been sealed off systematically, so we hardly get information concerning human rights. Websites are often blocked in Tajikistan too. On the other hand, the governments of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan officially endorse the freedom of expression. However, the Kazakh government is exerting pressure on independent media, and in Uzbekistan in February, a Muslim blogger was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison because of a single Facebook post. Human Rights Watch has documented his case. Something like that does not happen in a truly open society. The only central Asian nation where meaningful investigative journalism is feasible is Kyrgyzstan. It matters and deserves further support.

In which directions are things developing in this region?

Things are getting worse in various ways, as my examples have indicated. Kyrgyzstan has just passed legislation which permits authorities to shut down websites if they spread disinformation. What exactly amounts to disinformation, is not defined however, so it is left to arbitrary decision-making. On the other hand, we must not forget that people are rising up in growing numbers to express grievances. In January, average citizens took to the streets in Kazakhstan, venting their anger about rising fuel prices. They were actually quite brave. They were risking arrest because, as a matter of principle, rallies are not allowed. Nonetheless, the protests spread nationwide and fast. The point is that exasperated people are willing to take risks. In all countries we are discussing, there are people who fight for human rights. Human Rights Watch and others support them in doing so.

What can western democracies like Germany or the USA do?

Well, they can speak up for those who are doing good work in the countries concerned, including civil-society organisations. A tangible cause is to support professional journalistic training. Of course, governments want good foreign relations, and Kazakhstan, for example, is resource rich. Nonetheless, western diplomats should put human rights high on the agenda in bilateral negotiations.

You keep mentioning the internet. How important is it in regard to the freedom of expression?

It has become the crucial space for freedom of expression. Only thanks to the internet did protests spread like wildfires in Kazakhstan. In Turkey, many cases of domestic abuse only became known thanks to social media, as Human Rights Watch has reported. Abused victims did not go to the police they did not trust, but they did attract attention on social media – and that, in turn, helped to put pressure on state agencies. More generally speaking, the internet has become essential in many ways. When a state shuts it down, not only the freedom of speech is affected. Economic and social rights suffer too – just consider online banking or digitised health services.

What about online disinformation?

It is known that in Russia there are propagandists posting pro-Putin comments online in order to manipulate public opinion. We must assume that other countries in the region rely on troll factories as well. Trolling is a huge challenge because it has an impact on people's perceptions and is changing our society. Disinformation is designed to promote a certain reading of reality and reduce the space for other ideas. Accordingly, it reduces the scope for critical discourse. It is therefore an indirect tool for limiting the freedom of expression.

What you say sounds quite sobering, especially given the many negative examples.

We must not be too pessimistic. The key to success is to make even better use of the internet in ways that support people's self-determination and freedom of expression, which must not be confused with fake news and conspiracy theories. It is inspiring, for example, that Lukashenko's opponents who had to leave Belarus are now organising online. They are spanning great distances, from Ukraine to Poland and the Baltic states. While there are depressing examples, hope is justified just as much.

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US Senator Elizabeth Warren is a critic of internet giants – would she have more than 3.3 million Facebook followers if she praised them instead?

PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Giving voice to the voiceless

Freedom of speech is better protected in democratic systems than in authoritarian ones. Nonetheless, public discourse tends to be seriously distorted even in high-income countries with liberal constitutions. Poor and marginalised people typically stay voiceless.

By Ndongo Samba Sylla and Hans Dembowski

Freedom of speech is a fundamental pillar of any decent social order. To deprive human beings of expressing themselves freely, is to keep them in an animal condition. They are deprived of the communication they need to take their fates into their hands, whether individually or collectively.

Throughout history, oppressed social groups were neither allowed to speak their minds nor given the education that would have empowered them to do so forcefully. The prison of silence was not eternal, of course. Slaves, plebeians, serfs, members of lower castes, proletarians, colonial subjects: Again and again, the oppressed rose up to claim their rights. No oppressive order lasts forever; revolutions happen.

Freedom of speech ultimately depends on all members of society fully recognising one another's equality. Accordingly, the grass-roots reality often diverges considerable from well-phrased constitutional principles. Let us not forget that the USA was called a "republic", not a democracy in the 19th century, while the British empire was run by an "elective aristocracy". Both officially proclaimed the freedom of speech, but slavery was only abolished in the USA in 1865, while Britain colonised territories around the world and disenfranchised the working class at home.

"Freedom is always the freedom of the dissenter," the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871 – 1919) famously stated. She was not endorsing hatemongers and manipulators, but thinking of those who dare to speak truth to power, expressing the needs of the disposed. Her point was that freedom of speech must serve the weakest. Aimé Césaire, the poet from Martinique, put it this way: "My mouth will be the mouth of the unfortunate who have no mouth."

Quite obviously, freedom of speech is better protected in democratic systems than in authoritarian ones. Despotic leaders are prone to harassing, prosecuting and even killing journalists and other persons who dare to criticise them. However, there are serious problems in liberal democracies too. Rather than silencing dissenters, they have a pattern of crowding them out. It bares repetition that what is now called "public relations" or "PR" for short, used to be called "propaganda".

Indeed, Edward Bernays, the father of the PR industry, published a book with the title "Propaganda" in 1928. In it, he stated that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society." According to the book, "we are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of."

In other words, the consent of the people is actively engineered by those who hold power, notably through the media system. Government agencies are involved, but so

Screenshot: https://www.facebook.com/ElizabethWarren

are the PR departments of private-sector companies and organised interest groups.

It matters, moreover, that market dynamics emphasise the views of influential elites. Major corporations own TV stations, radio stations and newspapers. Dependence on advertising also shapes media houses' editorial policies. Increasingly, public broadcasters depend on advertising too, but conservative forces are casting doubt on their credibility in many countries. The most striking current example, of course, is the BBC.

All summed up, the space for free speech has always been small. It is now shrinking, and content is being impoverished.

DEAD END: SOCIAL MEDIA

For some time it seemed that the rapid development of social-media networks had opened up a more democratic public space. Today, nobody speaks of so-called "Facebook revolutions" anymore, as was common during the Arab Spring in 2011. The background is that the most important social-media platforms are owned by multinational corporations which prioritise profits over public discourse. They claim to only give people what they want, but inscrutable algorithms ensure that not all voices are equal. Information that might hurt Facebook, for example, will probably not spread widely on Facebook. Moreover, managers shy away from political controversies, but want to be appreciated by those who can pay most for advertising. That includes governments and big corporations.

It is just as worrisome, of course, that social-media platforms are being used to spread lies. Conspiracy theories that serve right-wing demagogues figure prominently. Not by coincidence, they often discredit state action. "Freedom" is declared to be the opposite of elected governments' decision-making, for instance in regard to climate mitigation, the public response to Covid-19 or publicly funded social protection systems. That narrative suits super-rich elites who do not depend on public services, but hurts masses of people who need them. It undermines constitutional democracy, but reinforces existing social hierarchies.

So far, platforms such as Facebook or Twitter stay non-transparent about what exactly they do to police opinions. It made headlines when they banned former US President Donald Trump in early 2021 after the insurrection in the US Capitol. The big question was whether this amounted to censorship. The legal answer is no, because censorship means that a government institution decides that someone may not speak. In this sense, private-sector corporations cannot exercise censorship.

Other questions got less attention:

- Should social-media platforms with an almost monopolistic reach be allowed to simply maximise profits or must they be regulated in ways that serve the public interest?
- Must social-media platforms not be held accountable for content the way that publishers are? After all, their algorithms determine what people see on their screens.
- To what degree do tech giants' algorithms amplify views they like and mute those they dislike?

Elizabeth Warren, the left-leaning US senator, is not denied her presence on social media, but corporate algorithms certainly do not boost her demands to break up or at least stringently regulate internet giants. Would Warren have more than 3.3 million followers on Facebook if she promoted tech-giants' interest? We do not know; the algorithm is secret.

We do know, however, that conventional media houses typically side with investor interests. Top managers generally get more favourable coverage than trade-union leaders. News about right-wing extremists in the security forces rarely makes the front page, while even non-violent leftists are cast as dangerous. However, media laws normally prevent newspapers and broadcasters from spreading outright lies. Public discourse would benefit from social-media platforms being made liable in similar ways (see Emmalyn Liwag Kotte on page 19 of this issue).

The "fact-checking" industry that has emerged cannot solve the fundamental problems. Typically, the fact-checkers are employed by major media houses and serve their needs. Not all relevant topics are fact checked. Issues that primarily concern developing countries do not get equal attention. Social-media giants, moreover, are not known to scrutinise content in other languages than English. Many issues are too complex for binary "true" or "false" questioning, moreover. Finally, fact-checkers sometimes face conflicts of interest, especially when their paymasters' business models are at stake.

WHISTLEBLOWERS' PLIGHT

Liberal democracies typically do not suppress dissent the way authoritarian regimes do, but whistleblowers may face hardship. An example is how the USA is treating Edward Snowden who revealed information on intelligence services' secret practices. That was of great public interest, but he must now live in exile in Russia. In many places, moreover, the law only insufficiently protects whistleblowers who reveal business malpractice. The main way that dissent is kept at bay, however, is that mainstream media drowns it in a flood of other stories.

Things are particularly frustrating in least-developed countries. In West Africa, for example, elite discourse relies on English and French, though masses of people only speak African languages. Compounding problems, not all African journalists are professionally trained. Private media companies generally depend on government advertising – and the same governments run the public broadcasting institutions. To some extent, people read the websites of the major outlets from their former colonial power.

While those outlets cover African affairs to some extent, they do not deal with national politics in depth and mostly fail to look beyond the capital city. Worryingly, they hardly pay attention to the harm that western governments, corporations and soldiers do in Africa. French media, for example, tend not to mention – or even put into question – the lasting support successive French governments gave to some of the most odious African regimes. Examples include Chad under Idriss Déby or Burkina Faso under Blaise Compaoré.

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Anti-democratic attitude

My favourite newspaper is the London-based Financial Times (FT). Most of the time, it is very reliable both in terms of factual accuracy and getting the big picture right. In a recent Saturday issue, however, I was disappointed in a portrait by Richard Waters and Lauren Fedor on the opinion page. It was about Facebook investor Peter Thiel.

Waters and Fedor describe Thiel as an intellectually fascinating man. They make a major effort to assure their readers that the Silicon Valley tycoon is not necessarily the dangerous right-wing manipulator that his critics claim him to be. They failed to mention that Thiel stated clearly in 2009: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." He resents majorities' propensity to put limits on what super-rich tech investors may do. Leaving out this kind of information distorts the picture.

It does not bother me that the FT authors quoted anonymous sources. My problem is that there were too many and what they said remained vague and ambiguous. For example, one "Thiel ally" pointed out that to expect a consistent ideology from this billionaire, is to misunderstand him.

It is really not hard to make sense of right-wing authoritarians' inconsistencies. They typically have double standards. The approach "one rule for us and one rule for them" is much harder to take if one sticks to a coherent world view.

In Thiel's case, the ideologically inconsistencies are glaring. He claims to be a libertarian who wants the state to be tiny, but his company Palantir is raking in profits from big-data services to governmental intelligence agencies whose work is completely non-transparent. He accuses Google of anti-competition practices, but that is a charge that many have raised against Facebook too.

He is not only a prominent supporter of Donald Trump, the serial liar and adulterer, but, according to the FT, also a "committed Christian". By the way, prudent investors normally doubt the leadership of business men with so many shady deals and defaults as Trump. Thiel is currently supporting two right-wing candidates in Senate elections in the USA. He gave each $10 million. One of them is J. D. Vance in Ohio. He used to be a sober intellectual, but has turned into a ferocious right-wing agitator whose propagandistic fight for "the" people and against "elites" depends on plutocratic funding – from a man whose top priority is to shield super-rich investors from state regulations. This is, by the way, a common pattern among Republican donors.

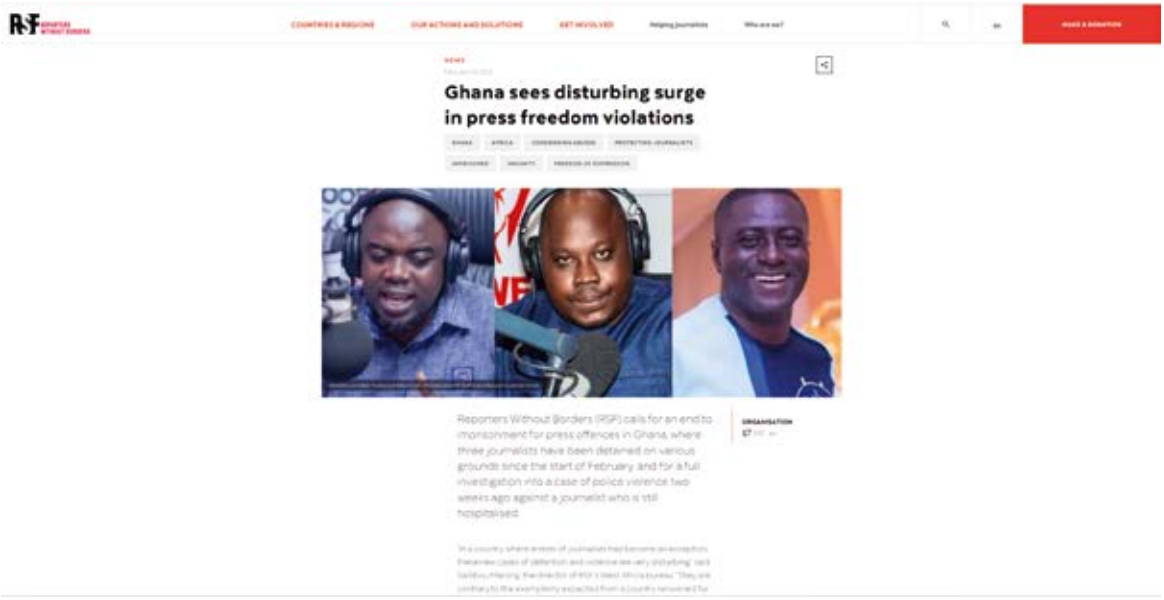
It fits the anti-democracy pattern that Thiel recently offered Sebastian Kurz, Austria's disgraced former chancellor, a well-paying job as a corporate strategist. Kurz resigned from all government positions because of corruption investigations. I doubt Thiel really wants his advice. As far as I can tell, the super donor was signalling to other officials in top government jobs that they need not worry much about constitutional norms or moral standards. As long as they use their jobs in ways he likes, he has their backs. The FT authors did not mention Kurz at all.

Tellingly, Thiel is not known to have used his influence as a Facebook/Meta board member to make the social-media giant promote fact-based reasoning. It apparently never bothered him that opaque Facebook algorithms facilitate the spread of disinformation and propaganda. If tech investors have the say, public information gets distorted by who they let interact with whom on what topic. We should expect more from someone who studied philosophy and, according to the FT, likes to challenge "conventional thinking". Sadly, the two authors do not expect more, though they want us to believe that "his interest in ideas sets him apart from other super-donors".

Thiel recently stepped down from his board membership in order to become more involved in politics without causing difficulties for the corporation. To me, that sounds like a threat. The global community needs democratic and accountable governance in the USA, not unlimited freedom for plutocrats (see Katie Cashman and Hans Dembowski in D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2022/01). DEM

Peter Thiel (centre) with Donald Trump and Tim Cook of Apple at the White House in 2017.

Photo: picture-alliance/AP Photo/jdake



Screenshot – RSF https://rsf.org/en/news/ghana-sees-disturbing-surge-press-freedom-violations

PRESS FREEDOM

On the defensive

Ghana is fast sliding backwards on press freedom. Two decades ago, the country permitted freedom of speech. In recent months, however, its police force has been arresting and detaining journalists. Civil-society organisations are outraged and speaking up against the trend.

By Dasmani Laary

In 2001, Ghana repealed the Criminal Libel and Sedition Laws and proclaimed journalists can publish and broadcast without fear of official retaliation. But press freedom looks threatened again. In recent months, police have arrested and detained several journalists after they published or broadcast reports critical of public officials.

Instead of the sedition law, the government now uses the Criminal Code and the 2008 Electronic Communications Act to hound critical journalists. Both laws forbid false reporting. Offenders face large fines and up to three years in prison.

In February alone, several journalists and civil-society activists were arrested and charged. Prominent victims included Kwabena Bobbie Ansah, a host of the radio station Accra FM, and Blessed Godsbrain Smart, a journalist for Onua TV. Adding to the worries, Oheneba Boamah Bennie of Power FM was sentenced to two weeks in prison and a fine worth the equivalent of €414. He was found guilty of contempt of court after stating in public that the president had tried to sway judges in a legal battle over Ghana's 2020 election results.

This repressive trend has troubling implications for Ghana. The country's reputation in regard to the freedom of expression is actually quite good. It ranked 30th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2021 World Press Freedom Index, ahead of Britain (rank 33), France (34) and the USA (44). The scenario is much better than in Zimbabwe (130), for example (see Jeffrey Moyo on p. 20).

"WHEN FREE SPEECH DIES, DEMOCRACY DIES"

On the other hand, the Media Foundation for West Africa, an international civil-society organisation, has identified 150 violations against Ghanaian journalists since 2002. Most were physical attacks carried out by security agencies. In an open letter to President Nana Akufo-Addo, the foundation's executive director Sulemana Braimah warned in February: "We cannot love democracy and hate free speech. When free speech dies, democracy dies."

The recent spate of arrests suggests that press freedom is still not sufficiently entrenched in Ghana's political culture – which, in turn, raises concerns about Ghana's democracy. Free media help to hold state agencies accountable, and only well-informed citizens can be expected to vote wisely.

The most recent round of arrests of journalists followed articles or broadcasts dealing with official corruption. Some articles or broadcasts had accused President Nana Akufo-Addo's wife of unlawfully obtaining state land for their foundation's headquarters.

Journalists are deeply frustrated. "This arbitrary arrest of journalists is distasteful and defeats the purpose of repealing the criminal libel law," says Emmanuel Mensah-Abludo, a journalist of the public broadcaster GBC. He points out that wrongly-accused public officials have options for defending themselves. For example, they can:

Screenshot – RSF – https://rsf.org/en/news/ghana-sees-disturbing-surge-press-freedom-violations

- complain to the national media commission,
- demand a retraction or an apology, or
- insist on a publication of their reply to the accusation.

Mensah-Abludo worries that the arrests will dampen free speech and the ability of journalists to hold leaders accountable. "Now, journalists will be cowed," he says. "This Rambo-style arrest and detention flies in the face of our democracy and sends Ghana back to the era of the culture of silence."

Mavis Okyere is another concerned journalist. She points out that the Covid-19 pandemic has recently shown that independent journalism, citizen reporting and open public discourse are indispensable, especially when an unexpected crisis hits. In her eyes, the growing repression of journalists is causing fear and panic. She wants it to stop.

Civil-society activists are affected too. Mensah Thompson is the executive director of the Alliance for Social Equity and Public Accountability. He was charged with spreading false information on Facebook after having accused the head of state and some of his relatives of using the official presidential plane for a shopping trip to the United Kingdom in December 2021. He then asked government institutions for clarification. When the armed forces denied his allegation, he retracted the post and apologised. Nonetheless, he was arrested in early February.

The arrests provoked sharp responses from civil-society organisations, including the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, the Imani Centre for Policy and Education and the Africa Centre for International Law and Accountability. "We are profoundly worried by the state's increasing use of prosecutorial and judicial power to punish criminally speech that purportedly wrongly injures or damages the reputation of others or of a public institution," the organisations point out in a joint statement. "The criminal law is being used in the same way that libel laws were used in the 1990s."

John Dramani Mahama, a former president of Ghana, agrees. Addressing the current head of state, he has written: "I fear that if you do not take immediate action to stop this unfortunate trend, when you leave the office of president in January 2025, freedom of speech and free media will not be counted as part of your legacy."

Sadibou Marong of the West Africa bureau of Reporters Without Borders sees things in a similar light. "In a country where arrests of journalists had become the exception, these new cases of detention and violence are very disturbing," he says. The international non-governmental organisation wants Ghana to stop stifling public debate and instead prosecute and punish those who assault journalists.

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Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono in August 2020: He was arrested several times being charged with "communicating falsehoods".

PRISON CONDITIONS

Locked up in hell

Conditions in Zimbabwean prisons are below any humanitarian standard. They are crowded and unsanitary, falling below minimal requirements for human habitation. Our correspondent Jeffrey Moyo experienced them first-hand after he had helped foreign colleagues to obtain press accreditation in Zimbabwe. The degree of press freedom in the country is also well below par.

By Jeffrey Moyo

The first sign of trouble came when two colleagues from The New York Times, Christina Goldbaum and Joao Silva, arrived in Zimbabwe on 5 May 2021. They were detained for hours after their flight landed in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city. I waited outside with their press passes, which I had obtained from the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC), the regulatory body that issues press credentials.

After a long delay they were allowed into the country. But three days later they were detained again. Zimbabwean immigration officials told them there were problems with their press credentials, and also that certain parts of the government were not happy about their presence in Zimbabwe. The two were swiftly deported. In a way they were lucky. Because then the officials turned their attention to me.

About three weeks later, on 26 May, three detectives from the Anti-Terrorism Unit at Harare's Central Police Station appeared at my house. They asked why I had sidestepped the Ministry of Information to get press passes for the New York Times journalists. "We want to know how your colleagues got accreditation," one of the detectives said.

I had no choice but to go to the police station with them. There, the questions continued: "Whom do you know at the ZMC?", the detectives asked. "And why do you work for The New York Times instead of The Herald (a state-controlled newspaper)?"

I answered their questions, but nonetheless was compelled to spend the night at the police station. I shared a cell with five other detainees. The cell had a stench of urine. Despite the cold, I was forced to remove my shoes, socks, shirt and sweater and keep on only my jacket and trousers. That night I slept on the concrete floor, as all available blankets were taken. I had to press myself close to other inmates for warmth.

The following morning, instead of taking me to the Magistrate's Court in Harare for an initial hearing, the detectives took me to Bulawayo, more than 400 kilometres away, where the case would be heard. Also arrested and taken to Bulawayo was my co-accused, Thabang Manhika, a staffer at the ZMC, who had processed the press passes for the New York Times journalists. "This is good for us; we will get a per-diem payment (an allowance for travel days)," one of the detectives remarked to his colleagues at the police station.

My unexpected transfer to Bulawayo came as a shock to my wife, Purity, as well as to a throng of journalists waiting outside the Harare court expecting to report on the case. The reporters had been alerted by Christina Goldbaum and by a local journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono.

At Bulawayo Central Police Station, I was held in a small cell with 17 other detainees. I slept on a concrete floor without blankets, with a stench of urine and human waste choking me. Unfortunately for me I was positioned right next to the toilet. Its foul odour was pure hell.

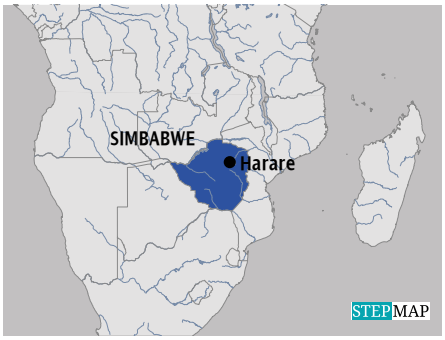
The next day, 28 May, I appeared in court in Bulawayo. Magistrate Rachel Mukanga set a date for a bail ruling on 31 May and ordered that I be kept in prison until then. On 31 May, the court denied bail and ordered me back to jail until 10 June.

Mukanga had decided I was both a flight risk and a "threat to national security". According to Mukanga, I had violated Zimbabwe's Immigration Act by helping the New York Times journalists to get media accreditation. She added that Zimbabwe's "sovereignty was undermined because foreign journalists interviewed Zimbabweans without permission from the Minister of Information".

My lawyers filed an urgent application to the High Court to get me out on bail. While that application was pending, I was held in the Bulawayo Central Prison, a 124-year-old facility once known as Grey Remand Prison because of the colour of the stones used to build it.

My cell, which I shared with 25 other inmates, had two tiny windows covered with rusty wire nets and was secured with a heavy, hardwood door. This cell, too, has a stench of urine and faeces from the toilet inside. Making matters worse was the smoke from the smuggled cigarettes that other inmates smoked.

Photo: picture-alliance/AP/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi



For my first three days at Bulawayo Central Prison I had no blanket of my own; there were not enough to go around. A fellow inmate, Onias Mavunge, passed me a badly torn and lice-ridden blanket, but I declined and slept uncovered directly on the concrete floor. Unfortunately the lice found me anyway.

Fighting off the lice was a constant occupation. Every day after cells were opened, inmates would stand outside and try to pick the lice off their clothes and blankets. It was a losing battle. Inmates often scratched themselves where they had been bitten by lice.

My wife travelled from Harare to see me. Through prison officials, I let her know I needed a blanket. With the help of my lawyers, she got permission to bring one in.

For breakfast we received plain porridge without sugar or salt. Lunch – served at 3 pm – was boiled dried spinach and other vegetables and boiled beans without salt or cooking fat. In less than three weeks at Bulawayo prison, my weight went from 78 to 71 kilogrammes.

I had a bad encounter with a female medical prison official who slapped me heavily across my face while testing me for Covid-19. I had shifted in the chair and she was angry about that and slapped me.

One prison official asked inmates for patience. "We do not have adequate blankets and our diet is not up to scratch," he said. "This is because our economy is not performing well. When the economy gets better, we hope everything will improve."

On 14 June, my wife got a message through to me that the Bulawayo High Court had agreed I could be released on bail. But some paperwork was still needed. My wife and several journalists stayed outside the prison entrance during the night of 14 June, anticipating my release. But I had to stay yet another day and night. On the morning of 16 June I was finally released on bail.

I have my freedom back due to the efforts of many people. My lawyers put up a good fight. Family and friends were actively involved in the fight. The New York Times, The Toronto Globe and Mail and diplomats and media colleagues all over the world had put pressure on the Zimbabwe government. Other inmates living in unacceptable conditions do not have those advantages.

In February the trial against me will resume. I hope in the end, media freedom will win, and my work as a journalist will be upheld and respected by the authorities.

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PHILIPP SCHWARTZ INITIATIVE

Safety for researchers at risk

According to the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), 80% of the world population lives in countries that restrict academic freedom. Many researchers are at risk or even forced to flee their homes. The Philipp Schwartz Initiative, which was launched by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, helps at-risk researchers to work in safety in Germany.

By Mareike Ilsemann

"After the Arab Spring protests in 2011, the situation in my homeland became increasingly difficult," Ghanya Al-Naqeb recalls. Al-Naqeb is from Yemen and has a PhD in food chemistry. When the multi-front civil war erupted in 2015, she was teaching and researching at Sana'a University. Suddenly everyone was a potential enemy. Harassment got worse, including on campus.

"Water and electric power were sometimes cut off completely at work," she says. "Moreover, I did not receive a salary for two years." When researchers from her department began to disappear, she knew anything could happen to her at any time. "I feared for my life."

Al-Naqeb drew attention to her situation at an international conference in Washington. Klaus Krickeberg, a German mathematician, wanted to help and put her in touch with Leane Lehmann, a professor of food chemistry at Julius Maximilian University in Würzburg. Lehmann, as the potential mentor, and Al-Naqeb, as a researcher at risk, applied for support from the Philipp Schwartz Initiative. "It worked out and that was such a gift, it felt like God's blessing," says Al-Naqeb.

FUNDING FOR UNIVERSITIES

Since 2016, the Humboldt Foundation's Philipp Schwartz Initiative has been awarding funds to German universities and research institutes so they can host at-risk researchers for two years. Host institutions receive funding for a research fellowship or contractual employment. The Humboldt Foundation enables over 2000 scholars a year from all over the world to do research in Germany.

The initiative is named after the Austrian pathologist Philipp Schwartz. He was a professor in Frankfurt, but was dismissed without notice because of his Jewish heritage when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Schwartz fled to Switzerland, where he founded the Emergency Society of German Scholars Abroad. The idea was to help persecuted scholars find work in other countries. The organisation supported several hundred displaced researchers.

Ghanya Al-Naqeb, a researcher from Yemen.

In view of Germany's historical responsibility, the Humboldt Foundation long considered how best to support persecuted scholars. It established contact with like-minded organisations like the New York-based Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), the international network Scholars at Risk Network (SAR) and the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) in Britain. Some of these agencies were founded in response to Nazi rule in Germany. Nonetheless, no German institution had contributed to their work.

In 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived in Germany, including many academics and researchers. With help from Germany's Foreign Office, the Humboldt Foundation established an entire support programme within a few months. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then serving as foreign minister, announced the establishment of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative at Humboldt Foundation's annual conference in Berlin in June.

To date, 330 fellows have been chosen in 10 selection rounds. Ninety-seven German universities and research institutes have agreed to act as hosts. Ghanya Al-Naqeb had to wait four months for her visa until she was able to emigrate via Sudan and resume her work in Würzburg in 2017.

"I took a course to learn German and continued my work in the university lab with plants that I had brought along from Yemen," she recalls. She found the language barrier challenging. Work in a highly advanced laboratory felt strange too. "The team acted in a very inclusive manner, and I am most thankful for the opportunity to keep working on my own research," she reports.

In the fall of 2018, the Foreign Office and the German parliament, the Bundestag, turned the Philipp Schwartz Initiative into a permanent programme. This important step received parliamentary support across parties. Germany has thus become an advocate for researchers at risk and is finally rising to its international responsibility.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

The initial hope was that many Philipp Schwartz fellows would be able to return to their home countries soon and then contribute to rebuilding them. In most cases, that has not happened. Therefore, the Schwartz Initiative is now working on finding long-term perspectives for the persons concerned. Permanent employment is important. So far, over 66 % of former Philipp-Schwartz fellows have found a new position immediately after their fellowship ended.

Food chemist Ghanya Al-Naqeb was not able to return to Yemen because of the ongoing civil war. But thanks to the contacts that she made during her time in Germany, she successfully applied to the University of Trento in northern Italy, where she now works.

The Philipp Schwartz Initiative has attracted international attention. For example, the Collège de France has set up a support programme of its own, following the Philipp Schwartz example. Both programmes are now involved in Inspireurope, an EU project that links ten institutions from nine European countries in efforts to promote researchers at risk.

LINK

Philipp Schwartz Initiative:
https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/apply/sponsorship-programmes/philipp-schwartz-initiative

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Photo: Humboldt-Stiftung/Elisa Vettori

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Hundreds of journalists in prison

More media workers than ever before are currently in detention because of their work, according to the non-governmental Reporters Without Borders. Three countries are primarily responsible for the increase.

By Jörg Döbereiner

Journalists face serious danger in many countries: in the past year, 65 were held hostage and 46 were killed. Two disappeared without a trace. By the end of the year, a total of 488 media workers had been imprisoned because of their work. These figures are from the 2021 annual round-up published by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières – RSF).

By its own account, RSF has never before counted so many imprisoned journalists – about 100 more than in 2020. According to the organisation, the increase can primarily be attributed to three countries: Myanmar, Belarus and China. The military seized control of Myanmar in February 2021 (see Katja Dombrowski's article in the Debate section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/03). Since then, the number of detained media workers has risen dramatically to 53, compared with only two in the previous year. In Belarus, the contested re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko led to protests. Thirty-two media workers are languishing in jail, compared with seven last year.

In China, Beijing hat tightened its grip on Hong Kong, especially since the passage of the so-called national security law in 2020. At least ten media workers have been imprisoned as a result, according to RSF. China is also the country with the most imprisoned journalists overall (127) in the RSF's annual assessment. It is followed by Myanmar (53), Vietnam (43), Belarus (32) and Saudi Arabia (31).

According to RSF, 30 media professionals were deliberately killed because of their work and 16 more died while carrying out their jobs. Nonetheless RSF states that, at 46, the total number of dead is the lowest in almost two decades. This decline is primarily due to the fact that the situation has stabilised in the war zones of Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Four women were among the deliberately killed. In Afghanistan, Shahnaz Roufi, Saadia Sadat and Mursal Vahidi died in attacks that the terrorist militia "Islamic State" has claimed responsibility for. The Yemeni reporter Rasha Abdallah al-Harazi was killed by a car bomb in the city of Aden.

DANGEROUS MEXICO

Mexico, however, is the country with the most murdered media workers. With seven deaths, it is in first place for the third year in a row. RSF points out that local journalists who report on sensitive issues like organised crime are particularly at risk. "The spiral of violence seems endless", the report states. It is fuelled by near total impunity and successive governments' lack of political will to tackle the problems. In January 2022 alone, four more media workers were killed in Mexico.

The RSF document cites numerous examples of serious violations of press freedom and human rights. For instance, the Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak, along with his colleagues Seyoum Tsehaye and Temesgen Gebreyesus, have been imprisoned in Eritrea for more than 20 years – under inhumane conditions, RSF reports. The NGO claims that Isaak has never been allowed to see his family or an attorney and has been held in isolation.

In Vietnam, according to RSF, authorities detained journalist Pham Doan Trang for more than a year without contact to the outside world before she was sentenced to nine years in prison for "propaganda against the state". Pham Doan Trang won the 2019 RSF Press Freedom Prize for particularly impactful journalism.

The report states that the longest sentence imposed on any media worker – 175 years – is being faced by the famous internet activist Julian Assange, who exposed US war crimes on his Wikileaks platform. The US has accused him of espionage. At the moment, Assange is being held in a high-security prison in London, awaiting the UK High Court's ruling on his possible extradition to the US.

LINK

Reporters Without Borders: 2021 round-up. ***https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsfroundup_2021.pdf***

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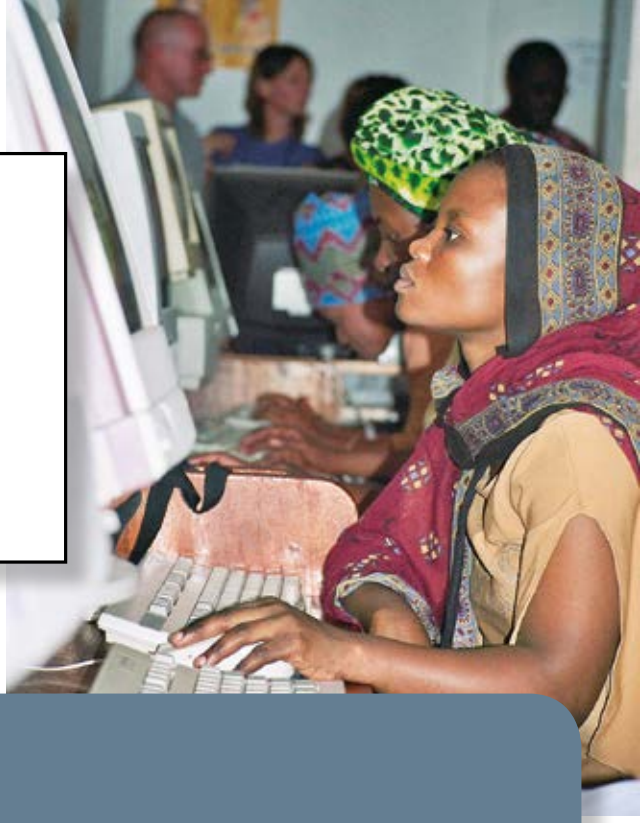
Photos of murdered journalists placed in front of the Interior Ministry Office in Mexico City.

Photo: picture-alliance/AA/Daniel Cardenas



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