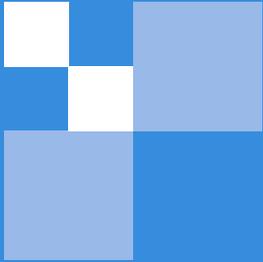




# Forgotten Conflicts

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Various Authors





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The article on Myanmar is not signed in order to guarantee the security of the author, given the situation of repression and violence that the country is living through.

# Introduction

The publication of this Notebook in the Virtual Collection in June, 2021, responds to a double necessity: to change focus and to flee the avalanche of monothematic information found in the context in which we live. For the last year and a half, in *Cristianisme i Justicia* we have concentrated a large part of the social and theological reflection on the situation coming from the pandemic. Blog articles, notebooks and reflection papers have attempted to shed light on a truly exceptional situation. In spite of that, we have attempted to keep the door ajar in order to continue reflecting from the viewpoint of faith and justice about other present-day social problems in all parts of the world. Unfortunately, these areas have been eclipsed by this phenomenon. One example is the publication of Booklet CJ #180, "Why Haiti?", written by Pau Farrás ten years after the earthquake.

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Visualizing "forgotten conflicts" is framed in this attempt by changing the focus and shifting it to situations that lack immediacy and that need to be visualized so that they do not fall into oblivion. In these pages that follow, you will find five extensive articles that review the causes, the development and possible future events in five countries in conflict. We are speaking about Honduras, Yemen, the Central African Republic, Western Sahara and Myanmar.

The authors of the articles are people who are local to the territory and who have first-hand knowledge, given their experience of having lived and worked on various projects (see p. 4).

The articles can also be read on the *Cristianisme i Justicia* Blog where they were originally published with the hashtag #ConflictosOlvidados. In them you will also find photographs and information concerning projects of groups that are rooted in the territory, who struggle to eradicate the conflict and to denounce the continuous violation of human rights.

As we visualize the conflicts, we visualize the victims and we also visualize those who in the country risk their lives to denounce, to pacify, to

transform and to rebuild. To them is dedicated this Notebook because they are surely the best seed of hope that our world has. To them we offer our commitment and our thanks.

# Honduras: a Broken Country

*Ismael Moreno*

Honduras, a small country with a privileged geographical site, with coasts on both oceans, land borders with three countries on the narrow territory of Central America, and with a breadth of biodiversity. With a population of 9 million in a territory of 112,492 square kilometers, it is mainly mestizo, although with at least nine diverse ethnicities. Society is led by a group of some 250 families who make up the Honduran oligarchic elite, an ensemble of a model organized to concentrate wealth and income in very few hands, leaving millions without opportunities to have access to a life with dignity.

Honduras is a country conditioned by its relationship of submission to the United States for at least the last 120 years. It was on its Atlantic coast where at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the expression "banana republic" was coined. It means that the United States and its multinational corporations look at and relate to Honduras on the basis of its remaining a perpetual provider of raw material and products for dessert.

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The motivating factor for the Honduran economy is sustained by a model of development that is based on extraction and the privatization of public goods and services. The motivation is from an Alliance that conducts itself in conformity with a political bureaucracy formed by the extreme political right, a small elite oligarchy and the transnationals. This alliance is backed by the military, the government of the United States and organized crime syndicates, especially those involved in drug trafficking.

September 15, 2021, will mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of a Central American independence document that denied sovereignty to the people and has imposed for two centuries a policy of "prevention" put in place by the political elite, fearful of "the consequences" which would come about if the people should declare their independence. Honduras has a great task ahead of it. In counterpoint to the elitist model which concentrated wealth and decision-making, it has to foster a proposal which starts from a new concept of sovereignty



based on capacity and power, acquired by the people, communities, organizations and the State, to take autonomous and free decisions about their personal lives and everything that touches on that, about common goods and wealth, about the present and the future, based on respect for human rights and the rights of the planet, looked at as our common home.

## Broken Society

In Honduras everything is broken. For the whole of this century, the Honduran people has been shaping itself around a state of defenselessness and injury. This breaking of the threads is expressed in the lack of trust toward all of the public and political institutions, as has been said in several public opinion polls conducted by ERIC (Reflection, Investigation and Communication Team, at the center for social and human rights of the Society of Jesus in Honduras).

It is also expressed in the depoliticization of more than 40 percent of the population who say that they do not belong to any political party. But neither do they belong to community organizations, or those dealing with unionization, environmental or human rights questions. This depoliticization has converted the Honduran people into a people that is easy to be manipulated by politicians and strong groups, like the gangs or the structures of organized crime. But on the other hand, it is a people which is suspicious of everything and of everybody, which says yes to anything which comes to them from above but then does whatever they feel like doing. It has been changed into a conglomerate under the only banner possible of every person for him/herself.

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## More Pitiful Than Poor

This brokenness is also expressed in the worsening of the impoverishment of the majority of the population. According to experts, at the end of 2020, eight out of every ten people remained below the poverty line. Those who were unemployed at the beginning of the year, are still unemployed, and many others who began the year employed, lost their jobs. Thus, the country moves toward, and indeed already has become, a society of pitiful people. And this is a grave danger, because it is converted into fertile ground for uncontrollable spontaneous uprisings. It also is ground for populist and messianic movements that feed



off of pitiful populations which they can manipulate with responses promising assistance. And thus, misery is transformed into votes that legitimize authoritarianism and dictators.

## A Society and a State Structurally Unprepared

The absence of preparation is a Honduran structural problem. It crosses the whole society, it has invaded the deepest dynamics of the society and of its members, to the point of becoming a cultural problem. All of the natural, political or human phenomena are converted into threats, dangers and finally into greater disasters and dehumanization. Even such matters as electoral processes or the justice system are part of this structural unpreparedness. All of the dynamics of institutionalism of the State end up being changed into threats and dangers to democracy itself and to the application of justice.

The fact that the State has been taken over by small political groups who use it to conduct business and to take out resources from the public institutions, confirms the lack of preparation of the society. When it is said that Honduras is the third most unequal country in the world after South Africa and Haiti, or the second most vulnerable country in the world together with Bangladesh, or one of the two most corrupt countries on the continent, it confirms the lack of preparation of the society. When the health system does not manage to control dengue, or when the resources to attend to the pandemic are stolen by the bureaucrats of the highest level, it confirms the systemic absence of preparation of the society.

When the institutions of the State in several of its dependencies, like the Armed Forces, the police, the Public Ministry (equivalent to the Ministry of Justice), the Supreme Court of Justice and the Presidential Palace itself, were contaminated and penetrated by sectors of organized crime, especially by narcotraffickers, it confirms the absence of preparation of the society and the State.

When a long time ago violence stopped being a matter that was dealt with exclusively by the State, but rather the State itself having delegated this responsibility to various private groups, it confirms that preparation is absent and that the whole society remains defenseless or a victim of uncontrolled violence, in the hands of groups that in very diverse ways act with impunity and under the aegis of the State.



When the structural dynamics of the society lead to the accumulation of multimillions in wealth by a few people, five of whom have gathered a fortune equivalent to the minimum annual salary of two million Hondurans, it confirms that the society is governed by a system of life that is protective of inequality and it is for that very reason that it systematically cancels out any attempt at preparation.

## **What Do We Do When Faced With a Lack of Prevention?**

All situations of vulnerability, all threats and all natural social dangers, whether environmental, health-related or political, are preventable. All of them. As the experts say, Natural phenomena cannot be held back by anyone. Not even the highest investigations until now have achieved any mechanism that is able to hold back a natural phenomenon. What can be prevented are disasters. It is well said that no one stops the phenomena of nature, but disasters certainly can be prevented. The same thing is true of a pandemic like that of COVID-19. Once the virus was unleashed it was difficult to stop, but it was possible to prevent its disasters. In desperation, many people organize themselves into caravans in order to take the road to the United States as an expression of a production model of inequalities. It is possible to prevent both disasters because they are not natural phenomena. They are social, political, institutional and human.

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## **Prevention: a Structural State of Stability and Confidence**

Prevention is a structural state of society for taking on situations or events that have a certain level of challenge and danger, and before they present themselves, the society already has a positive disposition to take them on as challenges and tasks. This works for natural, climatological or pandemic, economic, military, cultural or institutional phenomena.

To the degree that the various sectors of society become involved in beginning processes of prevention, the greater the capacity they will have to reduce the consequences. And the closer they are to achieving processes that deal with the causes of disasters, the greater their capacity to make sure that the prevention is structural and not specific or geared only to the current circumstances.



Institutional and cultural prevention, when it has the perspective of structural change, should never sustain itself only from the point of vertical lines, and defined only from top management, as does the reasoning behind the current system. Without denying the contributions of the political, entrepreneurial, labor, religious and social top management, the guiding principle should be to sustain itself by a series of national agreements with a strong component of popular participation. Institutional and cultural prevention should be good in the short term, but be oriented toward commitments that are for the middle and long-term. It should be based on facts and commitments that are specific and suited to current circumstances, but which transcend all of those.

## ABC for Honduras

Honduras has the need to develop Shared Basic Agreements (*Translator's Note: ABC from the Spanish "Acuerdos Basicos Compartidos"*). Experts talk about the degradation of society, both of its economic model, as well as that of the environment and political institutions. When one talks about a degraded society, they are referring to a society and a State which in the end are governed by decisions and even by structures that come from transnational organized crime.

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Honduran society, trapped as it is between insecurity and impoverishment, corruption and narcotraffic, politicians and violence and police corruption, is a depressed and condemned society. It is necessary to break with the pattern of doing the same thing and placing the leadership in the same position. The country should take this rethinking as a starting point of a consensual acceptance of "This is how we are and the point we have reached". No one has the ability to put forward a plan for a country on his own account and, even worse, imposing it on everyone else.

## Minimum Consensus: the Most for Which We Can Hope

An indispensable starting point to initiate a process of proposals that break with the exclusionary political paradigm is the consensual acceptance that the country is so fragile that in the short term, and foreseeably in the middle term, we do not have the capability to putting forward a proposal which looks for "maximums", simply because the real situation does not offer those possibilities.



The "maximums" that are possible to reach are found in the "minimums" that can provide the bases to initiate an authentic process which moves toward the construction of democracy and a State based on the rule of law. And this is because we have lost the minimum that a society needs of the common good in order to live together in harmony. These lost minimums are what it is necessary to recover as a precondition in order to begin the authentic processes of the building of a democracy and of a real State based on law. These minimums are what ought to be represented in what we are calling the "Honduran ABC", that is, Common Basic Agreements.

For this reason, there should be an initiative of calling together a group which would figure out the bases, methodology, time line and those responsible for the process. Who would be called together? Perhaps that is the first question to be resolved because a feature of the social deterioration of the institutions is the absence of credibility of the actors, institutions and characters. The convocation and the process should be under the responsibility of persons that involve both the most well recognized national figures that exist and international representatives.

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One particular shared point of agreement is that the current government cannot be among the convokers. The churches have lost the base of credibility with which they were able to count traditionally, but they cannot stay on the outside. The entrepreneurs have been scattered and are without common sources of backing, but they also cannot be left out. Miscellaneous groups or the NGOs are so diverse and dispersed that it results in being very difficult to find in them the base for a credible convoker or one that would mobilize others. However, they should not be left out because they are involved in diverse areas of the national life and especially by their involvement in processes that are close to the municipalities and local communities.

Undoubtedly, it would be necessary to have an international component to the convocation that would be linked to the defense of human rights without discounting official representatives of the United Nations, although with the amount of discredit and lack of confidence which it has acquired.

This international component is indispensable, not only because of the absence of consensus around the internal convokers, but also because any proposal to solve the case of Honduras has to pass through nego-



tiations that involve the international community. Each one of these sectors, as much the popular, political and entrepreneurial as well the ones dealing with territory or themes, should organize their own process of elaboration of the ABC. This would begin with the community assemblies, passing through those of sectors, municipalities and departments, until arriving at national assemblies.

## Common Basic Agreements About What?

In an ABC for Honduras, there ought to be included some categories of agreements.

The first should include socio-economic and environmental agreements such as about the tenancy of land and agrarian policy, the protection and management of wealth and natural resources, employment and production, environmental vulnerability, education, health, security of the population, fiscal policy and housing. In short, it is in the line of a new model of development and investments that makes a break with the galloping inequality, the decisive factor creating violence and instability.

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The second category would look for socio-political agreements such as those concerning human rights, defense of the communities and of their territory, the rights of ethnic groups, relationships between the sexes, the means of communication, liberty of expression, the right to access information and cultural rights.

The third category would be that dealing with the political, institutional and juridical areas. It has to do with the right to organization and participation in decision making from an institutional point of view that guarantees a representative, participatory and direct democracy, the transformation of the system of justice, the reconfiguration of the National Congress, the Armed Forces, the organisms that act as a control on the State, especially the Supreme Electoral Court and the Law of Elections and Political Organizations, and in general the design of institutions capable of responding to the transformations which are contained in the first two categories.

These categories are not separate unto themselves. Each one has references to the others. The first category contains small agreements with regard to employment and production, which immediately is



linked with agreements which need to be established with legislation that regulates employment, as is the case with the Work Code, until there is achieved a minimum agreement which gives work stability to the workers. In the same way, if there is a search for Shared Basic Agreements concerning employment, a link should be established to those relating to the defense of the human right to work of thousands of workers in the whole industry.

Among all these themes it would be necessary to define priorities, in what order to begin dealing with them and the process and mechanisms for their implementation. An ABC for Honduras of this nature should be oriented to the end of their ratification in a National Constituent Assembly which would draw up a new Political Constitution.

The design of an ABC for Honduras has to be a proposal that unites. This doesn't mean that everything should be started from zero because there should be taken into account successful experiences which have been realized in some areas, municipalities or organizations within the country. This ABC for Honduras should guarantee that not only does it set social inclusion and participative democracy as an objective, but also that the process itself should be an experience of inclusion and participative democracy. The non-official sectors and members of the opposition are called on to strengthen their own requests and identities, and using their organized capacity to develop their own agreements in order to change them into a force and power at the negotiating table, in order to avoid the imposition of the law of the strongest.

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## **And on What Should the Honduran People Feed Their Hopes?**

There exist at least five things to nurture hope for the Hondurans: (1) The nourishment of Faith in the God of life. Honduran society is one of believers and they are accustomed to say often when faced with something bad "only God is with us"; (2) The nourishment given by the martyrs and the memory of their ancestors; (3) The nourishment given by communities organized into movements; (4) The nourishment given by the generosity and gratitude of the most humble people; (5) The nourishment given by happiness and fiestas. Even in the most anxious of situations, dance and smiles blossom.

# Yemen: the Worst Humanitarian Disaster

*Pedro Moya*

## Historical Antecedents

Yemen is one of the oldest cradles of civilization of the Near East. A prosperous land, "Eudaimon Arabia", or "Arabia Felix" (happy Arabia) of the texts of Ptolemy, it reached its maximum splendor as the Kingdom of Sheba, the one noted for its mysterious queen and her amorous relationship with the Jewish King Solomon. After successive civilizations that flourished protected by a lucrative trade in spices, the territory fell into the orbit of Islam under the control and influence of the Caliphates of Damascus and Baghdad. An emirate of the Zaid dynasty, a branch of Shiite Islam, was maintained as a separate kingdom, with temporary periods of submission to the Ottoman Empire and to the Saudi dynasty. A colonial presence arrived at the hands of the British who installed themselves in the South, in the area of Aden, in 1839.

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In the First World War, Yemen achieved its independence in 1918. After joining the Arab League and the UN, the last king was ousted in 1962. The Arab Republic of Yemen was established and was called North Yemen. Meanwhile, in the South, in the area around Aden, after years of violence and guerrilla attacks, the British colonial rule gave way in 1967 to the Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen. This was the first Arab state with a Marxist orientation and had the support of the Soviet Union. After several confrontations between the two States and the fall of the Soviet Union, the two republics advanced toward reunification. In 1990 they ended up being fused into one, what is today the Republic of Yemen.

## The Origins of the Conflict

### *The Yemeni "Arab Spring"*

In 2011, within the context of a whole series of revolts and protests which occurred throughout the Arab world (the Arab Spring), the Yemenis rebelled against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh with peaceful



demonstrations which were violently put down by the Government. The President saw himself forced to abandon power after having exercised it for 33 years (first as President of North Yemen and later as President of the Arab Republic of Yemen), amid accusations of creating a "kleptocracy", corruption and having a failed government.

In his removal from power, a large part was played by the Houthis, an armed rebel group from the North of the country and one of the principal political actors in the present conflict. The relationship of the Houthis with President Saleh has been a sort of roller-coaster. Sometimes as his ally and others as his enemy, they would end up by assassinating him years after his retirement after accusing him of treason.

### *A Failed Transition*

After the abrupt departure of Saleh, the vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi, assumed the Presidency at the end of 2011 with the goal of shining a light on a new era of political openness and of opening the process of transition to the whole country. Within the framework of a "National Conference of Dialog", he attempted to deal with all of the subjects which related to governance, territorial restructuring and reform of the State, as well as to give a response to the claims which arose from the popular protests.

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After two years of consultation, the Conference presented a plan for a federal structure that divided Yemen into six regions. However, it did not take into account the claims relative to the distribution of natural resources, the weight given to the commercial or agricultural regions or access to the ports. The projected reform received only a minimum of popular support, and in particular the firm opposition of the Houthis. For them, the change to a regime of regional autonomy meant a lesser participation in the natural wealth and at the same time deprived them of access to the sea which they considered essential.

The protest ended in insurrection and with the coup d'état in 2015 the Houthis took control of the Presidential Palace, they dissolved Parliament, and brought to an end the Hadi administration. They expelled him from the capital, Sanaa, forcing him and his ministers to seek refuge in the port city of Aden and afterwards to go into exile in Saudi Arabia.

## Civil War

It was then when, at the request of the deposed President Hadi, a Coalition of Arab States, headed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened with the goal of restoring again to power the government which was internationally recognized by the United Nations. This operation signaled the beginning of an open armed conflict against the Houthis through a campaign of air bombardments called Operation "Decisive Storm". Nevertheless, five years of military operations have not been enough to bend them.

The rebels strategically occupied new territory in their advances toward the South. They established their power in nine of the 22 provinces of Yemen. They came into the control of key elements like the port of Hodeida on the Red Sea through which 80% of the country's imports entered and which was the nerve center for the food supply of the country. Another bold stroke was its attack with drones in September, 2019, on the main oil storage facilities in Saudi Arabia. This led them to suspend production in them and production was reduced to half normal, nearly 6% of world production. There continues participation by Iran in the operation without it's being clear about the type of the participation. Indeed, its collaboration can be presumed given the magnitude of the participation.

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As if it were a small thing, and taking advantage of the weakness of the national Government and the failure of the federalist reforms that were tried during the transition, the separatist militia groups, united around the "Transition Council of the South", fed the dreams of secession. In their favor they could count on the support of the United Arab Emirates, a country which has played an ambiguous role in the crisis. On the one hand it was allied with the Government in its struggle against the Houthis, but at the same time it abetted the secessionist aspirations of the South against the Government. Finally, the Government, with the help of the Arab coalition, reached what was called the "Riyadh Accords" (November, 2019) by which the separatists were promised their integration into the national Government, halting temporarily the secessionist adventure.

Only months after the above-mentioned agreement, the situation became worse on all fronts. The separatists in the South charged ahead again by proclaiming "self-determination" in the zones that were under their control (April, 2020). The Arab coalition received a death blow due

to the divergent interests of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which controls, with the support of the separatist militias, the strategic port of Aden and the mythical island of Socotra. Also, the Houthis launched the greatest military escalation in two years (October, 2020) in the strategic city of Hodeida, putting at grave risk the fragile "Stockholm Agreement" from the end of 2018. We can conclude that after five years of war the situation is at a military stalemate and there are not any prospects of a negotiated settlement to end it.

## Who Is Who in the Conflict?

### *The Houthis*

A Zaidi emirate governed North Yemen under a system known as "imamate" during nearly 1000 years until 1962 when the monarchy fell. The heirs of this political and religious tradition ended up coming together in constituting a rebel group known as Ansar Allah (Party of God). The name of Houthis comes from that of its founder, Hussein Badr al Dim Huti, the leader of the first uprising in 2004. This was an attempt to recover the political weight which had been lost by the Northwest of the country and at the same time to protect the Zaidi religion and its cultural traditions that they considered to be threatened by the Sunni Islamists.

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Their origins are marked as a group of anti-Saudi resistance and their role became relevant in the protests of the Arab Spring which, in turn, gave rise to the events of the civil war which are described above. Its qualitative jump from being a political group making its own claims to an armed rebel group is a determinative factor in the development of the conflict.

From the beginning, they were able to count on the sympathy and support of Iran although Iran formally denied that. However, it would not be possible to understand the military arsenal or the financing of the rebel group without the participation of a great power like Iran.

### *International Coalition of Arab Countries*

This group was created by Saudi Arabia at the beginning of 2015 in order to fight the Houthis. This was at the request of the government of Yemen whose president, Hadi, had just been deposed by the Houthi

offensive on the capital, Sanaa. The objective is none other than to put back into power their Yemeni ally (already in the past Yemen had been linked to the Saudi monarchy), and to counter the influence of Iran in the region. This was done to prevent what had happened in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon where the Shiites had exercised their power illegitimately and converted their governments into accomplices of the Irani strategy.

The coalition can count on the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the support of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrein, Qatar and others to a lesser extent, all of them in the Sunni sphere. In the “Western” camp, the coalition is backed by the United States, which has lent important logistical support to their Saudi allies, as well as the United Kingdom and France, although with a lesser involvement.

### *The Separatists From the South*

Grouped primarily around what is called the “Transition Council of the South”, they have concentrated their goal on the holding of a referendum of self-determination for the old South Yemen. The failure of the federalist reforms which were attempted during the transition, gave wings to the separatist movement and their militias. This happened with the complicity of the Emirates who were looking to expand their geopolitical power in the region through the establishment of military and naval bases in the Horn of Africa and the control of the ports, the maritime routes and the nearby islands.

## **Some Keys to Understanding the Conflict**

### *The Strategic Factor*

Yemen, overlooking both the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, is a vital area for controlling the supply of hydrocarbons on a world scale, and in particular for the energy interests of the United States and Europe. Through its waters flow nearly four million barrels of oil a day.

### *A Failed Government*

The autocratic regime that was put in place by President Saleh during his 33 years in power was based on a clientelism of families, clans and tribes which Saleh used and divided in his alliances depending upon the interests that were in play. To that can be added the almost abso-



lute domination of his party, the "General Congress of the People", in Parliament and the other institutions. The economic bonanza of the decades of the 1980s and 90s based on the profits from oil allowed for a certain stability. But the subsequent confrontations with the Houthis and the revolts of the Arab Spring ended up in its demise.

A similar fate occurred to his successor and the current president in exile Hadi with the failed process of transition. Despite this, his government maintains international recognition and that of the United Nations.

### *The Fracturing of the Territory*

The fusion of the two Yemen's (North and South) that gave way to the new Republic resulted in being somewhat forced and asymmetrical. It was felt more like an absorption of the South by the North rather than a true fusion. The attempts made during the transition to balance out the situation resulted in failures and the breach between the territories of the two prior States has been hardened.

### *The Struggle For Regional Political Hegemony*

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Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Arab coalition, is the principal ally of the deposed President whom it seeks to put back into power. Iran, as the antagonistic power in the region, is the principal backer of the Houthi movement. Both of them are playing their cards in the region in one more episode in trying to lead the political hegemony of the entire Near East. Yemen is in large part the theater of operations where the more global interests of two confrontational geopolitical visions are aired.

As has occurred in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, both powers have given rein in different scenarios to what has been called "wars by proxy or delegation", relying upon their local "confessional groups" for operations on the ground. Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government share the same Sunni cause while Iran gives its support to the Houthi movement, both in the Shiite camp.

## *The Interests of the Great Powers*

Both the United States and Europe are pursuing goals based on "security": energy security and of the maritime routes through which flows the largest world traffic in oil, and also political security in facing the threat of jihadist terrorism. Given the weakness of the national Government, Yemen has become an enticing territory for the goals of radical Islamism. Al Qaeda installed one of its strategic bases in Yemen and has bathed the territory with terrorist attacks. The Islamic State tried to make Yemen one of the main "provinces" of its chimerical State. Al Qaeda continues to live while the Islamic State has been pulled into its current decline.

## *The "Religious" Factor*

The conflict has its roots in the religious rivalry between Shiites and Sunnis, with ancestral differences that come out of the year 632 with the internal struggles for the succession to the Prophet Mohammed. This was the beginning of a dispute between two branches of Islam that have been divided ever since. Sunni Islam is clearly in the majority in the Arab world, while Shiism is concentrated in Iran, with its tentacles of influence in the whole region and particularly in Iraq and Lebanon. In the case of Yemen, 47% of the population belongs to the Shia branch and 53% to the Sunni.

Nevertheless, the reality in Yemen has not been particularly virulent with regard to religion. According to some analysts, the Zaidi are the most moderate group of Shiite Islam, and in times past that included maintaining peaceful relations while living together with the local Sunnis. It has been in recent times, in the heat of feeling the marginalization of its community as compared to its past of centuries of Zaidi power, when they have seen themselves pulled into an attitude of maintaining their own identity and staking claims faced with what they consider to be a usurpation by the Sunni. It is good to remember that a "Zaidi Emirate" was actively in power until its fall in 1962 and that the constitution of the Republic carried with it a loss of power for the Zaidi and an increase in that of Salafist Sunnism both in the political parties and in the control of the mosques.

## A Humanitarian Catastrophe

According to the United Nations, the situation in Yemen constitutes the "worst humanitarian disaster" caused by humankind. Some numbers will help to understand that.

Nearly 80% of the 28 million Yemenis are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. 14 million persons suffer from food insecurity and 18 million do not have access to potable water. Critical severe malnutrition threatens the lives of some 400,000 children under the age of five. "Save the Children" has sounded the alarm about an infant malnutrition that is almost endemic which leaves 100,000 children under the age of five between life and death. Only half of the 3,500 health care facilities in the country are functioning, which means that 19 million people lack basic medical assistance. The war has forced three and a half million people to flee from their homes, of which two million continue to be displaced. Famine and cholera epidemics have caused havoc especially among the infant population, given the destruction of the sewage and health systems. Now it is feared that the coronavirus and other illnesses like "dengue" will complete the tragedy.

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The reconstruction of a State which has failed politically, has been economically devastated, has had its infrastructure destroyed and has seen a large part of its rich patrimonial culture ruined, will require massive aid from the international community. The figures are nevertheless very far from the contributions that the United Nations has sought from the Conference of Donor Nations. In 2019 of the \$2.6 billion pledged, barely half was disbursed. In 2020 the pledge has remained at \$1.35 billion of which only 24% has been received. In the words of Lisa Grande, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, "We are going to have to close our projects in 189 hospitals that the UN supports in the country, for lack of funds."

## Perspectives For the Future

The situation is far from getting back on track. Light cannot yet be discerned at the end of the tunnel. For that to happen, some preliminaries need to be accomplished.

- *A military de-escalation of the conflict* that gives way to silencing the guns. After five years of war, the armed solution is stalemated.



There is no clear winner, nor prospects that there ever will be. The growing perception of that exhaustion could serve as the stimulus for the search for other ways out of the conflict.

- The gradual implementation of "*measures to instill confidence*" (prisoner exchanges, armistices, etc.) that would reduce the tension between the parties and help to overcome the mutual distrust.
- Give form to the belief that the *political route*, based on a negotiation that culminates in the integration and participation of all the parties to the conflict, is the only solution. But the positions continue to be very far apart.
- The geopolitical tendencies in the Arab world and the chronic *rivalry* between Saudi Arabia and Iran, don't help the situation. The confirmation that the present paralysis does not bring advantages to either of the two powers could auger an openness to negotiations among the Yemenis, which will only be initiated with the good will of their respective patrons.

A personal note. In March of this year, I had occasion to participate in a meeting with the Yemeni community in Brussels, organized by UNESCO, about the projects in the works for the reconstruction of the country. The data, overwhelming, invited discouragement, but the contact with the human capital represented by some 150 Yemenis, a majority of them being young, gave me an unexpected surprise. If the task to be done is large, the enthusiasm transmitted by these citizens was even larger. They are enthusiastic to return to their country to participate in its reconstruction. May that be and may that be soon.

# Central African Republic: Violence in the Heart of the Continent

Ferran Puig

## Introduction

I work in the Central African Republic. In South Africa? No, in Central Africa. Ah, and where is that? The response seems so obvious, no? But I don't have enough fingers on my hands to count the number of times that I have had exactly that same dialog. The things that are not known!

Yes, in effect, although many people are surprised by it, the Central African Republic - or abbreviated RCA - is a country that actually exists and, as its name would imply, is found in the center of the great continent, or that is to say, Beafrika, the heart of Africa, which is how the central Africans call their country in their local national language, *sango*. It is a heart that is overwhelmingly green because the country forms part of the drainage basin of the Congo, the second lung of the planet. The jungle extends throughout the country, becoming less dense in the north on the frontier with Chad, where it takes on the smell of the Sahel, but still far from the Sahara.

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With a current population of around 5 million people, the country is classified next to last (188/189) on the 2019 Index of Human Development as elaborated by the United Nations, only ahead of Niger. It is the last in life expectancy at birth at 52.8 years. 75% of the population is below the poverty line. Some of the important cities in the country did have at one time an electrical grid that stopped functioning some time ago, a sure victim to bad maintenance, lack of investment, vandalism and looting.

According to the 2003 census, the principal religions of the Central African Republic are: Christianity (80.3%, of which 51.4% are various Protestant groups and 28.9% belong to the Catholic Church), Islam (10.1%) and animism (9.6%).



## A Conflict that Comes from Afar

The geographic-administrative nature of its name gives us some insight into its origin. The Central African Republic is a state which is the fruit of the French decolonization of the 1960s in west and central Africa. It is an artificial state, without a national identity, that grouped together the great diversity of ethnicities, religions and languages that inhabited the territory. It is the heir to the French territory of Ubangi-Chari. "the blank space on the map of Africa, the center of the continent, whose outlines no one was able to draw," as defined by Jean-Pierre Tuquoi (2017) in his book *Ubangi-Chari, the country that never existed*.

In its precolonial history, this immense and sparsely populated territory already was guarding some painful memories. Slavery was practiced for centuries, especially by the Arab sultanates of Ouaddai, Ndelé and Birao which were established in the north. These favored man hunting by obtaining "hunting licenses" in order to supply slaves to the markets in the Maghreb, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and even Turkey.

The Central African Republic obtained its independence on August 13, 1960. This period is characterized essentially by a succession of presidents who had obtained power through revolts and coups d'état. Among them there stands out the picturesque but bloody and cruel "Emperor" Bokassa I who ruled between 1966 and 1979. The parents of those who studied in ESO will undoubtedly remember the image of the self-described emperor with his cape made of ermine pelts (in the middle of the tropics), scepter and crown, in a false imitation of the coronation ceremony of Napoleon.

*Francoise Bozizé (2003-2013)*

If we make a jump in time, skipping over decades of instability and armed conflicts, we find ourselves at March 15, 2003. After a coup d'état Francoise Bozizé came to power, deposing Ange-Félix Patassé. During his rule there was a deepening of the ethnicization of the army and the administration. His ethnic group, the *gbaya*, and especially the members of his family, occupied all of the key posts. The corruption and the repression of the other ethnic groups was notable.

The country is sometimes called the Republic of Bangui. The reason is that since independence all of the resources, services, business, etc., has become concentrated always in the capital. The general neglect

of the provinces is notorious. It is enough to pass through some medium-sized cities in order to determine that the existing administrative offices (prefectures, hospitals, schools, etc.) date from the period previous to independence, with their typical rustic version of colonial architecture. The presidency of Bozizé did not contribute anything at all to altering this tendency. In fact, it did just the opposite.

It is in these regions of the remote north where, as the fruit of abandonment and isolation, there began to be organized armed militias. The population of these areas is majority Muslim and they maintain more economic and social links with their neighboring Chadians and Sudanese than with the rest of the country. Their claims are political and economic, not religious. The response of the state to these claims only through repression fed the support of the population for the militias and the enrolling of young men as combatants.

In August, 2012, the most important militias joined together and created the *seleka* (alliance in *sango*), under the leadership of Michel Djotodia. They also incorporated Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries who, since the termination of the conflict between Chad and the Sudan, had found themselves in what could be called "technical unemployment." The *seleka* advanced progressively in controlling the territory. In March, 2013, after capturing Bangui, it took total control of the country. Bozizé was overthrown and Michel Djotodia succeeded to the presidency of the State.

### *Michel Djotodia (2013-2014)*

One of the immediate effects of the arrival of the *seleka* to Bangui was the disappearance of the Central African Armed Forces, the FACA. From one day to the next, the national army was dissolved. A good number of its members were integrated into groups which were called *antibalaka*. These groups mostly had their origin in groups for self-defense, local in character, badly armed and scarcely organized, generally popping up as farmworker militias in order to protect themselves from the groups of shepherds of the *peul* ethnic group who arrive each year with their flocks during the time of moving to new pastures. The flocks of the nomads often spill over from the open spaces, going into fields and destroying crops. The incorporation of elements of the FACA with their arms augmented the capacity of these *antibalaka* groups, but it did not succeed in integrating them into a united militia with true operational capacity.



With the coming to power of President Michel Djotodia, the sekeleka militias dedicated themselves to the most complete predatory behavior in the capital and the large cities of the west: robberies of cars and motorcycles, kidnappings, extortions, etc., which were turned into cash. If indeed at the beginning they only fattened themselves on the Christian communities, they quickly perceived that the more important businessmen, mainly of the Muslim religion and concentrated in the PK5 neighborhood of Bangui, were the ones who were keeping greater resources. Therefore they, too, became victims of these abuses. The abuses reached to such a scale that the international community reacted and they pressured Michel Djotodia to put an end to the situation. In response to these pressures, Djotodia decided to dissolve the sekeleka and to attempt to impose order, but did not succeed at it. Tension and hate accumulated between the population against what were then called ex-sekeleka groups who were identified as Muslim militia.

27 The vengeance of the antibalaka groups came on December 5, 2013. Members of the old presidential guard of Bozizé along with former members of the FACA in the hands of certain antibalaka leaders managed to gather together a contingent of some one thousand individuals that attacked Bangui to eject the ex-sekeleka and to depose President Michel Djotodia. The butchery reached Dantesque proportions in the streets of the capital: bodies inside of burning tires, people hanging from the trees, bodies – or only the heads – thrown into wells to stop them from ever being used again. The French contingent deployed as the RCA, the Sangaris force, was not able to brake the unmitigated chaos. The population fled, seized by panic, and they took refuge in large buildings like parish churches, seminaries, mosques and the largest of them which is the Bangui airport itself. Four hundred thousand people abandoned their homes in a few days only in Bangui and a hundred thousand of them went to the airport, a space which was protected by the French troops.

In the days following the taking of the capital, in Bangui and in the west of the country there unfolded a manhunt with the objective of massacring the Muslim population which was considered responsible for all of the suffering caused by the sekeleka. A majority of them fled and took refuge in neighboring Cameroon while others entrenched themselves in certain territories that were changed into completely isolated ghettos, protected by local militia who were generally well armed. The largest of these was the neighborhood of PK5 in Bangui, located in the center of the city, defended by various self-defense groups who with



the passage of time would become an extortionist mafia of their own people.

The rise to power of the seleka and their subsequent fall constituted the coup de grace for the slow but inexorable destruction of the Central African state, submerging it in an unprecedented crisis that would last for a long time. As a matter of fact, never since its independence had the Central African Republic experienced a similar wave of collective violence. The pattern of uprisings and coups d'état with little or no bloodshed or of fights between armed groups was substituted by an atmosphere of civil war characterized by the total disappearance of the structures of the State, an economy of survival and an intercommunity conflict with religious connotations that has caused a de facto splitting of the country into two.

The images of the killings in Bangui went viral and drew the attention of the public throughout the world but only for a few days. They soon fell into oblivion. Once Michel Djotodia had been overthrown, the international community applied pressure for a national dialog that became a reality in January, 2014, with a transitional government under the presidency of Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui, who was given a mandate to organize democratic elections before the end of 2015.

### *Catherine Samba-Panza (2014-2015)*

When Catherine Samba-Panza came to power in the midst of the general weakening, the government controlled barely 20% of the territory, mainly the area around Bangui. Even in the middle of the capital, the Muslim neighborhood PK5 escaped from the area of control. Since the national armed forces had disappeared, that relative control was achieved essentially due to the French forces from Operation Sangaris. Beginning on April 10 of the same year of 2014, there were progressively added in contingents of the integrated multinational mission of the United Nations for the stabilization of Central Africa (MINUSCA) which was formed by some 12,000 persons between military and civilians. The military contingents of the different countries participating in the peace-keeping operations were deployed in the major cities of the country without it's resulting in greater control of more territory.

The greater part of the country remained under the control of a plethora of armed groups, divided between ex-seleka and antibalaka, that



learned to coexist with the presence of the Blue Helmets who were installed in their zones. The latter could not – or would not – stop the fighting between the different militias who held the civilian population as their ultimate victim. The confrontations would continue happening in the following years in all of the possible combinations: *antibalakas* against *antibalakas*, *selekas* against *antibalakas*, *selekas* against *selekas*. The lack of foreseeability was total and the reasons for these conflicts were most diverse: ethnic conflict, control of mines, simple incidents that degenerated into violence, thefts, extorsions and pillage.

Many cities and neighborhoods would eventually be totally abandoned by their inhabitants. They would go to live with welcoming families, in displacement camps beside the encampments of MINUSCA, or they would leave for nearby countries as refugees, especially to Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon. The number of displaced persons would continue to rise until it surpassed 1.2 million people, which meant that more than 20% of the population saw themselves as having to abandon their homes. Necessities became very large – access to water, latrines, food and housing – but neither would the funds to finance the humanitarian response be sufficient nor would the international agencies and NGOs have sufficient capacity to supply the aid on the scale that was required, focusing on covering only the most critical necessities.

As the time limit approached for the celebration of the election that was supposed to put an end to the transitional government, violence was unleashed again in the heart of Bangui at the end of September and once again at the end of October, 2015. The fighting between the Muslim militias from the PK5 neighborhood and the antibalaka from the neighborhoods that surrounded it caused a new flow of displaced people and the total destruction of those surrounding neighborhoods. PK5 was left surrounded by a ring of desolation which isolated even more the Muslim population of the capital, a barrier zone emptied of all its inhabitants in which the jungle began to recover its territory.

The elections which were called as a last resort for December 30 ran the serious risk of being invalidated. Many were the voices that questioned their appropriateness in a moment of such great insecurity, but an unexpected event brought about a total change in the paradigm. Pope Francis decided to continue with the visit to the Central African Republic that he had planned for November 29 and 30. The visit, which was strongly discouraged by the French forces responsible for his se-



curity, included a Mass in a crowded stadium and a visit to the central mosque in Bangui within the PK5 enclave. He was also to open at the cathedral of Bangui the Holy Door that was to be kept open for the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

The Pope's visit was a huge success and celebrated by all confessions and creeds. It brought with it an atmosphere of reconciliation that impregnated the whole electoral process, allowing for the two rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections (December 30, 2015 and February 14, 2016) to be held in total tranquility.

### *Faustin-Archange Touadera (2016- )*

Faustin-Archange Touadera, a university professor and former prime minister under Bozizé, was elected in the second round with 62.7% of the vote. In spite of small irregularities, the process was considered transparent and his victory was recognized by his opponents. Touadera took possession of the office on March 30, 2016 and there began a period of relative calm. This was broken in the month of October when the struggles between armed groups began again in the East and they again destabilized the country.

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After several attempts, of which there were no less than eight since 2012, on February 6, 2019 there was signed the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (APPR-RCA), also known as the Khartoum Agreement, between the Government of the RCA and 14 of the principal armed groups of the country, under the auspices of the African Union and with the support of the United Nations. The Central African civil society was left completely on the sidelines in this whole process. Behind the peace agreement was the influence of Russia which began to fill the void left by France after the withdrawal of the military in Operation Sangaris which took place in October, 2016.

The growing closeness between Russia and the Touadera Government became visible for the first time in 2017 after a delivery of Russian arms to the Central African army and the support of the famous Russian instructors, authorized by the Security Council of the United Nations and intended to reenforce the capacity of the Central African army. In reality these instructors were mercenaries of the famous Wagner Brigade, belonging to the Russian oligarch Evgey Prigogine, an ally of Vladimir Putin. Among other things, they formed the new Prae-



torian Guard of the President along with Rwandan members of the MINUSCA. There also appeared on the scene Valery Zakharov, the new security advisor of the Central African president and a former officer of Russian military intelligence. This Russian presence was not to the liking of France which would gradually be estranged from Touadera and from their old colony.

The armed groups continued their predatory practices even after the signing of the peace agreement. Their habitual practices are the imposition of *tolls* on the commercial routes, both on the passing trucks and on the poor farmers who come into the city on market days, the exploitation of the gold and diamond mines that are abundant in certain areas of the country, the *protection agreements* for conducting exploration of the wood resources, for businesses or for ranchers moving between pastures, and *fees for the administration of justice*. In spite of periods of relative calm, the fratricidal fighting among groups destroyed Birao in September, 2019, and Ndelé in March, 2020.

### *Present Day*

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The end of 2020 brought a new cycle of elections. The first round of the elections was scheduled for December 27. Among the notable candidates were the president who was then in power, Touadera, and the past president, Bozizé. The candidacy of the latter was rejected by the Constitutional Court since he was under an international detention order which had been issued by the Central African government in 2013. The consequences of this rejection were ill-fated.

Bozizé managed to weave alliances with some of the larger rebel groups (AB, MPC, 3R, FPRC, UPC), and on December 18, in what was known as the Kamba Kota accords, there was created the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC). We are dealing here with a union which was against nature which united both antibalaka groups and exseleka with the ultimate goal of stopping the elections and the more than probable reelection of president Touadera. The coalition started off taking over territory and it came close to the capital, Bangui. For that, they were able to count on the participation of mercenaries from Chad and the Sudan.

In spite of the situation of generalized conflict, the elections were held on the scheduled date thanks to the omnipresent support of the MINUSCA and the PNUD and under pressure from the international



community that did not accept a delay in the process. For its part, the CPC barred the opening of the polling stations in the areas under its control in order to delegitimize the whole process and then it accused Touadera of electoral fraud in collaboration with the MINUSCA. In the end, Touadera won the first round with 53.2% of the votes cast, but which represented a very small percentage of those who were registered to vote. For that reason, they undermined their own legitimacy. In spite of that, the international community supported without reservation the election of Touadera for the new term as the only option for the future of the country. France had no other option than to accept, for the moment, that the intrusive Slav would gain influence in what it considered her sphere of influence.

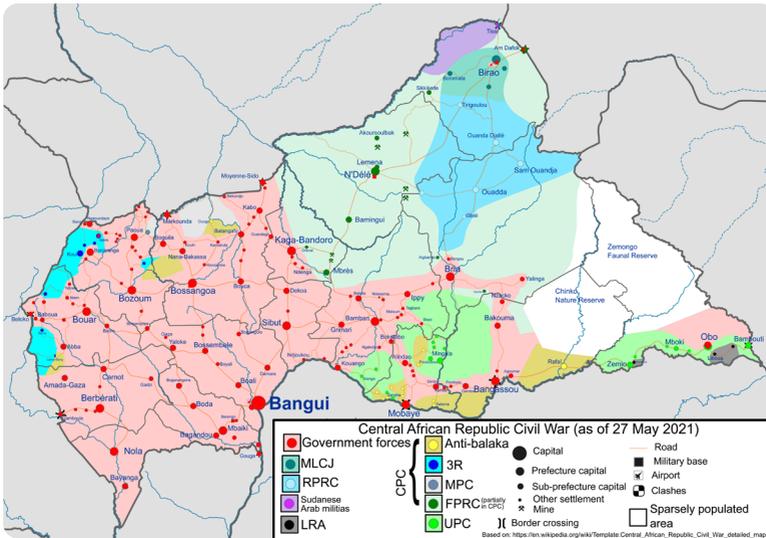
Faced with the advance of the forces of the CPC toward the capital, Touadera reached for Russian support which increased its presence in the territory and he also signed an agreement with Rwanda for the sending of a bilateral force which was not included within the framework of the peace mission of the MINUSCA. This betrayed a clear determination to take the offensive and the reconquest of the territory. On January 13, 2021, the coalition arrived in the outlying neighborhoods of Bangui, but the air superiority offered by the Russian helicopters and the collaboration of these forces with those of the FACA and the MINUSCA were able to repel them. In the following days, the government forces gained territory around the capital, but they could not provide for free passage of trucks on the MSR1, the only large commercial road that connects Bangui with the port of Duala in Cameroon. The cutting of this axis, a true umbilical cord for the supplying of the capital, caused an important rise in the prices for basic products and threatened to strangle the city.

With the passage of months, the Government with the help of the contingents from Russia and Rwanda has been recovering a good part of the territory, taking control of key cities like Biria, Kaga-Bandoro, Markounda among others, reopening the commercial axis with Cameroon and recovering some of the important mining areas (see the maps). After the initial bloody clashes between the two groups, the later dynamic in facing the advance of the government troops has been more of a progressive retreat by the rebel groups and their entrenchment in certain mining areas that have difficult access.

The current dynamic does not offer great opportunities for hope. The rhetoric used by the Government is one of war and the rejection of

any negotiation. The possibility of recovering the spirit of the peace accords seems remote and Central African civil society remains mute and divided before this situation. It is to be hoped that at some moment there will be established the front lines in dealing with the incapacity of one side or the other to take control of the country and the situation will become swampy again. An "it's still going on" that sinks the Central African Republic each day further into the well of underdevelopment and poverty.

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[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/War\\_in\\_Central\\_African\\_Republic.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/War_in_Central_African_Republic.svg)

## Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence

International Crisi Group

Report 230 / Africa / 21 September 2015

# Western Sahara: the Last Decolonization

*Albert Giralt*

Between the truth and a lie there are only four fingers: those that separate your eye from your ear. Because whatever you are told may not be true, but no one can deny what you have seen with your own eyes.

*Saharai Proverb*

## Short Introduction to the Conflict

In 1961, the United Nations created the Special Committee on Decolonization, or the Special Committee of the 24, with the objective of monitoring how Resolution 1514 of the General Assembly of the United Nations was being applied. The goal of the resolution was to encourage the process of decolonization of the non-autonomous territories that were still under the administration of colonial powers. One of these territories was that of Western Sahara which, at that time, was still a colonial territory under the administration of Spain.

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Western Sahara is a territory situated in the northwest of the African continent which borders Algeria on the east, the Atlantic Ocean on the west, Morocco on the north and Mauritania on the south. This territory became a colony of Spain in 1884 after the Berlin Conference in which the European states divided up the African colonies and defined their borders. In 1958, in order to avoid the process of decolonization, Spain declared Spanish Sahara to be a province. Despite that, the United Nations included Western Sahara in the list of non-autonomous territories and, therefore, it had to go through the process of decolonization. At that moment, Hassan II, the king of Morocco, tried to take advantage of the situation. Before the United Nations he called for the annexation of Western Sahara to his territory.

Years later, a Saharai independence movement began to be organized that was opposed as much to the Spanish domination as to the Moroccan pretensions to annexation. In 1969 there was born the Vanguard Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara, the immediate pre-

decessor of the Frente Polisario whose first congress was held on May 10, 1973. Today, the Frente Polisario is recognized as the only legitimate representative of the Saharai people by the United Nations.

On November 6, 1975, with the death of Franco drawing ever closer, in the face of international pressure for the decolonization of Western Sahara and the pretensions of annexation by Morocco and Mauritania, the Kingdom of Morocco began an invasion of Western Sahara with what is called the "Green March". Exactly a week later, November 14, 1975, the Franco government signed with Morocco and Mauritania the Tripartite Agreement of Madrid (lacking any sort of legal validity internationally) which ceded Western Sahara to these two countries. At that moment, war began between the Saharai army of the Frente Polisario and the Moroccan army in the north and the Mauritanian army in the south. This outbreak of war caused thousands of Saharais to flee into exile in southwest Algeria and they established there the refugee camps of Tinduf. It is estimated that some 175,000 Saharais have lived there in extremely difficult conditions for more than 40 years.

In February of 1976, in Bir-Lehlu, the Saharais proclaimed the Saharai Arab Democratic Republic (RASD) and they named El Uali Mustafa Sayed as their first president. In the present, RASD is recognized by more than 80 countries and is a member of the Arab League.

In August of 1979, RASD and Mauritania signed a peace agreement in Algier in which Mauritania came to recognize RASD and withdrew its troops from the war in Western Sahara. In November, 1979, the General Assembly of the United Nations reaffirmed the right of the Saharai people to self-determination. In the same resolution it deplored the gravity of the situation that the Saharai people were suffering as a consequence of the Moroccan occupation.

During the 1980s Morocco began the raising of six walls that today total more than 2,700 km in length, thus constructing the second longest wall in the world, and surrounding it with more than seven million antipersonnel mines. It divides Western Sahara in two.

After years of war, on September 6, 1991, the Frente Polisario and the Government of Morocco accepted the Peace Plan of the United Nations and signed a cease-fire. This included the holding of a referendum of self-determination for the Saharai people. At that moment there was created the MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Refer-

endum of Western Sahara), the only mission of the United Nations that does not have as part of its mandate the monitoring of the violation of human rights.

For years Morocco set up all kinds of roadblocks for the holding of the referendum. They blocked any agreement to adopt a common strategy for conducting the vote, colonizing in a blatant way Western Sahara so that they could try to "Moroccan-ize" the zone. They repressed any manifestation of Saharai identity.

The Saharai population thus has lived divided for decades. More than 172,000 Saharais live as refugees in the camps of Tinduf, in the harsh conditions of the Algerian desert and with a great dependence on humanitarian aid. Thousands live in the diaspora, many as expatriates or without even knowing their own country. Another part lives in occupied Western Sahara, suffering repression every day and violations of their rights on the part of the occupying Moroccans. There they wait for the international community to act to guarantee the holding of the referendum of self-determination of the Saharai people, the only way possible for a peaceful solution to the conflict.

## The Resistance of the Saharai People

The Saharai people are an example of struggle and nonviolent resistance throughout the years, from the signing of the cease fire in 1991 until the breach in the agreements on the part of Morocco in November, 2020. One of the most outstanding episodes is that of the [encampment of dignity, Gdeim Izik](#).

In October, 2010, a group of young Saharais began a peaceful protest on the outskirts of Al-Aaiun in the Occupied Territories of Western Sahara. In a few days it brought together tens of thousands of Saharais who set up their tents in the middle of the desert in what they called the encampment of Gdeim Izik.

The encampment of dignity began by calling for the ability of the Saharais to have access to their natural resources and for the end of the marginalization and state of precariousness in which they had lived for decades under the Moroccan occupation. After a month during which the encampment did not stop growing, Morocco, with the illegal occupation of Western Sahara, sent an army and the police to make an in-

tervention. They dismantled the encampment, using force with impunity and with complete brutality, giving way to one of the most violent episodes that occurred in the Saharai conflict.

The uprooting was brutal: burned tents, people wounded, detained, disappeared. The repression on the part of the Kingdom of Morocco led to the persecution and detention of hundreds of Saharais accused of participating in the protests, a legitimate right of all people.

Despite the imposing demonstration of force by the people and the example of nonviolent confrontation that was seen at Gdeim Izik, for more than 30 years the Saharai people tried to claim its fundamental rights, as, for example, the legitimate right of self-determination and to the exploitation of its resources. Meanwhile, they live with a constant infringement of their rights on the part of the Moroccan occupation forces who act with total impunity in the face of the passivity of the international community and of the United Nations.

Another example of this resistance of the Saharai civil society is the international campaign called "Western Sahara is not for Sale" which began in January, 2021, with more than 120 organizations from the Saharai civil society and who want to denounce the spoliation of the natural resources of Western Salara. This campaign was born as fruit of the "Sahara Rise" conference at the beginning of 2018 in which the Saharai civil society was organized to elaborate the strategy of non-violent confrontation of their people to put an end to the Moroccan occupation.

## **The Spoliation of Natural Resources**

During all of these years of illegal occupation, Morocco has also been carrying on an illegal spoliation of the natural resources of Western Sahara: fish, phosphates, agriculture. They have benefitted from this without a guilty conscience, violating international resolutions which prohibit exploitation of the resources of a territory without the consent of the population.

Western Sahara has some of the largest reserves of phosphates of the best quality in the world. In addition, in the waters of Sahara there can be found great banks of fish whose potential it is estimated could generate sufficient renewable energy to supply the whole region of the



Maghreb. The illegal spoliation by Morocco and the benefits it draws together with great transnational enterprises contribute to prolong the time of the conflict in Sahara and the suffering of the people.

Benefits are drawn from this trade by businesses in Spain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States, among others, in connivance with the Kingdom of Morocco and its economic and political elites. This is done counter to humanitarian rights as well as several international resolutions that recognize the right of the Saharai people to self-determination and sovereignty over their own resources.

In 2008 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 63/102 which recognizes that the natural resources of non-autonomous territories are the patrimony of their people, including the indigenous population. It points out that any activity which is oriented to exploiting the resources of the said territories should be done with the previous consent of the population and guaranteeing their humanitarian rights.

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Paradoxically, the member states of the European Union, guided by the norms of international law and the resolutions of the UN, do not formally recognize the sovereignty of Morocco over the territory in any document, nor its jurisdiction over the Occupied Territories nor the Saharai territorial waters. Nevertheless, for decades the agreements between the EU and Morocco include the exploitation of the natural resources of Western Sahara.

One of the routes used by Morocco to export the resources of Western Sahara is through the area of Guerguerat which is situated in the south of Western Sahara and near the border with Mauritania. This is a strategic territory where the Moroccan occupation forces have maintained an open illegal breach for years. Through here passes the transport of goods that are the result of the spoliation of Saharai natural resources, violating international covenants and generating millions of dollars in earnings in an illegal way.

## **Breaking of the Cease-Fire and Increase in Repression**

In October, 2020, a group of Saharai civilians began a nonviolent protest in the illegal breach of Guerguerat. They set up a camp and raised Saharai flags in front of this border crossing, cutting off the traffic of

goods that usually crossed this area. They demanded its closure and called on the MINURSO to comply with its mandate and to organize a legitimate referendum for the self-determination of the Saharai people.

On the morning of November 13, the Kingdom of Morocco crossed the illegal opening at Guerguerat in order to dislodge the Saharai people who were protesting there, breaking all of the peace agreements that they had accepted. Faced with this situation, the Frente Polisario intervened in order to protect the civilians from the Moroccan aggressions. Meanwhile, the Moroccans tried to open another gate in the wall of shame to be able to continue the spoliation of resources of Western Sahara. The Frente Polisario responded to the attack with a military maneuver.

All of this led to the government of the RASD declaring a rupture of the cease-fire. That initiated a military escalation in Western Sahara that resulted in a war after a cease-fire of 29 years.

Since the rupture of the cease-fire, the Moroccan occupation forces increased their military and police deployment in different cities of occupied Western Sahara such as El-Aaiun, Boujador and Dajia. The arbitrary detentions, as well as aggressions, tortures, house searches, isolation and home stake outs, and the control of movement have become the daily routine in the Occupied Territories, violating the human rights and the international humanitarian rights of the Saharais who live there.

During all this time Morocco has kept the territory closed and barred visits by international human rights organizations, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, NGOs, independent jurists and communications media, who have tried to document the situation that is being lived in occupied Western Sahara and to be witnesses to it.

Local communications media, like Equipe Medie, inform about the brutal systematic repression on the part of the Moroccan police against Saharai civilians, activists and protestors in the different occupied cities.

In only the first months of 2021 dozens of Saharai activists have suffered and continue to suffer the repression of the Moroccan occupiers.



The politician and ex-prisoner Ghali Bouhala was detained in the Occupied Territories, his home was searched and the mobile telephones of all of his family were stolen. Agents of the Moroccan police kidnapped the Saharai activist Mohamed Nafaa Boutasoufra when he was walking through the streets of occupied El-Aaiun. After having disappeared for several days, on February 15 a Moroccan court sentenced both of the activists to prison, accusing them falsely of the crime of drug possession, according to information by Equipe Medie.

Mohamed Lamin Haddi was sentenced to 25 years in prison for the nonviolent protest at Gdiem Izik. He has been in prison for ten years, three of them in isolation. He has been on an indefinite hunger strike since January in order to protest the abuses, the aggressions and the hard conditions of his incarceration. He cannot receive visits by his family and the condition of his health is not known. The last information about his case states that he is being fed by force and that he is in a state of extreme weakness.

The activist Sultana Khaya has been under illegal house arrest since November. Her house is surrounded by Moroccan police. Sultana and her sister have been the subject of physical aggression and sexual violence in their home, presumably by members of the occupying forces. For her part, the defender of human rights and member of the ISACOM (Saharai Petition against the Moroccan Occupation) has been under house arrest since May and lives closely guarded by Moroccan police. She finds herself totally isolated, without electricity or any contact with the outside.

To these examples has to be added the attack on the investigator, activist and defender of human rights and of natural resources Lahcen Dalil. He was kidnapped, tortured and abandoned in the desert on May 10 by the Moroccan police. On the same day, the president of CODESA, Babouzaid Mohamed Saeed, and the activists Khalid Boufraywa and Salek Babir, who were at the home of Sultana Khaya monitoring the attacks and the systematic repression against her and her family, were detained, tortured, handcuffed and abandoned also in the open desert 120 km north of the city of Boujador by the occupation forces.



## And Now ... What?

Arriving at this point, does the conflict in Western Sahara have any possible solution? Are there glimmers of hope in the current situation? Well, it depends, basically, on the will of the United Nations and of its member countries.

It is indubitable that the occupation of Western Sahara by the Kingdom of Morocco and the abandonment by the government of Spain are completely illegal. So, therefore, the only possible solution is to go back to the beginning: finalize the process of decolonization of Western Sahara through a referendum of self-determination with which the Saharai people can decide their own future.

Unfortunately, and as has happened in many places, the economic interests behind the exploitation of resources which the Kingdom of Morocco is carrying out in Western Sahara lead one to think that we will not obtain this solution any time in the near future. But, if there ever were a people who were convinced of the truth of their struggle, it would be the Saharui people. And it would not be possible to bury this for as many generations of Saharauis as might not be able to return to their home country.

# Myanmar. From the Golden Land of Dreams to a Theatre of Churning Nightmares

(An urgent update after the coup on 1st Feb 2021: *This essay was initially written in December, 2020, soon after election results. The democratic leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had won a landslide. People were waiting for the swearing-in of new leaders. Sadly on the day of convening the new Parliament, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the parliament members were arrested on the early hours of 1st Feb 2021. Army inflicted a shocking coup. That heinous act is resisted till today by the people of Myanmar at a huge cost to life and livelihood. The brutality in the streets shocks the world which is fed with the harrowing scenes through the social media. The junta's cruel response has provoked a global condemnation. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is incarcerated in an unknown place, charged with abominable crimes and denied due process of law. The continued violence shocks the world, creating anxieties of a 'failed state' in South East Asia, upsetting the stability of the neighbors. The democratic backslide is not only a nightmare to Myanmar but a threat to the political and economic and social stability of the region. Peace is possible provided regional powers like China, India, ASEAN and the UN proactively involve in resolving this conflict. The region can harvest a huge peace dividend when Myanmar returns to peace and democracy. This essay, left in its original format, enumerates the various roadblocks of history which gain a new urgency after the coup*)

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## Introduction

The story of Myanmar needs to be told – as a warning story – to a world fast slipping into illiberal democracies infected with demagogic populism and confrontational nationalism. Myanmar story is the story of resistance of the people against one of the most suffocating military totalitarian rule. After seven decades of conflict, displacement and deaths, Myanmar is on course to 'disciplined democracy.' Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has recently won a landslide victory in the elections. Despite the West's apprehension about the once admired democracy idol, she holds in her fragile hands and shoulders the trust and hopes of millions of Myanmar people. ( see the introduction).



Myanmar is celebrated in history as the 'Golden Land'. The spiritual world lauds Myanmar as the homeland of the pristine Theravada Buddhism. Two of the modern western passions, Vipassana retreat and mindfulness come from this land. A land of undoubted human and natural resource Myanmar story is the story of bad karma of endless wars, coups and displacement of millions.

The country was once hailed as the 'Shangri la' – the Theravada Buddhist country where 500,000 monks live an uncompromising ascetic life. This is also a country of scintillating beauty, three majestic rivers dancing merrily across the land, feeding millions. The population is a riotous canvass of 8 major colorful ethnic tribes and 135 sub tribes.

Situated at a geostrategic vantage point between fast developing economies, India and China, Myanmar is surrounded by 40 percent of the world population. Resources abound – above the ground and below the ground : Gold, Jade, precious metals, gas and oil. Treasures such as rubies, sapphires, pearls, and jade are hidden in her bosom. Myanmar is the valley of rubies. Rubies are the biggest earner; 90% of the world's rubies come from the country, whose red stones are prized for their purity and hue. 50% of all the world's 'wooden Gold' teak is in Myanmar.

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These resources proved to be the root of the long running 'resource conflict' between the center and the periphery. Center is where the the majority 70 percent Bamar ethnic group lives and rules the country. The periphery is where non Bamar minority ethnic nationalities live. They are less than 20 percent of the population, but live in 40 percent of the land mass and their lands hold 80 percent of the priceless Jade, gold and rubies. Conflicts are churning despite brief interludes of 'cease fire' and 'peace conferences.'

Myanmar is a country waging war against itself at three fronts : culture, resources and identity. The most critical axis of socio-political conflict since Burma's independence has been center-periphery struggles between the central government, dominated by the majority-ethnic Bamar, and ethnic-minority insurgencies located in Burma's borderlands. (Jones 2014). A classical center-periphery conflict.

The shopping list of hatred and death includes millions made refugees and IDPs, thousands killed and buried in unknown graves. (International Crisis Group 2020) Ethnic people have faced issues such as forced

relocation, underdevelopment in areas in which they reside, and high levels of poverty.

During the past decade, this plight has gathered a new intensity, accentuating a Buddhist-Muslim divide and resulting in one of the greatest Rohingya refugee crises in the modern world. (International Crisis Group 2020). In October 2017, there were an estimated 800,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. (UNHCR Aug2020). UNHCR referred to the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in north west Rakhine State as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”:<sup>1</sup>

## Conflict Cleavages

A variety of cleavages have led to tensions and confrontations within this state that affect its capacity to create national unity and the equitable sharing of the fruits of development, should that opportunity arise.

The cleavages and tensions within contemporary Myanmar may be conceptualized as follows:

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- Between Burman nationalism and a relatively new and diverse ethnic nationalism, which is a component of center-periphery issues and relates to the issue of national unity;
- Between civil and military sectors of the society;
- Between globalization and nationalism;
- Between centralism and pluralism;
- Between orthodoxy and competing views of the role of state and society;
- Among religious groups;
- New geo-political, international rivalries that affect the internal attitudes of those in authority.<sup>2</sup>

## Scope of this Essay

This brief Essay on Myanmar, will deal with the root causes of conflicts: the contested theory of internal colonization by powerful local elites in the decolonization era, the mutilating effects of exclusionary and essentialist nation building narratives, institutionalizing military intrusion into democratic polity, manipulation of the national Constitutional process, embedding discrimination, the ethnic brewing of conflicts,

1 Human Rights Watch, Burma: Discriminatory Laws Could Stoke Communal Tensions (New York: HRW, 23 August, 2015)

2 [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s\\_problems.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s_problems.htm)



resource curse, corrosive illicit economy fermenting conflicts and finally the rise of religious extremism, the collusion of ethno nationalistic elites and religious elites and their use of ontological anxieties in creating scapegoats. International actors too contribute to this: Xenophobia and Islamophobia, Myanmar is full of them. The world knows Myanmar more by the treatment of Rohingya Muslims.

The study will not end in pessimism. The longest night of silent tears, ends in a dawn. Myanmar survived five decades of military junta dictatorship. The painful transition from totalitarianism is marked by two elections. The people have voted overwhelmingly for democracy: the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi has won in a landslide in the recent elections and she will start her second term from January 2021. The people have rejected the nationalistic extremists, the military supported party. Even the non Bamar ethnic people have voted to Aung San Suu Kyi showing their exhaustion with war and looking for a nation built on inclusiveness, justice, peace and prosperity for all. We will end welcoming the streaks of hope for a new Myanmar.

## Nation Building – Embedding Conflict in the Conception of the Nation

### *Festering Wounds of Decolonization and Binary Fundamentalism*

Myanmar represents the post-colonial failures in microcosm : ethnic conflict, political impasse, militarization, economic neglect and the marginalization of local peoples. (Smith Dec 2019). The nation is yet to settle down to decide on its very name Burma vs Myanmar. The seeds of discord were sowed by the British colonizers, dividing the people with a lethal binary : Bamar and Non Bamar. (Greaves 2007). One with a value, another with a negatively linked value of nothing.

British rule in Burma lasted from 1824 to 1948. Colonization thrived on the toxic theory of binary formation. There was always a "non" other. *Bamar and NON Bamar ethnic tribes*, through a process of 'diluting and devaluing' a people's identity, providing a potential for future conflicts. Colonial supremacy, as *Sium, Desai & Ritskes*, argue, perfected binary configuration as the subtle tool of exploitation :

It is important to consider the process and logics of colonial modernity and white supremacy, the way in which Europeans defined and classified

people – as human and non-human – and then used this as a basis to conquer land and subjugate populations through enslaving, indenturing in labour and warring

(A. Sium, C. Desai & E. Ritskes 2012)

What relevance is this argument to Myanmar? As Paulo Freire argued in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the oppressed and dominated people internalized the values of the oppressor. In the post independent Myanmar, the majoritarian Bamar nationalists, in the decolonization process, not only appropriated the binary formula, but even adopted colonial ownership laws in the appropriation of the traditional lands and resources of the non Bamar ethnic people. This privileging of the Bamar community and the state ownership of the vast natural resources has been contested violently by the other ethnic nationalities.

This has injected a controversial concept of 'internal colonization'. Chavez defines : "The term internal colonialism seeks to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people." (Chaves December 2011)<sup>3</sup>. Historical struggles such the Indians and settlers in Americas, the English and the Asians, have had much to do with claims to homeland to indigenous resources and culture. (Chaves December 2011). In Myanmar, the way the non Bamar ethnic groups were treated was in a colonial mentality.

3 [https://scholar.smu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=hum\\_sci\\_history\\_research](https://scholar.smu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=hum_sci_history_research)

Sai Latt, an ethnic non- Bamar scholar on conflicts, writes that internal colonization is the core problem of Myanmar conflicts.

"The political pathology of Burma, if I may use the rather suspicious biopolitical term, is a process of internal colonization led by the Burmese ruling class. Widespread assumptions about the causes of ethnic conflict such as the lack of a "genuine" federalism, self-determination, democracy and human rights are only symptoms. Without addressing internal colonialism, all attempts at stabilizing the country are bound to fail."<sup>4</sup> (Latt 2013)

### *Exclusionary and Essentialist Nation Building Narrative*

Even before Independence Bamar nationalist movements like the Dobama Asiayone ( We the Bamar) began propagating quantifiers of "belonging" to the nation of Burma : to be a "dobama" (Burmese) was to be both Buddhist and Bamar, an identity that is essentialist that excluded



minorities on both ethnic and religious grounds. (Clinic 2020). As the Independence came in 1948 Myanmar nation building was predicated on the sharing of homogenous attributes, in this case the Bamar ethnicity and Buddhist religion. Chinese, Indians, Muslims were expelled despite generations of living in Burma. Subsequent internal wars would force millions to leave.

4. <https://www.newmandala.org/colonialism-and-ethnic-conflict-in-burma>

The legitimacy of the post independent central state, dominated either by military junta or the civilian government was violently contested by the non Bamar and Non Buddhist minorities for the last seven decades. (ICG 2017) This aggrieved sense of victimization felt by non Bamar, non – Buddhists is accentuated by the absence of any serious attempt to reframe the essentialist and exclusionary narrative surrounding race and identity. In the absence of responses to the minority ethnic grievances, political liberalization has led to strengthened ethnonationalism. (ICG 2017)

### *Military Intrusion: State Deficiency and State Inefficiency*

The Bamar dominated military -Tatmadaw- effected coups and ruled for five decades with ruthless coercion. The continuum of peace building, state building and nation building was mutilated since the army intruded. From the time civilian government came through in 2010, the military continues to wield power from shadows. The armed forces have morphed into an unaccountable "state within the state". Peace became a distant dream.

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Its leadership continues to insist that multifaceted threats to the "state security" and "national security" of the country still exist. (Renaud Egreteau 2018) Threats of "ethnic uprising" and the need to prevent the "disintegration of the union" are utilized by the military to justify its "institutionalizing intrusion into the civilian government." Three significant ministries in the Union cabinet remain under the sole authority of the armed forces (Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs) and a quarter of all Parliamentary seats are reserved for men in uniform, granting them veto power over any Constitutional changes. This contributes towards state deficiency and state inefficiency and impacts the civilian government's peace efforts.

The military junta was never admired by the Bamar people. But by a subtle maneuvering in image building, especially after political liberalization, the military has gained admiration by the majoritarian bamar



group. The Rohingya Muslim issue unites most of the Myanmar citizens. The military consolidated through a clever 'scapegoating' of the Rohingya Muslims and attracting the admiration of the majoritarian Barmars. Extremist monks joined the fray. Despite western criticism, Aung San Suu Kyi, ended up defending the army in the International Court of Justice. (ICJ). Western support has faltered in response to the 2017 crisis in Rakhine State, where the military's actions have emboldened its popular support and brought to the fore the ethno-nationalism that has long defined Myanmar's polity. Army's hidden political agenda and economic interests are major obstacles a true democratic state.

### *Illicit Economy : the Resource Curse, International Drug Hub, Extract Industries*

The country is endowed with oil, natural gas, high value timber, minerals, hydropower potential, and gemstones. Much of these natural resources are situated in the conflict-prone borderlands or off-shore. (Witness 2015). The resource rich border lands are haven for Warlords and drug barons. Kachin land in the north is rich with Jade which brings billions every year. According to a report released by Global Witness in 2015 the jade industry is controlled by "old junta military elite, US-sanctioned drug lords and crony companies" while "very few revenues reach the people of Kachin State or the population of Myanmar as a whole". Highlighting this stark example, Global Witness estimated that total jade production could have amounted to as much as \$31 billion in 2014, while just 3% of that value was officially declared. The illicit economy is greater than the national economy. A rough estimate puts around 69 billion US dollars in illicit economy.

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### *Drug Trade, Extract Industry*

Myanmar is the world's second largest producer of opium after Afghanistan, producing some 25% of the world's opium, and forms part of the Golden Triangle. The border is the convergence of militarization, (Aung Thwin and Aung Thwin 2013) According to Global Witness, associated parties earned a total of \$122.8bn from 2005 to 2015.<sup>5</sup> Billions are blundered while the country languishes at the bottom of world ranking as the least developed country.

Military-owned companies and holding groups such as Myanmar Economic Corporation are heavily invested in the extractive sector. Given that mining sites are often located in areas affected by conflict

<sup>5</sup> Myanmar's holds a diverse mix of mineral resources



between the Tatmadaw and non-state actors, the military has vested interests in maintaining control in such areas. This does have significant implications for the peace process.<sup>6</sup> The military, in its efforts to quell the border rebellions, co-opted their enemies through 'ceasefire capitalism' – allowing open looting of resources by armed groups, impoverishing the local people.

### *Citizenship Laws and Marginalization of Groups Like the Rohingya Population*

The 1948 citizenship law specified that, to count as indigenous, a group must have made its permanent home in Myanmar prior to 1823 (the year before the first Anglo-Burmese War started). Nearly a million Rohingya Muslims are stateless. The rise of xenophobic populism in the West, which has a significant Islamophobic element, has played well into the hands of Myanmar's "Buddhist nationalists", lending credibility and justification to their arguments and narratives.

## **Towards Building a Future of Hope**

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### *Democratic Spring*

Aung San Suu Kyi has emerged as the great hope of Myanmar people. Her social asset has increased through her commitment to democracy. The Rohingya issue and her defense of the army in the International court of Justice remains a great stain to her, once a great favorite of the West. But that act has solidified her support among the majority Bamar. The elections were a clear endorsement of her policies. Despite the Military's naked attempt to disrupt the elections, the Myanmar people overwhelmingly voted for Aung San Suu Kyi. Surprisingly she also got huge mandate from the peripheral non-bamar ethnic people, who preferred her over their own quarrelling ethnic parties and armed groups.

She has huge social capital. The mandate is clear: Initiate reconciliation, build a nation of peace and prosperity. She has already started that journey. She is planning to have an all-party coalition of nation building. This is the now or never moment for the septuagenarian leader to building trust with the country's minority ethnic groups.

6 Oye, Mari and Thet Aung Lynn. 2014. [Natural Resources and Subnational Governments in Myanmar Key Considerations for Wealth Sharing](#). Yangon: The Asia Foundation, International Growth Centre, and Myanmar Development Research Institute – Centre for Economic and Social Development.

### *Blunting the Intrusion of the Army*

The institutionalized presence of the army in the legislature and holding three important ministries has proved to be a debilitating punch in democratic transition. The 'moral power of her empty hands' has already dealt a blow to the army, through her actions against the army cronies and extremist monks. She needs to remedy state fragility through her efforts at controlling the army and sending it back to the barracks. This looks like a utopia, but Myanmar is turning around.

### *Moving Away From Exclusionary and Essentialist Nation Building*

Bamar elite need to challenge the exclusionary and essentialist process of nation building which proved to be violently contested by non Bamar nationalities. General Aung San, the father of the nation and the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, set in motion a comprehensive nation building strategy through Panglong Peace conferences. His daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi has continued this process. She has shown sagacity in inviting the non Bamar groups to be equal partners in the new government.

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### *Towards a Political and Economic Federalism*

Natural resources have been leveraged to incentivize peace rather than conflict. In Myanmar, the majoritarian center and the minority periphery have competing demands with regards to land and natural resources: Ethnic Armed Organisations advocate for ethnic self-determination and subnational control over rights to, revenue from, and the responsibilities for the management of natural resources, while the Army Tatmadaw tries to maintain a centralized unitary state system. The government of Aung San Suu Kyi needs to implement economic federalism, ensuring the present armed ethnic militias and international mafia removed from the illicit economy. The role of Chinese and Thailand governments is vital.

### *Amending the Constitution to Uphold Human Rights and Citizenship Rights*

The first victim of the Military imposed 2008 constitution is : Aung San Suu Kyi. The exclusionary nature of the constitution has barred her from holding official posts, though she is hugely popular and de facto leader. She termed the exclusionary clause as : unfair, unjust and undem-



ocratic. She must also accept that nearly a million Rohingya Muslims have been disenfranchised by this undemocratic law. Statelessness is a policy intervention by the military junta. It is heartening to see that Aung San Suu Kyi's party has included two Muslims candidates in the recent elections changing the perception of the this beleaguered minority. The citizenship Act of 1982 remains one of the most unjust citizenship documents. Hope she can work on this removing this injustice.

These are major challenges. But history beckons the leader, who is loved and admired by all. The army has lost much ground in its efforts to sideline her from the public. With a landslide presence in the parliament, the call of history has arrived. Optimism abounds in the streets. Hope this is not another false start to the Golden land that had too many night mares. The people of Myanmar deserve a new dawn of hope. (Original essay submitted on January 5th, 2021)



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