THIRD WORLD

RESURGENCE

ISSUE No. 355 e-ISSN 2948-4766 www.twn.my

The Iraq war 20 years on

A nation devastated, another scarred

Third World
RESURGENCE
www.twn.my
No 355   2023/2   e-ISSN 2948-4766

Sgt. Igor Paustovski

Twenty years after the United States' invasion of Iraq in March 2003, its ruinous legacy still persists. 16

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE is published quarterly by the Third World Network, an independent non-profit international research and advocacy organisation involved in bringing about a greater articulation of the needs, aspirations and rights of the peoples in the South and in promoting just, equitable and ecological development.

Published by Third World Network Berhad (198701004592 (163262-P)), 131 Jalan Macalister, 10400 Penang, Malaysia
Tel: 60-4-2266728 Fax: 60-4-2264505
Email: twn@twnetwork.org
Website: www.twn.my

Views expressed in these pages do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Third World Network.

Cover design: Lim Jee Yuan
Cover photos: Ragesoss (CC BY-SA 3.0); SSgt Cherie A. Thurlby, USAF (CC BY 2.0)

Editor: Lean Ka-Min
Managing Editor: Chee Yoke Ling
Staff: Linda Ooi (Design), Lim Jee Yuan (Art Consultant)

T. Rajamoorthy

(1943-2023)

IT is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of T. Rajamoorthy, a long-time and well-loved member of the Third World Network family. Raja breathed his last in the early hours of 24 March after suffering a heart attack. He was 79.

Raja, who was a senior lawyer, variously served as legal advisor and publications advisor of TWN, overseeing our publishing operations. Among the stable of publications, the one with which he was most intimately associated is *Third World Resurgence*.

Raja came on board as an editor of *TWR* in 1993 and, in his three decades at the editorial desk, practically lived and breathed the magazine. He would diligently source for articles from contributors and other publications, always making sure to maintain a balance of coverage among the different regions of the South and among the various sections of the magazine, from ecology, economics and health to world affairs and human rights. And not forgetting, of course, the poems that were featured on the back page of each issue – for which he would draw on the substantial collection of poetry volumes lining his creaky bookshelves. His legal training certainly also came in handy to ensure that, while championing the cause of the developing world, nothing defamatory or libellous appeared in the pages of *TWR* or other TWN publications!

Little known to many was Raja's love of music, and his collection always brought him joy, comfort and peace.

It is testament to his passion and endeavour that, despite experiencing health complications over the past few months, Raja was still fretting over the choice of cover stories for *TWR* – committed to the last. He will be missed.

'IN the early hours past the Ides of March a little-known figure passed on. Known for his self-effacing humility, Rajamoorthy was no more. His cutting analysis of world affairs, grounded in scrupulously well-researched historical antecedents – left now to be reminisced only. Stored in memory.

'From our early London student days of the 60s till the last occasion on 12 March, he was always there as a trusted and warm friend.... This legend of a man, who for past decades guided the Third World through his carefully scrutinised articles in *Third World Resurgence* – which he edited till the end. Railing against injustices, tyrannical hegemony. And pushing relentlessly the frontiers for progressive thought – at all stages and levels....

'Goodbye, my dear Raja. In our hearts, in our minds: You will always be cherished.' – ***Gurdial Singh Nijar****, Third World Network board member, and president of the National Human Rights Society (Hakam) of Malaysia*

'A PROLIFIC writer and editor throughout his career, he helped to shape the global discourse on trade policy, human rights and climate change.... [H]is soft-spokenness and gentlemanly exterior belied a deeper steadfastness in championing social justice and fighting for the rights of the poor and downtrodden. His glowing legacy will undoubtedly inspire other journalists and activists around the world to carry on the struggle for a more just world.

'Aliran and the rest of the civil society movement mourns the loss of this gentle, caring activist of the South. Rest well, dear Rajamoorthy.' – ***Anil Netto****, president of Aliran, a reform movement in Malaysia promoting justice, freedom and solidarity*

'RAJA was such a beautiful person, a committed activist, insightful journalist and such a good friend.' – ***Roberto Bissio****, coordinator of Social Watch, an international network of civil society organisations reporting on how governments meet international commitments*

Tragedy in the Omo Valley

Dam and sugar plantation projects have visited hunger, disease and misery upon Indigenous communities in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley, as documented in a report by the *Oakland Institute* extracted below.

THE Omo Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a popular tourist attraction. People from around the world travel to experience what the government of Ethiopia advertises as 'one of the only places in the world where you can still find Indigenous people that haven't been influenced by the outside world ... and who all staunchly keep to their unique traditional costumes, customs, and beliefs'. The extremely dire conditions faced by the Kwegu, Bodi and Mursi, however, remain overlooked.

Despite the urgent need for humanitarian assistance, the government and relief agencies have so far failed to respond to calls for help. World Vision distributed bags of wheat in November 2022, but this aid is far from sufficient to cover the need and it is unclear if it will continue.

Tackling the crisis in the Lower Omo Valley requires immediate and sustained humanitarian assistance, along with decisive government action to address its root causes – largely tied to the devastating impact of the so-called 'development' projects in the region.

Growing hunger: The Gibe III Dam and sugar plantations

The Lower Omo Valley is home to numerous Indigenous groups – predominantly pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and flood-retreat cultivators. Their identity, culture and livelihoods are intimately linked with the plains and snaking Omo River – relying significantly on its annual flood for the cultivation of crops, fishing and grazing of cattle.

In 2006, the government, then led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), embarked on the construction of the Gibe III Dam to increase Ethiopia's energy potential and establish large-scale irrigated plantations, with the goal to 'transform' the region. In 2011, it initiated the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP), comprised of a massive sugarcane plantation and five associated factories, located downstream from the dam.

A Mursi child suffering from severe malnutrition at the Hana Health Centre, October 2022. *Source: Oakland Institute, 'Dam and Sugar Plantations Yield Starvation and Death in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley'.*

Since inception, the Gibe III Dam and KSDP have severely deteriorated the livelihoods of Indigenous communities in the region – wiping out livestock, driving mass displacement and decimating local communities' ability to make a living – leading to widespread hunger. For years, the Oakland Institute has raised the alarm about this impact but no action appears to have been taken to mitigate the consequences of projects that were supposed to bring development.

One of the most severe consequences of the Gibe III Dam – completed in 2015 – is the loss of the annual flood of the Omo River. For centuries, this flood has been at the core of food production for Indigenous communities and a key component of their economies. Since the dam started generating power in 2015, the annual flood has not occurred. Local communities are increasingly dependent on the fickle rains for bush cultivation and the sale of their cattle to buy grain. Locals have been forced to resettle and abandon practices like herding cattle that were essential to their livelihoods.

Devastated by 'development' projects

Seven years after the completion of the dam and 11 years since the first plantations were established, the harsh reality of hunger and disease on the ground confirms their disastrous long-term impacts on the region, threatening the survival of Indigenous tribes.

One of the groups hit the hardest, the Kwegu – people who have occupied this land since time immemorial – are a 2,000-strong band of Omo-flood cultivators, hunters and gatherers, and goat herders. Their territory is adjacent to both the Omo River and a sugarcane plantation. Prior to the dam, they lived at the Omo year-round. The Kwegu used to fish, eat wild game and a large variety of wild plants, and collect wild honey.

The Kwegu's territory intermixes with the Bodi and Mursi, two other Indigenous groups who are also suffering greatly from the projects. The Bodi number around 10,000. They are cattle herders and have traditionally cultivated along the Omo River after the seasonal floods, while also practising rain-fed cultivation in the bush. The Bodi's neighbours to the south are the Mursi, who also number around 10,000. The Mursi have very similar livelihoods. They too are cattle herders and practice both flood-retreat cultivation on the Omo and rain-fed cultivation in the plains.

Unable to practise flood-retreat cultivation, the Kwegu, Bodi and Mursi communities have lost their lands, livelihoods and food sources to the Gibe III Dam and irrigation schemes. They are chronically hungry.

Losing to disease and malnutrition

The situation has severely deteriorated in recent years. Twenty-two Mursi villagers died of malnutrition near the Mago checkpoint in October 2022. Locals estimate that every family in the area has lost two or three children to malnutrition and leishmania. Some fear that half of the Mursi population could die from malnutrition in the absence of urgent action. In October 2022, eight people were brought from the checkpoint to the Hana Health Centre, where all but one subsequently died, including a pregnant woman. The lack of transportation to get people in critical condition from the bush to Jinka, a town with medical facilities, is a pressing issue. The lack of basic health services locally is dire given so many people are in critical need of care and the fact that many villagers do not want to leave, because they fear dying during the travel or at the hospital, far away from their community.

Currently, the Kwegu and Mursi are suffering from an outbreak of chickenpox. Additionally, they are also experiencing a measles outbreak, which started in 2021. The Mursi are most impacted – villagers report that 40 Mursi children have died from the disease. Mursi children are also struck by malaria and leishmania. In addition to this, cholera has appeared in the area since 2020.

Contaminated water brings cholera and dangerous chemicals

Research shows that cholera has spread through the local communities since January 2020, with the earliest outbreaks reported in a Kwegu village which obtains its water from a tributary of the Omo River. A worker camp and a military detachment situated upstream of the river had been releasing raw sewage directly into the tributary, leading to 200 people falling sick and 23 people dying the following week. Having gone four years without a harvest from the riverbanks, local communities were experiencing grave hunger; when cholera arrived, their immune systems were already weakened, leaving them vulnerable to the disease. Cholera has continued to spread, causing the death of over 15 Kwegu, 20 Bodi and 12 Mursi in the past two years.

Water contamination tied to the sugar plantations and factories' toxic chemical use is another concern, which the villagers allege is poisoning their drinking water. The threat to drinking water has been confirmed by several studies conducted in the region which show that sugarcane cultivation is heavily dependent on chemical inputs like pesticides and fertilisers, with sugarcane processing plants producing large amounts of runoff that can contain heavy metals and cleaning agents. This raises grave concerns over the Omo River's water quality, compounded by the fact that there is no water testing or treatment available. Community members report that they are forced to drink from chemical-filled irrigation canals, which poses significant long-term health risks, including cancers, neurodegenerative disorders and reproductive harms. Most tribe members, however, are unaware of the dangers posed by the dirty runoff water or chemicals, and thus continue to be exposed to these health risks. Not only the Bodi and Kwegu, but also other communities living downstream from the river, are impacted by this contamination.

Failure of resettlement sites

'Development' projects have forced local tribe members to resettle and abandon livestock herding. The Mursi and the Bodi were promised irrigated land in resettlement sites where they would be able to grow crops and which would have schools, access to healthcare, grinding mills, food aid, safe water and access to electricity. Little to none of this ever materialised, causing communities to abandon the resettlement sites. In Hana, these sites are virtually empty with no government services.

In a case reported to the researchers for this report, when a sugar factory encroaching on Bodi and Kwegu territory was constructed, the owners of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation prepared a piece of land for the two groups, with irrigation canals to allow for the cultivation of corn. After community members had cultivated the land for two years, the factory owners abruptly took it back and gave them a small parcel of dry, rocky land – far away from water sources, rendering cultivation impossible. The Bodi and Kwegu have attempted to cultivate crops near the sugarcane plantation, but these efforts were thwarted by employees of the sugar factory, who have cleared and destroyed these crops. Bodi villagers have reportedly needed to direct water from the canal into their fields at night, because workers of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation have banned them from using it during daytime.

Menial jobs for the locals

Locals have been left with no choice but to work for the sugar factories. Despite the promise that KSDP would bring jobs, the few made available to the Kwegu, Mursi and Bodi are low-paid, menial and seasonal – primarily consisting of hunting buffalo that eat the sugarcane for the men and, for the women, removing crushed sugarcane refuse.

These jobs pay between 400 and 1,500 birr ($7-$28) per month. This exceedingly low sum is further devalued amidst the prevalent inflation rate in Ethiopia – at over 30%. A quintal of maize that would feed a family for a month is now sold for more than 3,000 birr ($56). In order to survive, the Bodi and Kwegu sell charcoal to people in nearby towns or plantation workers, buying bread for their children on a day-to-day basis with the money they earn.

Loss of cattle, wild game and fish

With the Indigenous losing most of their land to the dam and sugar plantations, over half of their cattle have perished in recent years. And the crisis continues today with cattle dying of malnutrition and various illnesses such as tuberculosis, anthrax and pasteurellosis. The Mursi and Bodi are not provided medicine for their cattle and feel that this is an intentional attempt to get rid of the cattle.

The wild game that the Indigenous relied on for subsistence have also disappeared – having fled or died due to the loss of habitat to the sugar plantations. Moreover, having been disarmed by the military, locals lack the arms to hunt.

Additionally, it has become increasingly difficult to catch fish. Research shows that this may be due to the loss of the annual Omo floods, which generated fish migration and replenished the river-fed lakes. Significant reductions in the productivity of flood-plain fisheries are often detected following the construction of dams in numerous river basins across the world. The reduction in the number of fish may also partly be due to overfishing, as more people turn to it given the loss of other livelihoods. In addition, men from urban areas are coming in and fishing commercially with nets.

These different factors have reportedly forced villagers to eat bush leaves in order to survive, while others go hungry because they cannot find anything to subside on at all.

Forgotten in a time of civil war

In April 2018, there was hope that change in the Omo Valley might be possible as Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister with a reform agenda emphasising human rights and *medemer* – an Amharic word for coming together and synergy – across the country.

After taking office, Abiy set out to break the power and influence of the TPLF, which had dominated national politics for almost three decades. This fuelled tensions, leading the TPLF to retreat to its stronghold in the northern region of Tigray. In September 2020, tension culminated in the Tigrayans holding local elections in defiance of federal orders, following the postponing of long-promised national elections. Two months later, violence broke out, gradually escalating into a brutal civil war known as the Tigray War. For the next two years, the conflict left an unknown number dead, forced over two million people from their homes, and drove parts of Ethiopia into famine. In November 2022, the Ethiopian government and the TPLF leadership signed an agreement to stop fighting.

With international coverage focused on the war in the north, conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley have gone almost entirely unreported. In 2019, military forces carried out indiscriminate killings in the region, leaving at least 38 people dead – including women, children and the elderly – gang-raping women and forcing community members to go into hiding. Among the Mursi people, similar devastation occurred, with reports of houses set on fire, beatings and torture. Following this campaign of violence, the Bodi and most of the Mursi population were disarmed. Given all of the neighbouring groups are still armed, this leaves the Bodi and Mursi more vulnerable to cattle raids as well as general abuses by local administrators and the military.

Call for action

The November 2022 agreement by Ethiopia's warring sides to cease hostilities potentially paves the way for peace. It is urgent for the government to now turn its attention to the Omo Valley and address the harms suffered by Indigenous communities.

Despite the severity of the situation, the regional and national governments have failed to take action. More than a decade after their inception, it is clear that the 'development' projects in the Omo Valley have massively failed the Indigenous communities. Humanitarian aid is urgently needed now to stop widespread hunger and provide adequate medical aid. In the immediate term, the Ethiopian government must take steps to address this devastating situation and end the suffering, by ensuring food, water and medical assistance are provided. The government must also address past abuses and take all appropriate measures to mitigate the impacts of the projects, including returning arable land to communities. Only this will usher in a new era – one that benefits and includes Indigenous communities, traditions, cultures and livelihoods.

Indigenous tribes of the Omo Valley must be respected, allowed to live in dignity, and supported to have their land and livelihoods restored. ◆

The above is extracted from the Oakland Institute report 'Dam and Sugar Plantations Yield Starvation and Death in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley' (https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/dam-sugar-plantations-starvation-death-ethiopia-lower-omo) published in February 2023. The Oakland Institute is an independent policy think-tank bringing fresh ideas and bold action to the most pressing social, economic and environmental issues.

A ray of hope for TB patients

Indian authorities' rejection of a bid to extend the patent monopoly on a vital tuberculosis drug paves the way for more affordable treatment – and for greater involvement by patient groups in opposing such extensions in future.

Prathibha Sivasubramanian

Distribution of anti-tuberculosis medication at a hospital in Bangalore, India. There are an estimated 130,000 cases of drug-resistant TB in India every year and currently less than 30% of these patients are diagnosed and put on an appropriate treatment regimen.

ON 23 March, in a landmark victory to tuberculosis (TB) patients all over the developing world, the Indian Patent Office (IPO) rejected a patent application relating to fumarate salt of bedaquiline.

Bedaquiline is a medicine used to treat drug-resistant TB (DR-TB). It is a component of short and long regimens to treat DR-TB in adults.

Before the introduction of bedaquiline, patients diagnosed with DR-TB had a long and tormenting treatment (20 months) with a combination of medicines including daily injections which had adverse side-effects such as permanent hearing loss, psychosis etc. The new bedaquiline-based oral regimen has increased the cure rate of DR-TB and replaced medicines causing severe side-effects.

Bedaquiline-inclusive treatment regimens are a boon for DR-TB patients and are used to treat almost every person with DR-TB. In early 2018, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published new treatment guidelines establishing a new, all-oral, bedaquiline-based standard of care for multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB).[1]

It is estimated that globally the incidence of DR-TB increased to 450,000 cases in 2021 from 437,000 in 2020.[2] However, only 36% of patients could access treatment.[3]

India has a high incidence of DR-TB. In fact, India, China and Russia combined contribute more than half of the MDR-TB cases globally.[4]

There are an estimated 130,000 cases of DR-TB in India every year and currently less than 30% of these patients are diagnosed and put on an appropriate treatment regimen.[5]

The *India TB Report 2022* estimates that in 2021, 48,232 patients were diagnosed (laboratory confirmed) with multidrug- and rifampicin-resistant TB (MDR/RR-TB) and 43,380 patients were put on treatment.[6] More than 50% of the DR-TB cases go undetected and untreated in India.[7]

Bedaquiline was granted accelerated approval by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2012 as part of a combination treatment in adults with pulmonary MDR-TB. Conditional marketing authorisation for bedaquiline was subsequently granted by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in 2013.[8]

Bedaquiline is not available in the retail market in India. So far it has been rolled out through the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP). Currently, a six-month treatment course of bedaquiline costs around $350 for the Indian government.[9] It is expected that the cost would come down with the entry of generic pharmaceutical companies.

Development of bedaquiline

For 50 years, before the introduction of bedaquiline, there were no new medicines for TB. Around 2005, bedaquiline was identified by Janssen, a subsidiary of the pharmaceutical company Johnson and Johnson (J&J). However, further development of bedaquiline involved a lot of public funding and contributions from philanthropic organisations.

Academia, non-governmental and humanitarian organisations and governments have played a role in the development of this drug.

In 2009, Janssen entered into an agreement with the Global Alliance for TB Drug Development (TB Alliance), a non-profit organisation, to share resources and expertise for the development of bedaquiline.[10]

Several phase I and II trials of bedaquiline conducted prior to the drug registration were sponsored by the US National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the TB Alliance.[11] The phase III trials to confirm the efficacy of bedaquiline and to identify potential combinations with other TB medicines were not conducted by Janssen but were undertaken by non-profit organisations such as the TB Alliance, the Union (previously the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease), Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) and Partners In Health (PIH).[12]

Apart from the clinical trial costs, other incentives such as tax rebates, orphan drug status and seven years of exclusivity were granted for bedaquiline.[13]

Since J&J has obtained multiple patents on bedaquiline in many countries, considering the philanthropic contributions to its development, the company should be obligated to provide access to all MDR-TB patients who need it.

Secondary patent application

Currently, J&J has a monopoly in the market due to the primary patent on bedaquiline. This patent is set to expire in July 2023.

Generics can enter the market after July 2023 and provide low-cost versions of bedaquiline. However, J&J has filed multiple secondary patent applications on various forms such as fumarate salt of bedaquiline, dispersible tablet formulation, to treat latent TB, and also for a combination of bedaquiline, pretomanid and linezolid. These secondary patent applications, if granted, will block generic versions of the drug. The applications have been granted in some countries.

In India, the patent application relating to the fumarate salt of bedaquiline along with well-known wetting agents like TWEEN20 was filed in 2009.

In 2013, the Network of Maharashtra People Living with HIV (NMP+) filed a pre-grant opposition raising objections on novelty and inventive step under Section 3(d) and 3(e) of the Indian Patents Act, 1970.

[A patent is granted only on the satisfaction of three criteria: novelty, inventive step (qualitative improvement from a previous product) and utility. The exact definition of these criteria differs for different countries depending on national laws and standards. Some countries lay down a higher standard, resulting in grant of patents to only genuine inventions, which gives more space for local industries to grow in the particular field of the art. The standard is set according to the needs of the country. In this regard, the international Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) administered by the World Trade Organisation sets only minimum standards and does not define these criteria, leaving this to the individual country.]

In 2019, two TB patients also filed a pre-grant opposition pointing out that many parts of the patent specification were copy-pasted from an earlier application relating to an HIV drug, rilpivrine, which the IPO had rejected. The opposition also raised objections on inventive step under Section 3(d) and 3(e) of the Patents Act.

The claims were amended after the oppositions were filed.

After hearing both parties, the IPO on 23 March rejected the secondary patent application relating to fumarate salt of bedaquiline on the grounds of lack of inventive step in the light of disclosures in prior published documents.

The IPO referred to disclosures relating to bedaquiline and suggestions to make a fumarate salt of bedaquiline in the primary patent, as well as the disclosures in the literature about advantages of the salt form over the base compound in terms of bio-availability.

It also took into consideration that the use of TWEEN20 as a wetting agent in pharmaceutical compositions in a particular range is well known in the pharmaceutical field.

The IPO noted that the affidavits filed in support of the patent application failed to prove that the composition of fumarate salt of bedaquiline and TWEEN20 would show surprising effect over the known composition of bedaquiline disclosed in the primary patent.

Thus, combining the teachings and suggestions of the prior art, the IPO concluded that the application is obvious to a person skilled in the art.

Additionally, the IPO also found that the applicant had provided data on improved bio-availability to prove Section 3(d). (The bio-availability of a drug indicates the percentage, amount or concentration of the drug that reaches into the systemic circulation and is available at the site of action.) However, the IPO observed that this data was insufficient to satisfy the requirement of enhanced efficacy, as bio-availability is not the same as efficacy.

The IPO concluded that 'improved bio-availability would not constitute enhancement in therapeutic efficacy of the pharmaceutical composition unless it shows significant enhancement in known therapeutic efficacy in terms of efficacy results.'

The IPO also found that the applicant had not proved any synergistic effect of the formulation and considered it as a mere admixture (fumarate salt of bedaquiline and TWEEN20), which is disallowed under Section 3(e) of the Patents Act.

The Supreme Court of India, in the case *Novartis AG v Union of India* (2013), had ruled that 'efficacy', a term in Section 3(d) of the Patents Act, means 'therapeutic efficacy – effect of the drug on the body'. It is not the same as bio-availability. The applicant has to prove that any increase in bio-availability should in turn increase the therapeutic efficacy of the drug.

The IPO's bedaquiline ruling is significant because it not only disallows 'evergreening' (i.e., extension) of the patent monopoly on bedaquiline, but also sets a good precedent for subsequent oppositions to secondary patent applications relating to pharmaceutical salts, compositions and tablet formulations.

Further, the ruling will encourage the use of pre-grant opposition by not only companies, civil society organisations, academicians or scientists, but also patients who are directly affected by the grant of patent monopoly.

The IPO decision will reduce the current high cost that the Indian government has to incur to buy bedaquiline and enable supply of bedaquiline to be scaled up in line with WHO guidelines prescribing the use of bedaquiline-based treatment regimens.

This is important not only for India but also for other developing countries as it can facilitate the export of affordable generic bedaquiline. 'India, being a generic production hub, can count on companies being able to pick up production after the original patent expires in July 2023. This can increase the amount of the medicine available, make it cheaper, and get it to more people,' Priyam Lizmary Cherian, an intellectual property lawyer who argued the case at the IPO, was cited as saying by Peoples Dispatch. 'The decision is not important for people in India alone, but also in the rest of the world, since it should pave the way for export of generics.'[14]

However, MSF reports that J&J has licensed bedaquiline to treat drug-sustainable TB (DS-TB) to the TB Alliance, who in turn sub-licensed it to two generic companies in India – Viatris (formerly Mylan) and Macleods.[15] With these sub-licences in place, these companies could only supply bedaquiline for DS-TB and not DR-TB.

Since the licensing agreements are not available in the public domain, it is not clear whether there are any unbundling clauses in the sub-licences. However, other companies which have not entered into licences will now be free to develop the generic bedaquiline.

Increased patent grants

The 23 March decision was handed down by the Mumbai Patent Office. (There are four Patent Offices in India: Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata.) Ideally this decision needs to be followed by the other Patent Offices, although there is currently no consistency among the Patent Offices in following precedents.

Further, while this latest ruling is cause for celebration, the increased grant of patents to existing drugs by the IPO is still a huge problem.

Lack of uniformity in decisions is a crucial issue which leads to conflicting decisions in the grant of secondary patents to salts, polymorphs, compositions etc. For instance, the IPO granted a patent to the combination of tenofovir and emtricitabine in May 2022. Both tenofovir and emtricitabine are known and their combinations were earlier rejected by the IPO.[16] Despite the glaring disclosures in the previously published documents, the IPO granted the patent without applying the inventive step or Section 3(d) appropriately.

In addition, a patent for a bilayer tablet[17] comprised of old HIV drugs – rilpivirine and tenofovir – was granted in 2019.

Many of these orders granting secondary patents on existing drugs have no reasoned decision by the IPO.

It appears that the IPO may be lowering the inventive-step criterion, granting more and more patents, and not implementing the Supreme Court judgement on Section 3(d) in a bid to compete with its counterparts in China and the United States.

Amid this backdrop, the recent bedaquiline ruling has a significance that extends beyond the potential benefits in terms of TB treatment. It is an exemplar of how patient groups can effectively use legal safeguards to oppose frivolous secondary patent applications even when generic pharmaceutical companies are not part of the process. ◆

Prathibha Sivasubramanian is a legal researcher with the Third World Network.

Notes

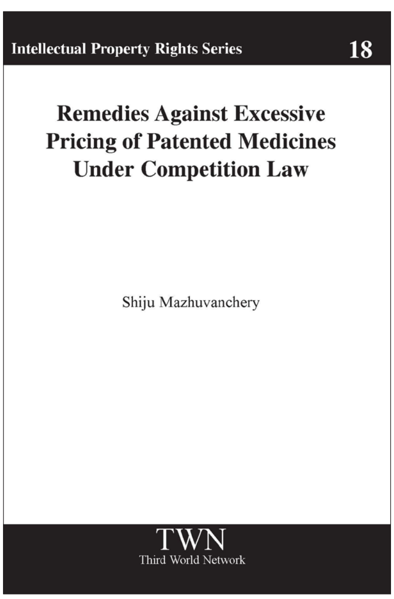
1. World Health Organisation. Rapid communication: Key changes to treatment of multi-drug- and rifampicin-resistant tuberculosis (MDR/RR-TB). 2018. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-CDS-TB-2018.18
2. https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/hq-tuberculosis/global-tuberculosis-report-2022/global-tb-report-2022-factsheet.pdf?sfvrsn=88f8d76_3&download=true
3. The reported number of people started on treatment for MDR-TB and rifampicin-resistant TB (RR-TB) in 2021 was 161,746, covering only about one in three of those in need. https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/hq-tuberculosis/global-tuberculosis-report-2022/global-tb-report-2022-factsheet.pdf?sfvrsn=88f8d76_3&download=true
4. World Health Organization. *Global Tuberculosis Report 2020*. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/336069/9789240013131-eng.pdf

5. https://scroll.in/article/941815/in-india-over-56-of-multidrug-resistant-tb-cases-remain-undetected-and-over-64-untreated#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20India%20diagnosed%2044%25%20%E2%80%93%20or%20around,put%20on%20treatment%2C%20the%20Global%20TB%20report%20said
6. https://tbcindia.gov.in/WriteReadData/IndiaTBReport2022/TBAnnaulReport2022.pdf
7. https://scroll.in/article/941815/in-india-over-56-of-multidrug-resistant-tb-cases-remain-undetected-and-over-64-untreated#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20India%20diagnosed%2044%25%20%E2%80%93%20or%20around,put%20on%20treatment%2C%20the%20Global%20TB%20report%20said
8. https://msfaccess.org/open-letter-jj-calling-affordable-access-critical-tb-drug-bedaquiline
9. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/aug/11/patients-are-falling-through-the-cracks-drug-costs-hinder-indias-response-to-tb
10. https://www.jnj.com/media-center/press-releases/unique-collaboration-between-tb-alliance-and-tibotec-to-accelerate-tuberculosis-drug-development
11. Evaluation of Early Bactericidal Activity in Pulmonary Tuberculosis With(J-M-Pa-Z) (NC-001), https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01215851; Evaluation of Early Bactericidal Activity in Pulmonary Tuberculosis (TMC207-CL001), https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01215110; https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01341184; https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT00992069
12. https://msfaccess.org/open-letter-jj-calling-affordable-access-critical-tb-drug-bedaquiline
13. Gotham, D., McKenna, L., Frick, M. & Lessem, E. Public investments in the clinical development of bedaquiline. 2020. *PLoS One*, 15(9), e0239118. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239118
14. Singh, J. & Vračar, A. Yes, we can stop patents getting in the way of TB treatment. Peoples Dispatch, 24 March 2023. https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/03/24/yes-we-can-stop-patents-getting-in-the-way-of-tb-treatment/
15. MSF Access Campaign. DR-TB Drugs Under the Microscope 2022, 8th Edition. Issue Brief. https://msfaccess.org/dr-tb-drugs-under-microscope-8th-edition
16. This combination is of tenofovir alafenamide fumarate and emtricitabine; earlier combinations of tenofovir disoproxil fumarate and emtricitabine were rejected. Patent applications relating to tenofovir alafenamide were also previously rejected. Further, the combination of tenofovir alafenamide fumarate and emtricitabine was very obvious in light of the literature and disclosures in the prior art. Basically the active ingredients tenofovir and emtricitabine and their combinations are well known in the art.
17. Bilayer tablets, sometimes called double-layer tablets, are a combination of two or more active pharmaceutical ingredients in a single dosage form. It is a technology for controlled release formulation and the use of bilayer tablets is growing.

TWN Intellectual Property Rights Series No. 18

Remedies Against Excessive Pricing of Patented Medicines Under Competition Law

by *Shiju Mazhuvanchery*



Publisher: TWN

Year: 2022 No. of pages: 26

Exorbitant medicine prices, especially for medicines subjected to patent protection, are increasingly coming under the spotlight. This paper considers whether and how this serious concern can be addressed within the framework of competition law.

Differing perspectives exist over the appropriateness of intervention by competition authorities in cases of excessive pricing, particularly when these involve patented products. However, there are no legal barriers to such intervention; competition authorities can act – and have acted – against firms deemed to have charged unfairly high prices for medicines, including those under patent.

In fact, this paper contends, competition enforcement against excessive pricing of patented medicines would not only advance consumer welfare but also contribute to safeguarding the fundamental human right to health. The remedies available under competition law – such as compulsory licensing – can be effectively applied to keep a lid on the prices of essential, potentially life-saving medicines.

Available at https://twn.my/title2/IPR/ipr18.htm

The big corporate power grab

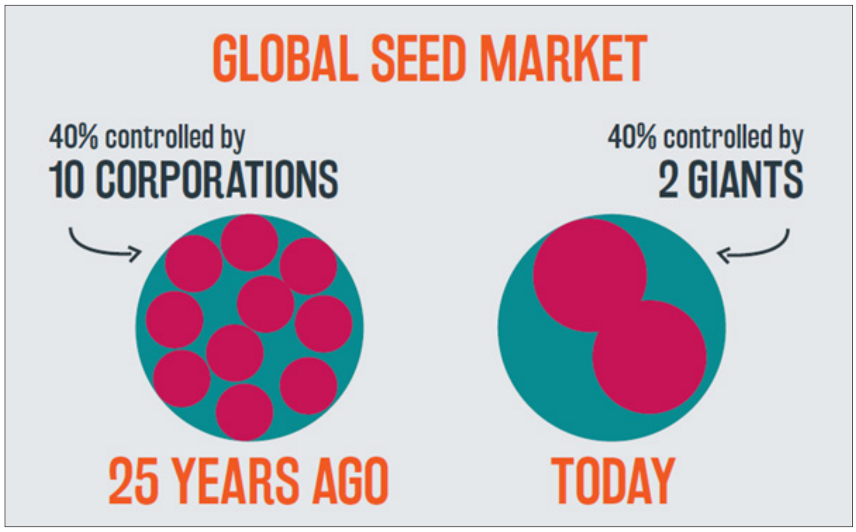
The increasing concentration of wealth and power among mega-corporations, facilitated in no small part by rigged rules of the global economy, is undermining democracy, economic security and planetary health. A report by the development organisation *Global Justice Now* – an excerpt from which is published here – delves into this problem of monopoly capitalism.

THE global economy is dominated by gigantic corporations. These huge businesses wield enormous power, crossing borders, avoiding laws and taxes, compelling governments to compete with each other for investment. The biggest corporations have captured eye-watering wealth, which far outweighs the economic power of most countries on earth. And that wealth and power is only growing.

As the world is battered by a cost-of-living crisis, still recovering from the worst pandemic in a century, and struggling to cope with the effects of disastrous climate change, the profits of the biggest 500 firms on the planet nearly doubled, exceeding $3 trillion in 2021. Their combined income amounted to an almost unimaginable $38 trillion – equivalent to nearly 40% of the entire world economy. That's more than the GDP of all but the very richest countries in the world combined.

The combined income of just the five biggest corporations in the world was more than the income of the poorest 2 billion people put together – one-quarter of the world's population. One single corporation – Walmart – earned more than half-a-trillion dollars. That's more than $1.5 billion every day, exceeding the GDP of even wealthy countries like Austria or Norway. Meanwhile, Apple, the most profitable private corporation in the world, saw its profits rocket by 65% to $95 billion.

These riches aren't accidental. These gigantic corporations have captured the economy, giving them the power to set prices, in sectors including food and energy. So while food and energy costs rise dramatically for ordinary people, corporations in those sectors are under no pressure to lower prices even as their profits spiral into the stratosphere. The big five oil corporations, for instance, brought in record profits of $195 billion in 2022, funnelling around $110 billion straight into the pockets of mostly very wealthy shareholders.



Source: ETC Group, 'The Food Barons', 2022

Corporate concentration is growing, with those at the very top gobbling up more and more rivals. Just in the world of Big Tech – one of the richest sectors of the economy – the five biggest firms, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft, have bought out over 1,000 companies over two decades, and until last year no regulator, anywhere, stopped even one of them.

The problem is particularly acute in the US, where recent research finds that the top 1% of corporations account for a truly astonishing 81% of business sales and 97% of business assets. More worrying still, the top 0.1% alone account for 88% of corporate assets and 66% of sales. But the same trend can be seen across Europe and much of the world. And here too, the growth in corporate power has been met, at least until recently, with little action. Of 8,000 proposed business mergers the European Commission was notified of since 1990, only 30 (less than 0.4%) were blocked.

Part of the problem lies with the rules of the global economy – rules often designed by the very corporations who benefit from them, and which in turn hand more power to these same corporations in a vicious circle. Some of these rules have allowed and even encouraged corporations to put profiteering and speculation ahead of their supposed purpose, whether that's making medicines or producing food. In this way, far from encouraging creativity and innovation, monopoly power has stifled it.

So monopoly capitalism doesn't simply drive higher prices. It shifts wealth far more fundamentally from the 99% to the 1%, and from poorer to rich nations, driving huge inequality. What's more, it is shifting power – undermining our democracy and making it harder to achieve the sorts of policies we desperately need to deal with, for instance, climate change. Indeed, monopoly capitalism entails the capture of vast swathes of decision-making by and for elite private interests. Only by reclaiming, breaking, decentralising and dispersing this power can we hope to make democratic decisions which meet the public interest.

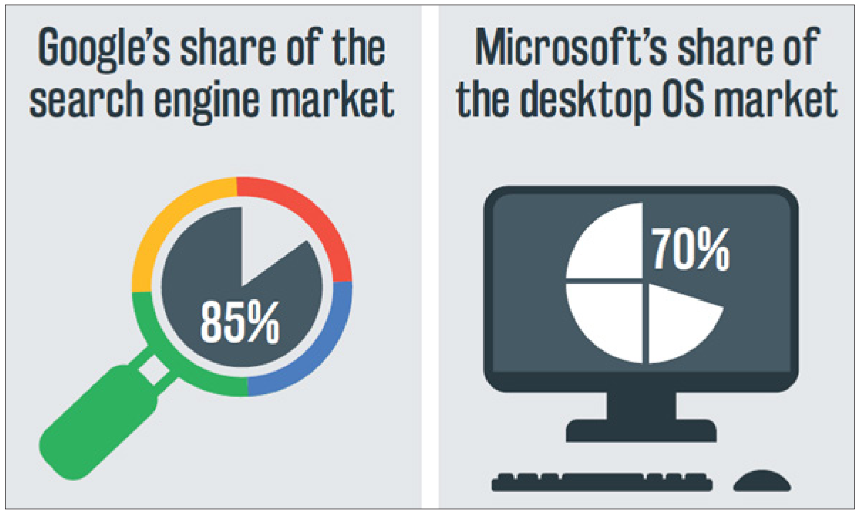
The problem with monopolies

Monopolies erode our democracy

Economists usually focus on the economic problems of monopolies, but perhaps more important is the way private monopolies undermine democracy. The decisions which are being made by monopolies are deeply political in nature: what should society make for whom and how? Who should get to partake in these products and services and on what terms?

Particularly when we're talking about the things we need to live – food and medicines – it's obvious how economic concentration can warp and subvert resource allocation in a way which threatens basic human rights. But even if we're talking about less essential products and services, how we utilise society's resources is an important question that goes to the heart of what type of society we live in. As long as these decisions are in private hands, taken based on private rather than public interests, our vision of democracy will remain extremely limited.

Just look at the power corporations like Bayer and Monsanto hold over farmers, regulating, in effect, how farmers will grow their crops. Anti-corruption campaigner Zephyr Teachout believes the privatisation of these *governing* decisions not only makes corruption more likely, but is in fact corruption itself. Defining corruption as the use of public power for private and selfish ends, she says that we have built a system rooted in corruption because, 'by definition, the corporations are going to act in a selfish and greedy way ... we know they are, we built them to. So we built a selfish power and then granted it governing power, we have built a system of corruption'.



Source: Statista.com, 'Global desktop market share of search engines 2015-2023'; 'Operating systems market share of desktop PCs 2013-2023'

Academics at Sheffield University make clear that this is a global problem when they say 'the concentration and dominance of transnational corporations is profoundly restructuring the global economy', adding that these corporations 'have become central organisers of global economic activity and key decision-makers over who gets what, when, where, and how in the global marketplace'. Of course, corporate wealth and concentration does also give corporations undue influence over formal political power. This is most obvious through lobbying, but also through, for instance, buying (or discrediting) scientists and academics – which Teachout calls 'corruption of thought'.

The more power corporations have, the more power they can buy. The lobbying power of major corporations is renowned and has enabled them to create economic rules which exacerbate that power. Corporations have lobbied for new tighter intellectual property provisions in trade deals, allowing them to extend their monopolies across the world. They lobbied for financial policies which allowed them to drive down their taxes to historically low levels. They even lobbied for special 'corporate courts' to be inserted into trade deals, a form of investment arbitration designed to ensure their 'legitimate expectation' of future profits which they can resort to should governments make decisions they don't like.

Monopoly power has grown over sections of the economy whose job is to inform us of current debate, as corporate power has transformed the media landscape. In the UK, according to the Media Reform Coalition, just three companies, News UK, Daily Mail Group and Reach, own 90% of the national newspaper market (up from 71% in 2015). When you include online readers, the three giants have around 80%. In local news, just six companies account for nearly 84% of all titles. In the US, just six corporations dominate 90% of mass media consumption and distribution (including 24-hour news stations, newspapers, publishing houses, Internet utilities and even video game developers), a consolidation from 50 companies back in 1983.

Monopolies are destroying our planet

Food monopolies are intensifying agricultural production in ways that both produce more emissions and which leave us vulnerable to climate impacts by increased use of monoculture crops. But there are other ways monopolies fuel climate change too.

The energy sector is dominated by massive corporations. Oil giants are particularly well known: think Shell, BP, Exxon, Chevron and Total. As with food corporations, these conglomerates made profits, of $195 billion in 2022, at precisely the time so many people struggled to pay vastly inflated energy bills. These same corporations used around $110 billion to directly enrich their wealthy shareholders, rather than investing it into any form of energy transition. In fact, what funds they did invest were overwhelmingly in further fossil fuel production, not in renewables.

In the UK, energy supply is also highly concentrated in both production and retail. In 2019, more than two-thirds of all energy was produced by the largest six companies. While a plethora of smaller companies emerged in the retail market in the 2000s, during 2021 dozens of companies failed, further concentrating the big suppliers' hold. Electricity infrastructure is similarly concentrated in the hands of six giants, the biggest run by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing. His CK Infrastructure Holdings was accused of doing too little to upgrade infrastructure, and when it does, passing costs on to consumers.

Monopolies have encouraged the growth of environmentally destructive practices like built-in obsolescence. Just look at Apple, which has for years been criticised for preventing third-party service and software installation, allowing it, in the words of Cory Doctorow, 'to decide when an iPhone is beyond repair and must be shredded and landfilled as opposed to the iPhone's purchaser … This is a very useful power to wield, especially in light of CEO Tim Cook's January 2019 warning to investors that the company's profits are endangered by customers choosing to hold onto their phones for longer rather than replacing them'.

There are indirect ways that energy monopolies fuel climate change too. We've seen how monopolies help fuel inequality. The biggest polluters by far are concentrated at the highest end of the wealth spectrum, with the investments of a billionaire effectively emitting a million times more greenhouse gas than the average person. More billionaires means more climate change. And monopoly capitalism is creating new billionaires every day.

On top of that, monopolies are able to apply direct political pressure, donating more money to lobby politicians to protect their interests. They can also afford to fund think-tanks which publish climate-sceptic propaganda rubbishing the scientific consensus. Oil major Exxon has recently been shown to have intentionally undermined climate change science for decades, even though corporate executives understood the damage they were doing.

The good news is that renewable energy tends to be less open to monopolisation than the fossil fuel industry, with much smaller businesses, but also cooperatives and groups of citizens able to produce renewable energy. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be wary of attempts to monopolise renewable energy technology. While climate change declarations regularly stress the need to share climate-friendly technologies, in practice these technologies are often protected by strict intellectual property provisions, undermining the growth of independent economic development in most countries in the world. As with medicines, we need to immediately suspend these global trade provisions for climate technologies, and find new ways to reward innovation.

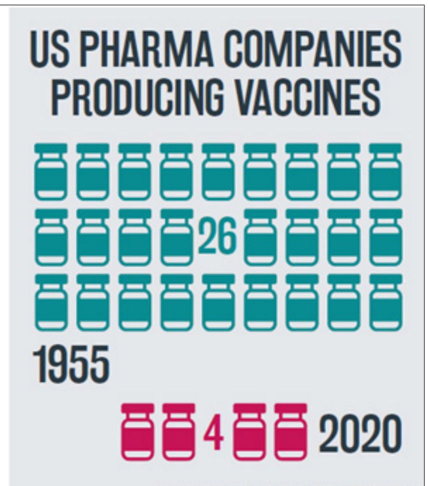
Monopolies drive poverty, inequality and economic fragility

The most obvious impact of monopoly power is economic. Monopolies protect businesses from the pressures to either invest in better products or lower prices for consumers. Instead, they can keep prices high to reward shareholders, which entails a transfer of wealth from ordinary people to elites. This can drive cost-of-living increases, but there are wider problems too. For instance, without strong unions, the market power of monopolies can allow them to pay their workers less, contributing to wage inequality.

It's no wonder that monopoly power has dramatically shifted society's resources from labour to capital. The share of global income that accrues to workers (as opposed to owners and shareholders) has fallen by around six to eight percentage points since 1980. According to the Balanced Economy Project, that shift is massive, with workers losing out to the tune of around $6 trillion a year: 'an order of magnitude greater than the estimated $400-$600bn in annual losses to tax abuse'. While corporate concentration is not the only factor at play, it's certainly a big one.

It's a point made eloquently by economist Paul Krugman in a 2016 piece entitled 'Monopoly power is killing US economy', where he says 'profits are at near-record highs, thanks to a substantial decline in the percentage of GDP going to workers'. In fact, for Krugman, this inequality is actually driving the whole economy into a death spiral, because these profits aren't being invested in 'plant, equipment, and technology' or other productive activity, but 'mergers and

Source: Open Markets Institute, 'High Drug Prices & Monopoly'



Source: Wired, 'A Covid breakthrough could fix the broken economics of vaccines', 2021

acquisitions' and returning wealth to shareholders. The economy begins to eat itself.

Monopolies can feed other forms of inequality too. They tend to remove value from communities in myriad different ways. Think of smaller farmers more likely to see their livelihoods squeezed. Or the closure of small businesses, more likely to be owned by people from traditionally marginalised groups. The US alone has lost 65,000 small independent retailers in just 10 years, with one in three local banks closing, leaving one-third of US counties without a local financial institution.

There's also evidence that monopoly pricing affects poorer groups more strongly, with the poorest households on average using markets that are 30% more concentrated than markets faced by the richest households, and 'likely to be at a greater risk of the effects of concentrated markets, as they are more reliant on goods and services that are characterised by such an industry structure'.

Monopolies also make our economy fragile. The drive towards ever-longer supply chains under corporate control, allowing 'just in time' production, makes us highly vulnerable to a crisis, to climate change – even to a trading ship getting stuck in a canal. Big business has told us not to worry about our economic security: we don't need to grow the food we eat, or make the computers or clothes we use. But there is now a growing understanding that security is necessary, with the US Trade Representative recently saying we need to accept a less 'efficient', but more secure, trade model.

The rules that enable monopoly rule

Corporations have a long history, tied to empire and exploitation. Some of the first corporations were vehicles for economic colonisation. They extracted wealth for the benefit of elites in imperial centres, working closely with their home governments.

While formal empires have, to a large degree, been consigned to history, the global economy is still neocolonial in many ways, and corporations play a leading role in perpetuating this dynamic. It's true that some emerging economies, particularly China, now host many of their own big corporations. This fuels inequality *within* Global South countries, creating billionaires even though extreme poverty thrives across society.

But monopoly capitalism also distorts the economy at a global level, exacerbating inequality *between* countries, especially between the Global North and the Global South. Big business is still overwhelmingly based in the Global North. With the very significant exception of China, only 26 of the largest 500 corporations are based outside high-income countries. This fundamentally affects global inequality because it means that even where corporations are operating in the Global South, they are able to return their money to Northern financial centres – exploiting the labour, resources and environment of the Global South to enrich elites in the Global North. The revenue of just the richest 500 US-based corporations was nearly three times the GDP of Latin America, and eight times that of sub-Saharan Africa.

This is particularly relevant to the work of Global Justice Now, in our struggle for a more equal world. Since our foundation we have focused specifically on the way that the rules of the international economy exacerbate injustices in the Global South. Today, rules which encourage and exacerbate corporate monopolies sit at the centre of the global economy. Our role is to expose and challenge those rules, whether they are global trade rules that impose stringent intellectual property standards everywhere or financial rules that enable tax avoidance.

Trade and monopolies

These problems can be seen in the global trade system. Trade can be good for Southern countries, allowing them to stimulate their economy, build employment and learn from technologies developed in richer nations. But current trade rules are premised on the idea that governments should intervene as little as possible in their economy, discouraging use of local-content requirements to stimulate the economy, allowing corporations to repatriate their profits, and clamping down on the copying of technologies developed elsewhere.

Countries are robbed of the tools to make trade work for them, so that corporations can enhance their power.

The UN agency UNCTAD has found that the majority of global trade takes place within supply chains controlled by transnational corporations. In 2021, they described the global economy as 'a rentier economy dominated by large corporations. Their control over key strategic assets and long global reach affords them a dominant market position from which abusive, and oftentimes predatory, business practices proliferate'.

In this context, simply arguing for more trade and investment for developing countries as a route out of poverty completely misses the point. Unless these global rules are rewritten, and economic structures reshaped, more monopoly capitalism will only fuel global inequalities rather than redress them.

Finance and monopolies

The concentration of corporate power is also connected with the role of finance in the economy. Access to finance is a key weapon in a corporation's armoury. Loans and debt allow corporations the financial firepower to, for example, sell goods below cost for a period of time, or even to take over other corporations. Both debt and mergers and acquisitions have boomed in recent decades, cementing corporate concentration. As the Balanced Economy Project puts it: 'Finance likes to throw cheap, plentiful credit at powerful, wealthy monopolists like Amazon, while starving their competitors. Venture capitalists talk of "kill zones" where innovative firms can't access reasonable financing because lenders judge them to be operating in areas where the monopolists can kill them at will.'

This has been helped by a tremendous concentration within the financial industry itself. A new aristocracy of finance has increasingly monopolised access to credit and favoured large, increasingly globalised corporations. In turn, chasing the capital necessary for expansion means corporations are not simply competing to make better products within a specific sector, but competing against every other corporation for investment from a concentrated financial sector, hardwiring a tendency across the economy to seek short-term profit maximisation as opposed to sustainable businesses.

Increasingly, the largest shareholders in all major transnational corporations are made up of the same enormous investment funds, with three massive asset management firms – BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street – responsible for $20 trillion in assets. As Common Wealth finds: 'Today, the Big 3 dominate global financial markets: in the US, one of the Big 3 firms is the largest shareholder in 495 out of the 500 S&P 500 companies, a basket comprising the largest US corporations, which includes everything from Exxon to Tesla, and Pfizer to Facebook. Together, they control a staggering 20 percent of the average company in this index, and a recent study suggested this ownership concentration could double to 40 percent within the next 20 years.'

In an economy where access to capital is the highest priority, these corporations have enormous power. One columnist writes in *The New York Times*: 'their rise has come at the cost of intense concentration in corporate ownership, potentially supercharging the oligopolistic effects of already oligopolistic industries … in the future, about a dozen people at investment firms will hold power over most American companies'. Similar consolidation has taken place in other parts of the financial sector.

The connection between finance and monopolies is an old one. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of the way 'industrial empire building, unfortunately, has evolved into banker control of industry', saying '[s]uch control does not offer safety for the investing public' but rather robbed business of 'virility, independence, adaptability and daring'. Any attempt to confront monopoly capitalism requires strict financial regulation.

Intangible assets, tax and speculation

Real value in corporations is increasingly embedded in so-called 'intangible assets'. Brand recognition, patents and copyright have become more valuable to corporations than 'real' assets like factories or workforce. While these intangibles are nearly impossible to accurately measure, corporations nonetheless try to put a high value on them and spend a fortune protecting them. Precisely because they aren't physical, these intangible assets are much easier to register in low-tax jurisdictions. They also convey real monopoly power – encompassing brands, recipes and identities which it's illegal for others to use.

Studies have found strong evidence of a correlation between investment in intangible assets and industry concentration. Patenting, in particular, is a highly concentrated field, with a small group of corporations increasingly owning a huge quantity of patents. As Cedric Durand and Cecilia Rikap write, corporate concentration is increasingly 'based on depriving others of access to knowledge. Legal monopoly is already very well advanced, with just 2,000 corporations owning 60 per cent of the patents simultaneously obtained at the world's five leading patent offices'.

The growth of tax avoidance more generally has allowed an incredible situation to arise wherein many of the wealthiest corporations on earth pay a lower rate of tax than their lowest-paid member of staff. Larger corporations tend to face a lower effective tax rate than smaller firms, further increasing their wealth and power.

This all affects the economy in a fundamental way. The great theorists of monopoly capitalism, Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, writing in the 1960s, believed that, by concentrating resources in the hands of big corporations and those that own them, and shifting the balance strongly away from working people, monopoly capitalism inevitably tended towards stagnation. In order to overcome this and maintain profits, a number of 'tools' were developed which themselves had undesirable consequences: high levels of military spending, which pushed public resources into the private sector while also encouraging conflict; a highly proactive sales and marketing industry, which manipulated people into buying (often on credit) while fuelling climate-destructive consumerism; and the development of new financial markets and forms of speculation, boosting profits while also injecting massive instability into the economy, which only benefits gigantic corporations that can weather the instability better than small producers. As *Business Week* wrote in 1985: 'Slow growth and today's rampant speculative binge are locked in some kind of symbiotic embrace.'

Hope and activism

Global Justice Now is part of a movement that has long campaigned against corporate power and the rules that underpin it. At times, we've won. But we believe a movement that can go beyond individual corporate sectors or individual rules is needed. We think talking more about monopoly capitalism can help foster such a movement.

Of course, this will mean debating different ideas and alternatives. Ultimately, we need a very different economy. Not everything in that economy needs to be small. But where monopolies are unavoidable, we need to look at who controls those monopolies and who can hold them to account. There's not a one-size-fits-all approach, but potential solutions to monopolistic practices might include:

- breaking up big firms and decentralising economic power
- stopping the endless train of mergers fuelling greater concentration
- regulating corporate power in the public interest
- constraining the role of financial corporations in the economy
- taking companies into government ownership and running them accountably in the public interest
- promoting smaller economic units, including importantly cooperatives, collectives and non-profit production, and giving workers and communities more control over the places they work in
- new measures and practices to better determine monopolistic behaviour
- increasing trade union density in firms and across industries.

You can be part of this movement at many different levels. You might join one of our campaigns to change the rules of the global economy. The People's Vaccine movement, which challenged monopolies over COVID-19 medicines, has helped spawn a wave of alternative research, development and manufacturing initiatives throughout the world. Meanwhile, the insulin monopoly in the US has spurred states like California to begin public production of the medicine.

You might get involved in challenging monopoly hold over a specific sector of the economy – the fight for a different food model for instance, like the food sovereignty movement led by millions of small-scale producers around the world in La Via Campesina. At a local level, in the US, there are dozens of examples of local initiatives fighting big business – such as the struggle in North Dakota to maintain a local banking sector resulting in more capital available for local businesses and farms, or the example of Cleveland shifting 39% of its procurement budget to local, small and minority- or women-owned businesses.

Or you might join a campaign aimed at a specific corporate monopoly, like Make Amazon Pay, the international campaign to force Amazon to pay fairer wages and taxes. Whether you work at a local, national or global level, this work is all part of the bigger pushback against monopoly capitalism.

And there's a growing network of organisations dedicated to tackling monopolies head-on, a burgeoning antitrust movement, including the Balanced Economy Project, the Institute for Local Self Reliance and the Open Markets Institute.

And this is having an effect. In a sweeping executive order, US President Joe Biden promised to implement 'full and aggressive enforcement of our antitrust laws', saying: 'We're now 40 years into the experiment of letting giant corporations accumulate more and more power ... I believe that experiment failed.' He appointed antitrust expert Lina Khan to chair the US Federal Trade Commission, one of the world's most powerful economic regulators. According to Nicholas Shaxson and Michelle Meager, 'If these gains can be consolidated and extended, and expanded outside the US, it is no exaggeration to say that this could transform our societies and economies for the better.'

There are a plethora of perspectives on how to tackle the concentration of wealth and power in our economy. From reframing what competition policy is, to transforming ownership in the economy and much else besides. We hope we can inspire people to come together in a movement where we can reflect, debate and analyse the differences so that we can shape a liberatory future in the interests of people and the planet. ◆

The above is an extract from 'Monopoly Capitalism: What Is It and How Do We Fight It?', a report published by Global Justice Now in March 2023 and written by Niall Glynn and Nick Dearden. The full report, including references, is available at https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/resource/monopoly-capitalism-what-is-it-and-how-do-we-fight-it/.

Global Justice Now campaigns for a global economy where people come before profit, and works in solidarity with social movements to fight injustice and inequality.

COVER

The US invasion was a catastrophe for the people of Iraq

In March 2003, acting on dubious grounds and riding roughshod over international opposition, the United States launched a military assault on Iraq. Twenty years on, the invasion and subsequent occupation has left a terrible trail of death, division and destruction.

Dina Rizk Khoury interviewed by Daniel Finn

IN March 2003, the US military launched a full-scale invasion of Iraq. The George W. Bush administration promised to bring freedom to millions of Iraqis. In reality, the occupation inflamed sectarian divisions and reopened Saddam Hussein's torture chambers at Abu Ghraib, while US officials tried to privatise Iraq's vast oil resources.

Eight years later, US forces officially withdrew from Iraq after hundreds of thousands of people had been killed. They left behind a corrupt and authoritarian political system that was soon unable to cope with the rise of ISIS. A protest movement has developed in the past few years to challenge the ruling class in Baghdad. But the legacy of the occupation will be haunting Iraq for decades.

Dina Rizk Khoury is professor emerita of history at George Washington University and the author of *Iraq During Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembranc*e. The following is an edited transcript from *Jacobin* magazine's *Long Reads* podcast (https://shows.acast.com/jacobin-radio/episodes). Listen to the two-part interview at https://play.acast.com/s/jacobin-radio/long-reads-us-destruction-of-iraq-part-1 and https://play.acast.com/s/jacobin-radio/long-reads-us-destruction-of-iraq-part-2.

Impacts of an invasion

Daniel Finn: *What was the balance sheet in terms of death, injury and material destruction from the period of direct US occupation in Iraq?*

Dina Rizk Khoury: The invasion and occupation of Iraq after 2003 was devastating in many ways. But it's important to keep in mind that the US war on Iraq goes back a long time before that. It really started in 1991. The impact of the 2003 invasion was made all the worse because the embargo that was imposed by the United Nations and supported by the United States after 1991 had already weakened the infrastructure of Iraq, particularly when it came to health and education.

Between 2003 and 2011, which was the official date for the withdrawal of American troops, the tally on the American side was 4,500 US soldiers killed. On the Iraqi side, there were 650,000 deaths, according to the reliable statistics that we have from the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The US fight against ISIS from 2013 also led to the death of 40,000 Iraqis. These are documented figures.

In addition, there are five million Iraqi refugees. Some fled to Syria and Jordan in the wake of the sectarian civil war, but a large number were internally displaced, moving from areas that had seen a high level of violence to more peaceful districts. We also know that the occupation of large parts of Iraq by ISIS and the subsequent war on ISIS also created over a million internal refugees.

Another social cost of the war that is not spoken about very often is the stress on family structures. There are currently two million households in Iraq that are led by women as well as countless orphans. This has taken its toll on the ability of Iraqis to rebuild their social lives.

We also need to discuss the material and environmental destruction that came with the occupation. The early months of the occupation led to widespread looting, particularly of Iraq's cultural heritage. You have to think of Iraq as a territory that is virtually one big archaeological site. It is one of the world's most ancient civilisations.

Before the invasion, the Pentagon and the US State Department seem to have acknowledged the importance of taking care of that heritage. The bombing and fighting during the invasion did not take place in the vicinity of archaeological and cultural sites, so the US forces knew this was something they had to bear in mind. However, the warning went unheeded in the first months of the occupation.

During that period, the Iraqi national museum and the national library were looted. About 170,000 artefacts were taken from the museum and about a million books and manuscripts were looted or burned. US forces also took the archives of the Ba'ath Party and various government ministries out of Iraq.

The archaeological sites suffered as well. For example, the occupation forces built military bases on the ancient ruins of Babylon and Ur, and a helicopter launchpad damaged the theatre of the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar. When ISIS emerged, of course, there was more destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage in the areas it controlled. The trade in smuggled antiquities filled the coffers of ISIS.

When it comes to the environment, we are beginning scientific studies about the impact of military ordnance on public health. Iraq has effectively been at war since the 1980s. During the 1980s, when Iraq invaded Iran, there was extensive use of chemical and biological weapons on both sides. The 1991 Gulf War left a lot of depleted uranium in the soil, and UN agencies recorded an increase in the number of cancer patients as a result. Iraq is a space where the United States has experimented with weapons systems since the 1990s, resulting in a great deal of environmental degradation.

DF: *What was the nature of the political system that was put in place under US domination after 2003?*

DRK: The United States came into Iraq with two stated purposes. The first was to overthrow Saddam's dictatorship and set up a democratic system. The second was to establish a free-market economy unregulated by the government, in which foreign companies as well as companies built by the Iraqi diaspora would have the lion's share in the task of reconstruction and developing Iraq's oil reserves. There was a deeply entrenched view after the Cold War that held that liberal democracies only flourish when you have free markets and the state sector of the economy is dismantled.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the administrative body set up by the United States to govern Iraq in the first year of the occupation, proceeded to implement a series of measures that were meant to eradicate all the remnants of the institutions that had formerly governed the country. A number of observers have described this as a process of state-building in reverse.

The CPA disbanded the Iraqi army and devolved the security and military functions of the state to an amalgam of US military forces, foreign contractors, and private militias aligned to political parties that were empowered by the occupation. There was an attempt to 'de-Ba'athify' all state institutions, which meant political and economic disenfranchisement and criminalisation for tens of thousands of people who were primarily Sunni. This fuelled the insurgency and a sectarian civil war, particularly in the Arab regions of Iraq.

Iraq was a one-party state until the Americans occupied it. It was necessary to be a member of the Ba'ath Party if you wanted to work in state institutions, go to university or be part of the military, even if you weren't an active member of the party or didn't belong to its upper echelons. The 'de-Ba'athification' process thus affected a large part of the population.

In place of the Ba'ath, the United States set up an interim government that was supposed to be a constitutional democracy. However, Washington envisaged a different kind of constitutional democracy than we would be familiar with in Western Europe or the United States itself, for example.

The United States and its Iraqi allies saw Iraq as being divided along ethnic, tribal and sectarian lines. In such a divided country, where the divisions were supposedly entrenched in culture rather than along economic and social lines, the only democratic system that could work would be one that gave proportional representation to the communities in a parliamentary system.

US policymakers and their overseas Iraqi supporters saw the Ba'ath regime as being dominated by the Sunni minority. To reset the balance and make sure that all communities had representation, they believed, it was necessary to divide power along communal and ethnic lines. The constitution that was ratified in 2005 set up a confessional system of representation in which parliamentary seats, the executive branch and the resources of the state were divided up between political parties organised around sectarian and ethnic agendas. This was known as the *muhasasa* system.

Under this system, the president of the republic would be Kurdish, the prime minister would be Shia, and the parliamentary speaker would be Sunni. It was very similar in its construction to the much older Lebanese system of democratic politics. However, this was totally new to Iraq – there was no history of it – whereas the Lebanese system had antecedents in the 19th century and was reinscribed under the French colonial mandate during the interwar period.

In its crudest iteration, this system furnished the scaffolding of a political and economic bargain among Iraq's post-invasion political class to divide up the state's ministries and institutions and privatise its resources according to ethno-sectarian quotas. The main beneficiaries have been the Shia blocs, which remain in power up to the present, with Sunni parties as their junior partners. The Kurdish parties have control in the areas ruled by the Kurdish Regional Government.

While these elites may have a fractious relationship with one another in their continuous bargaining for a greater share of the pie, they constitute a new political class with economic interests and a common style of governance. They build power by offering patronage to supporters who become their clients. They appoint people to positions in the various ministries under their control. This is their main way of winning support.

The funding for this patronage comes from state resources. Instead of being invested in the economy, these resources are used to buy clients. By 2011, when the US forces left, most state institutions had become arenas of competition between these highly militarised political parties. Corruption is built into the system at the expense of rebuilding the country and developing its economy for the benefit of Iraqi citizens.

DF: *How was Iraq's political economy – its oil sector in particular – transformed during the occupation?*

DRK: The United States went into Iraq with the aim of imposing a friendly client regime. A large part of its interest in doing so was to develop Iraq's oil resources. The country has the world's fifth-largest oil reserves. The United States and its allies were interested in opening up the development of Iraqi oil to American and European companies.

During the 1990s, Iraq had functioned under a crippling sanctions regime in which it could only produce enough oil to feed its own population. It couldn't sell its own oil either – it had to go through an international body set up by the UN that monitored the sanctions regime. Its infrastructure had become debilitated, so there was a lot of work to be done. The Americans and the Iraqi elite who came in with the occupation thought this was a perfect opportunity to begin privatising the production and marketing of oil.

The Iraqi oil industry, which accounted for 85% of state revenues, had been nationalised in 1972. There were several attempts after 2003 to pass a new oil and gas law that would privatise it. A law to that effect was introduced in parliament in 2006 and 2008. It faced great opposition from Iraqi parliamentarians who said that oil was the patrimony of the Iraqi state. It was also opposed by labour unions in the oil industry and by political parties like the Sadrists.

In response, the government devised a way of getting around this opposition. It said that Iraqi oil would remain a national resource under the purview of the oil ministry, but that foreign companies would be granted what were known as technical service contracts to develop the oil fields. In return, they would receive either a share of the profits or a set fee per barrel of oil produced. As a result, the Iraqi state lost control of the production of oil.

By 2009, all new oil and gas development was allocated to international oil companies in production-sharing agreements. These companies had the right to manage the oil fields with very little oversight by the Iraqi government. The workers in the oil sector had previously been employees of the Iraqi state, but they now found themselves employed by these foreign oil companies and their subcontractors. The oil workers' unions objected to this and tried to stop it.

The privatisation of Iraq's energy resources proved very lucrative for the international oil companies, particularly the subcontractors in construction, security and the transport of oil. These subcontractors also included Iraqi businessmen and political figures who were in partnership with the oil companies, especially in shipping and marketing. By 2013, oil production in Iraq still hadn't matched its levels before 2003, in part because of the overcharging and corruption that came with the new production and drilling contracts.

When we think about the political economy of oil, it's important to look at who benefits from the new arrangements, apart from the companies involved in the oil production agreements, of course. The main parties and militias draw their funds from control of the marketing, transport and smuggling of oil. There is an entrenched political system that has the primary resource of oil at its disposal. It can enrich itself at the expense of the state coffers or investment in more sustainable economic activities like industry and agriculture.

Political, security and business entrepreneurs have amassed vast wealth and influence from the new political economy of oil. It's difficult to exaggerate the negative consequences of this misuse of public resources for working Iraqis who are not part of this elite. The system of power that was set up after the US invasion is dependent on the distribution of wealth through clientelism and the sale of public offices.

The official unemployment rate in Iraq today is 16%. Among the youth, it's much higher – 36%. Most Iraqis work in the informal sector. They have no protection, job security or social benefits because the state is bankrupt. This precarious class includes people from various social backgrounds: university students, health professionals, teachers and so on. It supplies the fuel for massive protests against the Iraqi political system that continue to erupt in the country.

Violence and political fallout

DF: *You've touched on this already when talking about the nature of the Iraqi political system, but could you tell us a little more about the main political forces that were competing for power in Baghdad after the US withdrawal?*

DRK: The first and most important Shia bloc is the Dawa Party of Nouri al-Maliki, who was prime minister between 2006 and 2014. The second is the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which has more followers in the southern parts of the country. These two parties were based in exile in Iran during the period of Ba'athist rule before they came to power after 2003.

Both parties had pro-Iranian agendas. They saw Iran as their protector and saw themselves as the protectors of Iranian interests, although the Supreme Council's offshoot, the Hikmah movement of Ammar al-Hakim, is now trying to distance itself from Iran.

The other strong political force is the Sadrist movement, which is led by a charismatic figure, Muqtada al-Sadr, the descendant of a venerable family of Shia clerics, many of whom suffered at the hands of the Ba'ath. Muqtada al-Sadr sees and projects himself as a nationalist. He regularly mentions the fact that the Sadrs never left Iraq and are not allied to Iran – although he is very cautious in his relations with Iran at the same time.

He is a populist who appeals to the disenfranchised population. There are Sadrist strongholds in Baghdad's popular quarters and in the south. The Sadrist militia, the Mahdi Army, fought against the US occupation and played a central role in the sectarian war, particularly in Baghdad.

Al-Sadr has navigated the politics of Iraq masterfully. He has managed to remain part of every government coalition while also presenting himself as an honest alternative to the corrupt Shia parties. At various times, he has expressed his agreement with the protesters challenging the corruption of the system. He has extricated himself quite cleverly from his militia background and continues to present himself as a populist, a nationalist and a protector of the poor.

There are other secular parties such as the Communists and others connected with the Iraqi diaspora figures who returned after 2003. However, they have always played a minor role and are in effect junior partners of the main Shia parties. You also have the Sunni parties, who had become marginalised in the political system by 2011.

A number of Sunni political groups decided to run for parliament and take part in the system as junior partners. But they were discredited in the eyes of most Sunnis because they could not persuade the Shia parties to deliver resources to Sunni-dominated areas. This was what fuelled the al-Qaeda insurgency in those areas in 2007-08.

That led in turn to the so-called Sunni Awakening, an alliance of tribal leaders supported by the United States to fight against al-Qaeda. By 2011, al-Qaeda had been defeated and its remnants were scattered elsewhere. Yet Anbar and Fallujah remained quite neglected.

The Kurdish parties dominated the regional government, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by the Barzani family, which was based in Erbil, and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, based in Sulaymaniyah. These parties controlled the government in the Kurdish areas and had their own militia. The federal army has no presence there.

DF: *What factors lay behind the sudden collapse of the Iraqi state and army in the areas where ISIS took control?*

DRK: The rise of ISIS may have seemed quite sudden to outside observers, but there was a history behind it. The areas where ISIS took control were marginal and neglected by the Iraqi state. The inability of the central government to deal with Sunni demands in Fallujah and Anbar province in 2012-13 led a number of young people to travel to Syria and join ISIS because they did not think there was any hope of getting assistance from Baghdad. There had been well-organised protests in those areas that were violently suppressed by the Maliki government.

In addition, ISIS arose in a particular national and regional context. There was a pro-Iranian government in Iraq that was openly sectarian and corrupt and a murderous government in Syria that was also supported by Iran. This led to a radicalisation of the Sunnis in both Iraq and Syria that was supported by Turkey and some Gulf states.

The Maliki government had also used its control of the interior and defence ministries to fill the ranks of the army and the security services with supporters who had very little training and operated with an openly sectarian agenda. Those forces in Mosul were unequipped to deal with the rise of ISIS – they just turned and fled when ISIS came.

DF: *How did Iraqi state managers and their allies respond to the challenge from ISIS in both political and military terms? How would you characterise the long-term consequences of that response for Iraq?*

DRK: The takeover of Mosul by ISIS came as a surprise to the Maliki government. The rapid disintegration of any government presence in the north generated panic among the Shia population as well as the government. They were saying to each other that there was going to be a massacre of the Shia by the Sunnis, harking back to the early history of Islam. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the premier religious authority among the Shia, issued a call from the holy city of Najaf urging all Shias to take up arms and fight against ISIS.

This call led to the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces by the Iraqi government. This was a state-sponsored umbrella organisation composed of several armed factions. While the majority of those factions were Shia, they also included Sunni Muslims from Anbar province and Christians, as well as Yazidi groups.

The Popular Mobilisation Forces were mobilised to fight against ISIS in the north, along with a counterinsurgency unit trained by the United States, certain sectors of the Iraqi army, and the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdish Regional Government. Between 2014 and 2016, this coalition of forces waged war against ISIS and ultimately defeated the movement. There was a massive deployment of air power, with about 11,000 air strikes launched against ISIS, particularly in the Mosul area.

The US and Iraqi governments saw ISIS primarily as a military problem. The political conditions that allowed ISIS to take power were not discussed at all. They simply declared that ISIS was an evil force and people who supported it were evil. The only solution required to get rid of ISIS from this perspective was a military one. There was very little attempt to deal with the factors behind the support for ISIS.

Because of that, the post-ISIS landscape in Iraq has not been very promising. It resulted in further militarisation of Iraqi society and politics. The Popular Mobilisation Forces are still powerful players in Iraqi politics. They have become a political bloc that can protect its own interests and that plays an important role in managing the areas that were retaken from ISIS.

The Iraqi state has never had a monopoly of violence, as most states do. It is an amalgam of political groups that wield power through their militias. The Popular Mobilisation Forces have now become part of the political scene. The Iraqi government continues to see a military response as the only way to deal with potential threats to its legitimacy.

Another result was the strengthening of the Kurdish territorial reach in areas beyond the Regional Government's undisputed territories. These were areas that the Kurdish Peshmerga helped win back from ISIS and that the Kurds were not willing to give up easily afterward. They have claimed that the Yazidis and other minorities who inhabit these areas are actually Kurdish and therefore should be part of the Regional Government's jurisdiction. This has compounded the fragmentation of Iraq's territorial space into cantons controlled by parties.

There has been no serious effort at reconstructing the areas devastated by the war against ISIS. There was a conference in Kuwait where pledges were made to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in aid for reconstruction, but this has not materialised. Those areas are now worse off than they were before ISIS came to power.

About a million people have been internally displaced. This includes people whose families were accused of collaborating with ISIS and who fear retribution if they go back. The Iraqi government is not doing anything to reassure them.

Protest and the future of Iraq

DF: *What was the nature of the protest movement that emerged in 2019? What features did it have in common with the protests that were unfolding more or less simultaneously in countries like Algeria, Sudan or Lebanon?*

DRK: Let me begin by answering the second part of your question about the common features of these protest movements. They were all dominated by young people from a generation who feel abandoned by their governments. Their basic rights to education, healthcare and employment have been completely eroded, in part because of the push for privatisation and liberalisation of the region's economies and the dismantling of state services.

These young people were largely non-ideological in the sense that they didn't belong to political parties with clear ideological agendas. Their agenda was primarily for basic human rights. They understood those rights to include social rights as well as political rights in the liberal sense of the term.

They also shared a common repertoire of protest, as social scientists call it. That involved the occupation of public squares – retaking the spaces of the city for organising protests. They picked up certain slogans and images from elsewhere. For example, the 2019 Iraqi protests borrowed the face of the Joker from protesters in Chile. This was a very savvy group of young people organising through social media to get around the repressive apparatus of the state.

What distinguished the Iraqi case is the particular context in which those protests emerged. There was a generation of Iraqis who were raised under the late Ba'ath regime and then the US occupation and the system it established. They rejected the claim of political parties organised around sectarian agendas to represent them and demanded a new order that would embrace all Iraqis.

In that sense, they differed from the other protesters because they were trying to create a sense of civic engagement and Iraqi nationhood. This was a challenge that protest movements elsewhere didn't have to grapple with – apart from in Lebanon, where there was also a challenge to political parties based on sectarianism.

The protests in Iraq also arose from a complete failure of the state. The Iraqi government was experiencing a clear crisis of legitimacy. We already saw the beginning of organised protests in 2015, while the fight against ISIS was in progress. Even though ISIS posed an existential threat to Iraqi Shias because of its sectarian agenda, the protesters were still ready to challenge the corruption of the political order at that time.

By 2019, the protests were drawing in wider sections of the population. The 2015 demonstrations had been concentrated in southern areas like Basra, but they now spread to cities all over southern and central Iraq from October 2019. The protesters were mainly Shia, although Christian and Sunni Iraqis also expressed their support.

Civil society groups such as the women's movement and labour unions had been growing in Iraq during the 2010s. The Iraqi Communist Party assisted in the organisation of unions, and they also received support from international labour organisations in trying to revive what had once been a fairly strong union movement before the Ba'ath took power. There were unions of students and professional groups such as teachers as well.

These civil society organisations joined the protests and helped sustain them. For example, doctors would go to the tents that were set up in Tahrir Square to help. Unions would establish their own tents to support the protestors. The protests expanded beyond the youth to incorporate a wider cross-section of the Iraqi population.

DF: *How did the Iraqi government respond to the protests and the crisis of legitimacy that you alluded to?*

DRK: The scale of the protests alerted the government to the serious problem it was facing. Its response was violent: in the first six months, 600 Iraqis were killed by the state forces, and about 20,000 were injured. But the government then had to curtail the violence.

This was partly because the protesters had the protection of the Sadrist movement, at least until January 2020. Muqtada al-Sadr played his usual mediating role, telling the government that the protesters had legitimate demands and that his movement was going to protect them. He sent his followers onto the streets to protect the demonstrators against the violence of the state. In doing so, he also expanded the size of the protests, since he has a large following.

Al-Sadr changed his position after the US military killed the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Qassem Suleimani, and the leader of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, at the beginning of January 2020. The Sadrists then withdrew their support, saying that they did not want to weaken the government and accusing the protesters of being funded by the United States.

Eventually there was a less violent response that involved trying to co-opt the protests by promising more public sector jobs. When the protesters articulated a clear political agenda, demanding the government's resignation and calling for fresh elections under a new electoral law, the government promised to respond.

DF: *What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the political situation in Iraq? Was it possible to maintain any form of effective social mobilisation?*

DRK: The pandemic played a critical role in limiting the ability of Iraqis to mobilise. It wasn't the main reason why the protests petered out, but it certainly discouraged people from taking to the streets for what might be super-spreader events. The failure of the government to respond in the way that it should have to the pandemic then left Iraqis in a position where they had to fend for themselves throughout the crisis.

DF: *What potential would you say exists today for the kind of political action that could establish a more democratic and egalitarian system in Iraq?*

DRK: It is very difficult to radically transform the current political system in Iraq. The most that we can hope for is reform within the system itself. That means elections that are more inclusive of the different political forces, as well as the independent secular parties that have been organised in the wake of the protests.

In October 2021, there were elections held on the basis of a reformed electoral law. It was now possible to vote for individual candidates, whereas under the previous system, your vote would only count if you voted for a party that belonged to one of the blocs. For the first time, we saw people running for election as independents outside of the parties.

In that election, one section of the protest movement decided that the only way to bring about change was to participate in the system, while others insisted that change could only come through revolution and the overthrow of the system. There was a relatively small group of independents elected who were aligned with the protest movement, and the Sadrist party won the largest number of seats. As I discussed previously, the Sadrists have been able to navigate in the space between government and popular politics in a way that has allowed them to survive and flourish.

There are a number of potential pitfalls within the field of electoral politics. The newcomers who were elected as independents have no experience and have to learn how to operate as a united front, while the Sadrists are unstable allies for those seeking to bring about change.

After their election victory, the Sadrists tried to form a majority coalition with Sunni and Kurdish forces that could take up some of the demands of the protesters for reform. But these efforts at coalition-building fell apart. In June 2022, they withdrew completely from the government, which left the door open for traditional Shia parties to come in for business as usual.

However, business as usual is not viable in the long run. The Iraqi state is more or less bankrupt, and the International Monetary Fund is demanding further privatisations. The established parties have built their political strength on their ability to dispense government appointments, but they can no longer carry on doing so.

In the current situation, change will have to be incremental. All of these parties are militarised, and violent confrontations between the different Shia parties would compound the fragmentation of Iraq. There is no revolutionary option for the protesters: they are going to have to work within the system as it currently exists, with regular protests around certain issues and perhaps also changes of government. ◆

This interview is reproduced from the Jacobin *website (jacobin.com).*

Dina Rizk Khoury is professor emerita of history at George Washington University and the author of Iraq During Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance *(2013).*

Daniel Finn is the features editor at Jacobin. *He is the author of* One Man's Terrorist: A Political History of the IRA.

For 20 years, Team Bush has escaped prosecution for their war crimes in Iraq

The attack on Iraq was an illegal act of aggression and war crimes were committed by US forces in that country, but no one from the Bush administration has ever been brought to justice.

Marjorie Cohn

Reprinted from *Truthout*

IN March, Iraqis marked the 20th anniversary of the horrific US-UK bombing of Baghdad, dubbed 'Shock and Awe'. In rapid succession, 'coalition forces' dropped 3,000 bombs, including many that weighed 2,000 pounds, on Baghdad in what *The New York Times* called 'almost biblical power'.

Although they launched an illegal war of aggression and committed war crimes in Iraq, 20 years later the leaders of the US and the UK have never faced criminal accountability. By contrast, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has already charged Russian President Vladimir Putin with war crimes just one year after his unlawful invasion of Ukraine. He is the first non-African leader to be charged by the ICC, which frequently succumbs to pressure from the United States.

In what came to be called 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', 173,000 troops from the United States and the United Kingdom invaded Iraq. During the eight-year war, about 300,000 Iraqis and 4,600 Americans were killed. The United States spent $815 billion on the war, not counting indirect costs. It plunged the country into a civil war and millions of Iraqi refugees remain displaced. Two decades later, not one of the officials responsible has been brought to justice.

President George W. Bush visiting US troops in Iraq in 2008. Bush relied on mythical weapons of mass destruction and a non-existent link between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks to justify his war on Iraq.

Invading Iraq was an act of aggression

Sources within his administration have confirmed that George W. Bush was planning to invade Iraq and execute regime change long before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The US-led invasion violated the United Nations Charter, which authorises countries to use military force against other countries only in self-defence or with approval by the UN Security Council.

The attack on Iraq didn't satisfy either of these conditions and was therefore an act of aggression. After the Holocaust, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg wrote, 'To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.'

Like other US military interventions, the rationale for this illegal aggression was based on a lie. Much as President Lyndon B. Johnson used the fabricated Tonkin Gulf incident as a pretext to escalate the Vietnam War, Bush relied on mythical weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and a non-existent link between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks to justify his war on

Iraq.

Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice falsely warned that Iraq had WMDs and Rice invoked the image of a 'mushroom cloud' to justify the impending invasion of Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell shamefully presented false information about Iraq having WMDs to the UN Security Council in February 2003.

In 2002, former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter confirmed that Iraq had destroyed 90-95% of its WMDs and there was no evidence that it had retained the other 5-10%, which didn't necessarily constitute a threat or even a weapons programme.

Indeed, no WMDs were ever found by the UN weapons inspectors before or after Bush's invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the Bush administration fabricated a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda notwithstanding the intelligence to the contrary.

The Downing Street Minutes, a transcript of one of Prime Minister Tony Blair's briefings with British intelligence that *The Times* of London published in 2005, demonstrated that the Bush administration had decided by July 2002 to invade Iraq and carry out regime change. The 'intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy', the minutes revealed.

Even a 2005 US Congressional report prepared at the direction of former Representative John Conyers, Jr. concluded that in spite of intelligence information to the contrary, members of the Bush administration made false statements before the invasion about Iraq having WMDs, and linkages between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Although Team Bush urged the UN Security Council to pass a resolution authorising its attack on Iraq, the Council refused. Bush and his allies instead cobbled together prior Council resolutions, none of which – individually or collectively – authorised the invasion of Iraq.

Bush justified the attack with his doctrine of 'preemptive war'. But the UN Charter only allows a country to use military force in response to an armed attack by another country or with permission of the Security Council. 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' violated the UN Charter and constituted an illegal war of aggression.

War crimes committed by the Bush administration

US forces committed many other war crimes in Iraq, including extrajudicial killings, torture and the targeting of civilians, which are prohibited by the Geneva Conventions; the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Torture and abuse conducted at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq included the stacking of naked prisoners on one another; photographing prisoners who had been forcibly arranged in sexually explicit positions; keeping prisoners naked for days; forcing male prisoners to wear women's underwear; using snarling dogs; punching, slapping and kicking prisoners; and sodomising a prisoner with a chemical light and broomstick.

Civilians were targeted as US troops operated under rules of engagement that directed them to shoot everything that moved. In these 'free-fire zones' the US also bombed civilian areas and used cluster bombs, depleted uranium and white phosphorus, resulting in massive civilian casualties.

The most notorious free-fire zone was in Fallujah. In April 2004, US forces attacked the village and killed 736 people, at least 60% of whom were women and children. In another attack the following November, US troops killed between 581 and 670 civilians in Fallujah.

Another infamous example of extrajudicial killing was the Haditha Massacre in November 2005, when US Marines killed 24 unarmed civilians 'execution-style' in a 3-to-4-hour rampage. The US covered up the massacre until *Time* magazine ran a story about it in March 2006.

Documented extrajudicial killings also took place in the Iraqi cities of Al-Qa'im, Taal Al Jal, Mukaradeeb, Mahmudiya, Al-Hamdaniyah, Samarra, Salahuddin and Ishaqi.

These war crimes are not only abhorrent, but punishable under the US War Crimes Act and the US Torture Statute. Yet, although it has been 20 years since the invasion of Iraq, no US leaders have been indicted. The Obama administration's Department of Justice actively decided not to prosecute anyone for the torture and abuse committed during the Bush regime. Yet it only took one year for the ICC to charge Putin with war crimes in Ukraine.

Last May, George W. Bush accidentally admitted that his decision to invade Iraq was unjustified. While addressing a crowd at the Bush Presidential Center in Dallas, Bush decried 'the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq. I mean, Ukraine'. He then added under his breath, 'Iraq too'.

Speaking about the war in Ukraine, President Joe Biden recently declared the apparent absurdity of 'The idea that over 100,000 forces would invade another country – since World War II, nothing like that has happened.' Biden apparently forgot about 'Operation Iraqi Freedom.' ◆

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the US National Lawyers Guild, and a member of the national advisory boards of Assange Defense and Veterans For Peace, and the bureau of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. Her books include Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral and Geopolitical Issues*. She is co-host of* Law and Disorder *radio (lawanddisorder.org/).*

COVER

The Iraq war and the role of empire in the Middle East

While the US invasion of Iraq can be seen as a prime manifestation of imperialism, a more nuanced understanding is required of empire's involvement in the region over the centuries.

Ozan Ozavci

Repair works on an oil pipeline at the Al Fatah bridge in Iraq in 2006. The US invasion enabled multinational companies to once again exploit Iraqi oil, ensuring Western energy security.

BEFORE the US-led coalition's occupation of Iraq starting in March 2003, there was at least one subject upon which certain advocates and opponents of the war agreed: that the invasion was imperialistic. Both sides weaponised the historical role Western imperialism played in the Middle East in an equally pragmatic and impressionistic fashion. But they did so through opposite interpretations of the past.

Fouad Ajami, a prominent historian of the Middle East who died in 2014, reportedly advised the George W. Bush administration in favour of intervention. Ajami argued that the British empire's moment in Iraq had come after the First World War. But it was economically exhausted, and therefore failed. It was now the US's time. Its driving motivation, he said – the 'imperial burden' – should be 'modernising the Arab world', above and beyond toppling Saddam Hussein.

Three years into the war – with Hussein toppled – Ajami maintained that the war was a legitimate 'imperial mission', a 'foreigner's gift' to Iraqis. It was a 'noble war' the outcome of which would 'determine whether it is a noble success or a noble failure'.

'Benevolent empires'

Ajami's discussion of benevolent empire chimed with a strand of scholarly work on imperial history that had emerged in the 1990s, some of it sympathetic towards classical imperialism. But in July 2002, the literary theorist and historian of Orientalism, Edward Said, anxiously complained that this revisionist scholarship, emphasising 'the modernising advantages the empires brought' as well as 'the security and order they maintained', failed to answer the question of 'who decides when (and if) the influence of imperialism ends'.

The accounts of benevolent empire had to be unravelled because they were obscuring the relationship between the role Western empires played in the Middle East and the ongoing disorders and violence there. Benevolent empire was being used as a dangerous instrument to validate another war in Iraq in 2003.

A couple of months after the war broke out and weeks before he passed away, Said warned that every empire would tell itself and the world that 'it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate'. Empires were sustained by means of that imperial perspective – 'seeing its people as subjects whose fate can be decided by what distant administrators think is best for them'. The same perspective was imposed upon the world by the US/UK coalition's propaganda and policy apparatus with 'woefully inadequate' sources of information about the Middle East.

The Bush administration disregarded detailed security and intelligence reports on the post-invasion policy of the coalition. Their eyes were trained exclusively on the campaign's military success. Though it is said that there was a gameplan for the aftermath of the invasion, its priorities were mismatched to realities on the ground. Local needs and wants were hardly taken into account. The result was a failure, which was

Library of Congress via pingnews

British officers in Baghdad, 1932. 'Time and again... empires intimidated, perpetrated violence, pillaged and partitioned a region that the imperial strategists came to call the Middle East.'

anything but noble.

Three years after the war, Iraq descended into devastating civil strife. Chaos lingered, spawning the horrors of first al-Qaeda and then the Islamic State in Iraq. Since 2003, the war and the ensuing violence have claimed more than 200,000 civilian lives.

Between 2008 and 2021, around 5.7 million Iraqis were displaced. Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction, one of the pretexts for the invasion, were never found.

Prior to the war, the Iraqi government had acted as swing producer, disrupting the free flow of oil from the Gulf to the world, thus holding the strings of global oil prices and antagonising Big Oil. The 2003 invasion enabled multinational companies to once again exploit Iraqi oil and adjust its flow to world markets again, ensuring Western energy security.

History has it

This is not simply to say that Ajami was profoundly mistaken or Said spot on in their respective accounts of the influence of Western imperialism in the Middle East. Much of the suffering in the region – including the 2003 war and the human misery it has since prompted – was a result of global imperial and local factors. No one ought to whitewash the role of Western or Ottoman imperialism nor welcome an over-simplistic attribution of guilt to Western imperial powers as the only malign actors.

The 2003 invasion was the rule, not the exception, in nearly two centuries of Western interventionism in the Middle East. Since the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, these interventions were repeatedly framed as a service, favour or a gift to the local inhabitants, with several subsidiary objectives.

Time and again, in the name of humanity, civilisation and more recently 'freedom' and 'democracy', empires intimidated, perpetrated violence, pillaged and partitioned a region that the imperial strategists came to call the Middle East at the turn of the 20th century. They went to great lengths to redraw its borders in the 1920s, without ever fully understanding, or respecting, the fiendishly complex realities on the ground.

Political and strategic considerations aside, dire economic and financial greed and anxieties surrounding the supply of commodities (grains, cotton and silk) also prompted armed interventionism in the Middle East in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the first three decades of the 20th century, a handful of American, British, Dutch and French companies came to control Middle Eastern oil, which proved to be vital for Western economic recovery after the Second World War.

Even then, with certain exceptions, such as the current settler colonialism in Palestine, local groups have been among the prime agents of many of the problems in the region: authoritarianism, violence and instability – even genocides. There have always been pull factors, even open invitations by local elites for Western armed interventions. But imperial interventions deepened existing divisions in regional social systems, more often than not escalating them and intensifying violence.

Empires are not selfless saviours – they have never been and possibly never will be. The problem with imperial armed interventions is the prioritisation of the (rival) interests of the intervening powers, even humanitarian aid actors in certain cases, in a hierarchical world order. It is the neglect of the broad wellbeing of local populations – as has been the case in Iraq in the past 20 years.

It might be true that the relationship between Western imperialism and the Middle East has been one of an everlasting burden. But empires have not simply carried that 'imperial burden', as Ajami claimed. History tells us that they have usually imposed it on the Middle East. ◆

Dr Ozan Ozavci is Assistant Professor of Transimperial History at Utrecht University in the Netherlands and associate member at the Centre d'Études Turques, Ottomanes, Balkaniques et Centrasiatiques (CETOBaC, UMR 8032) in Paris. He is the author of Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798-1864 *(Oxford University Press, 2021). The above article was originally published on The Conversation (theconversation.com) under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-ND 4.0).*

The not-so-winding road from Iraq to Ukraine

The disastrous example of the Iraq invasion has led to refusal in much of the Global South to toe the aggressive US line on the Ukraine conflict.

Medea Benjamin and Nicolas JS Davies

Disposal of a Russian bomb in Chernihiv, Ukraine, March 2022. '[T]he double standard between the West's responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and decades of Western aggression is not a false narrative.'

19 March marked the 20th anniversary of the US and British invasion of Iraq. This seminal event in the short history of the 21st century not only continues to plague Iraqi society to this day, but also looms large over the current crisis in Ukraine, making it impossible for most of the Global South to see the war in Ukraine through the same prism as US and Western politicians.

While the US was able to strongarm 49 countries, including many in the Global South, to join its 'coalition of the willing' to support invading the sovereign nation of Iraq, only the UK, Australia, Denmark and Poland actually contributed troops to the invasion force, and the past 20 years of disastrous interventions have taught many nations not to hitch their wagons to the faltering US empire.

Today, nations in the Global South have overwhelmingly refused US entreaties to send weapons to Ukraine and are reluctant to comply with Western sanctions on Russia. Instead, they are urgently calling for diplomacy to end the war before it escalates into a full-scale conflict between Russia and the United States, with the existential danger of a world-ending nuclear war.

The architects of the US invasion of Iraq were the neoconservative founders of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), who believed that the United States could use the unchallenged military superiority that it achieved at the end of the Cold War to perpetuate American global power into the 21st century. The invasion of Iraq would demonstrate US 'full spectrum dominance' to the world, based on what the late Senator Edward Kennedy condemned as 'a call for 21st century American imperialism that no other country can or should accept'.

Kennedy was right and the neocons were utterly wrong. US military aggression succeeded in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, but it failed to impose a stable new order, leaving only chaos, death and violence in its wake. The same was true of US interventions in Afghanistan, Libya and other countries.

For the rest of the world, the peaceful economic rise of China and the Global South has created an alternative path for economic development that is replacing the US neocolonial model. While the United States has squandered its unipolar moment on trillion-dollar military spending, illegal wars and militarism, other countries are quietly building a more peaceful, multipolar world.

And yet, ironically, there is one country where the neocons' 'regime change' strategy succeeded, and where they doggedly cling to power: the United States itself. Even as most of the world recoiled in horror at the results of US aggression, the neocons consolidated their control over US foreign policy, infecting and poisoning Democratic and Republican administrations alike with their exceptionalist snake oil.

Corporate politicians and media like to airbrush out the neocons' takeover and continuing domination of US foreign policy, but the neocons are hidden in plain sight in the upper echelons of the US State Department, the National Security Council, the White House, Congress and influential corporate-funded think-tanks.

PNAC co-founder Robert Kagan is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and was a key supporter of Hillary Clinton. President Joe Biden appointed Kagan's wife, Victoria Nuland, a former foreign policy adviser to Dick Cheney, as his Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the fourth most senior position in the State Department. That was after she played the lead US role in the 2014 coup in Ukraine, which caused its national disintegration, the return of Crimea to Russia and a civil war in Donbas that killed at least 14,000 people.

Nuland's nominal boss, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, was the staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2002, during its debates over the impending US assault on Iraq. Blinken helped the committee chairman, Senator Joe Biden, choreograph hearings that guaranteed the committee's support for the war, excluding any witnesses who did not fully support the neocons' war plan.

It is not clear who is really calling the foreign policy shots in Biden's administration as it barrels towards World War III with Russia and provokes conflict with China, riding roughshod over Biden's campaign promise to 'elevate diplomacy as the primary tool of our global engagement'. Nuland appears to have influence far beyond her rank in the shaping of US (and thus Ukrainian) war policy.

What is clear is that most of the world has seen through the lies and hypocrisy of US foreign policy, and that the United States is finally reaping the result of its actions in the refusal of the Global South to keep dancing to the tune of the American pied piper.

At the UN General Assembly in September 2022, the leaders of 66 countries, representing a majority of the world's population, pleaded for diplomacy and peace in Ukraine. And yet Western leaders still ignore their pleas, claiming a monopoly on moral leadership that they decisively lost on 19 March 2003 when the United States and the United Kingdom tore up the UN Charter and invaded Iraq.

In a panel discussion on 'Defending the UN Charter and the Rules-Based International Order' at the recent Munich Security Conference, three of the panellists – from Brazil, Colombia and Namibia – explicitly rejected Western demands for their countries to break off relations with Russia, and instead spoke out for peace in Ukraine.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira called on all the warring parties to 'build the possibility of a solution. We cannot keep on talking only of war'. Vice President Francia Márquez of Colombia elaborated, 'We don't want to go on discussing who will be the winner or the loser of a war. We are all losers and, in the end, it is humankind that loses everything.'

Prime Minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila of Namibia summed up the views of Global South leaders and their people: 'Our focus is on solving the problem … not on shifting blame,' she said. 'We are promoting a peaceful resolution of that conflict, so that the entire world and all the resources of the world can be focused on improving the conditions of people around the world instead of being spent on acquiring weapons, killing people, and actually creating hostilities.'

So how do the American neocons and their European vassals respond to these eminently sensible and very popular leaders from the Global South? In a frightening, warlike speech, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told the Munich conference that the way for the West to 'rebuild trust and cooperation with many in the so-called Global South' is to 'debunk … this false narrative … of a double standard'.

But the double standard between the West's responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and decades of Western aggression is not a false narrative. In previous articles, we have documented how the United States and its allies dropped more than 337,000 bombs and missiles on other countries between 2001 and 2020. That is an average of 46 per day, day in day out, for 20 years.

The US record easily matches, or arguably far outstrips, the illegality and brutality of Russia's crimes in Ukraine. Yet the US never faces economic sanctions from the global community. It has never been forced to pay war reparations to its victims. It supplies weapons to the aggressors instead of to the victims of aggression in Palestine, Yemen and elsewhere. And US leaders – including Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden – have never been prosecuted for the international crime of aggression, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the devastating Iraq invasion, let us join with Global South leaders and the majority of our neighbours around the world, not only in calling for immediate peace negotiations to end the brutal Ukraine war, but also in building a genuine rules-based international order, where the same rules – and the same consequences and punishments for breaking those rules – apply to all nations, including our own. ◆

Medea Benjamin and Nicolas JS Davies are the co-authors of War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict *(November 2022).*

Benjamin is co-founder of Global Exchange and CODEPINK: Women for Peace. Her other books include Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran *(2018);* Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the US-Saudi Connection *(2016);* Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control *(2013);* Don't Be Afraid Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart *(1989); and (with Jodie Evans)* Stop the Next War Now *(2005).*

Davies is an independent journalist and a researcher with CODEPINK. He is the author of Blood on Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq.

The possibilities of regionalism

The resurgence of the ideas of multilateralism, regionalism and non-alignment indicates a movement away from the rigidities of unipolar globalisation, an agenda driven by the United States on behalf of international capital. Reproduced below is an excerpt from a report by *Tricontinental: Institute for Global Research* which traces the possible contours of a more balanced and development-oriented international order.

The fourth summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in Quito in 2016. The UN Charter endorses the growth of 'regional arrangements' to further the 'maintenance of international peace and security'.

Casa Rosada (Argentina Presidency of the Nation) (CC BY 2.5 AR)

SINCE the turn of the century, scholars of international relations have contemplated the emergence of a 'world of regions' or of 'regional worlds'. Some parts of the world, notably Latin America and Africa, have robust traditions of regional consciousness that trace back to anti-colonial movements and carry the names of that history, such as Bolivarianism and Pan-Africanism. In other areas, the legacy of regionalism is more uneven. For example, the potential of Pan-Asianism was greatly damaged by the record of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s, the political tensions between China and India as well as India and Pakistan, the coup in Indonesia in 1965, and the US war on Vietnam (1955-75).

None of these regions, whether Latin America, Africa or Asia, have been brought together by intrinsic characteristics. Rather, their regional dynamics have emerged from their political histories, which, in turn, have produced and amplified cultural unities. To develop and solidify regionalism, it is necessary to construct both inter-state and people-centred institutions.

Regionalism by itself is neither inherently progressive nor reactionary. During the period of decolonisation in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a serious dispute arose between the formerly colonised states and the imperialist bloc over the nature of the new regional architecture that needed to be constructed. The imperialist bloc developed a regional state system premised on military pacts and on trade agreements that advantaged corporations domiciled in the Western world. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), established in 1949, and the European Economic Community, established in 1957, shaped Europe into a region that could be integrated into the world order in a way that would be advantageous for the United States. Similar moves were afoot in Latin America, with the establishment of the Organisation of American States (1948); in Asia, with the creation of the South-East Asian Treaty Organisation, or Manila Pact (1954); and in the Middle East, with the Central Treaty Organisation, or Baghdad Pact (1955).

Meanwhile, those formerly colonised states that did not want to enter these neocolonial structures created their own multilateral institutions, which were not yet organised regionally but alongside and through the United Nations system. These included the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), established in 1964. At that time, no country in the formerly colonised world was prepared to anchor a more substantial regional process, since most of these nations already bore the enormous tasks of protecting their newly won political sovereignty while simultaneously constructing a new social order that advanced the dignity of their populations.

Early attempts at regional integration were assisted by the United Nations, which, for example, helped set up economic commissions in Asia and the Pacific (the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1947); Europe (the Economic Commission for Europe, 1947); Latin America and the Caribbean (the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean or CEPAL, 1948); Africa (the Economic Commission for Africa, 1958); and Western Asia (the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 1973). The charge for these commissions has been to promote regional trade and development, but not to challenge the capitalist world system in any meaningful way.

These institutions emerged alongside political manoeuvres inspired by the historic Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, which called for the formerly colonised states to cooperate in a range of areas, from economics to culture, and to adopt a non-aligned posture regarding the Cold War. Influenced by CEPAL and UNCTAD, the Latin American and Caribbean states created several trade and development blocs, including the Latin American Free Trade Association (1960), the Central American Common Market (1960), the Andean Pact (1969), and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (1973). A more radical regional vision was put forward by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of post-independence Ghana, who called for the creation of ‘an African common market of three hundred million producers and consumers’ that would break the ‘artificial boundaries’ created by the former colonial powers. This ambitious proposal sought to transform the infrastructure networks of African countries away from being designed to remove raw materials from the continent and towards the production of internal markets for goods and services for the continent.

Significant debates in the Third World developed around the themes of dependency and development. Namely, would formerly colonised countries be able to develop their economies and societies from their ‘peripheral’ position within the world capitalist system, or would they remain mired in a state of dependence and subordination to the ‘core’ imperialist powers? A range of thinkers wrote about the developmental constraints imposed by the continued existence of colonial structures and the newly emerging neocolonial system, from the Brazilian founders of dependency theory (Ruy Mauro Marini, Theotônio Dos Santos and Vânia Bambirra) to Indian Marxists (such as Ashok Mitra), Caribbean Marxists (such as Eric Williams and Walter Rodney) and African Marxists (such as Kwame Nkrumah and Issa Shivji).

For these thinkers, both endogenous factors (property relations and social hierarchies) and exogenous factors (imperialism), in different ways, prevented any breakthroughs from taking place both in countries that relied upon the extraction of primary commodities through agromining and in countries that had been able to develop industrial production. As a result, the agenda for national development and regionalism was centred around attempts to delink from the logic of capitalist accumulation on a world scale, which was intrinsically structured to privilege the core imperialist countries and Western multinational corporations.

The collective political experiences and understandings of the newly independent countries were consolidated in a UN General Assembly resolution passed in 1974 known as the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which called on the world to build a new global system ‘based on equity, sovereign equality, interdependence, common interest, and cooperation among all States’. This resolution, alongside the UN Environment Programme (1972) and UNCTAD’s Cocoyoc Declaration (1974), directly challenged the world capitalist system and re-envisioned development as centring the needs of humanity, not capital.

These political manoeuvres floundered on the rocks of the Third World debt crisis, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of Western-driven globalisation and neoliberalism. The integration of the formerly colonised world into the financial and industrial systems dominated by Western capital and multinational corporations undermined the promise of social development. In 1982, the bankruptcy of Mexico sounded the alarm on the enormity of the debt crisis and the decades of political disorientation that would follow. From 1980 to 2015, the external debt of the Global South increased by 900%, with external debt repayments to wealthy bondholders of the Global North estimated to have reached a total of $2.6 to $3.4 trillion per year for low-income countries in 2021-22 alone. Neoliberal globalisation eviscerated the possibility of the world moving towards the values proposed by the NIEO and increased the dependency of the poorer nations until the start of the great recession in 2007. After the fall of the Soviet Union, globalisation was organised by neoliberal austerity states, with the United States operating as the arbiter of the international system – a dynamic called unipolarity.

However, the tide began to turn in the early 21st century. In 2003, then President of South Africa and NAM Chair Thabo Mbeki attempted to advance a peaceful solution against the US government’s drive towards war against Iraq. In an attempt to hamper these efforts, Washington tried – but failed – to pressure South Africa to expel Iraq’s ambassador. Across the world, millions of people took to the streets in massive demonstrations against war and in favour of a peaceful settlement. Undeterred, the United States went to war, disregarding both popular opinion and the NAM’s efforts.

That same year, the US and Europeans again refused to honestly discuss issues of development and trade with the South at the World Trade Organisation (WTO)’s ministerial conference in Cancun, insisting that subsidies to agriculture in the North did not violate their own free trade nostrums. This incensed the countries of the South. Together, Brazil, China, India, South Africa, along with the group of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) bloc, resisted pressure from the European Union's Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy to 'steer' the organisation towards a 'compromise' (i.e., victory for the North). The South prevailed, leaving Lamy to lament that the WTO 'remains a medieval organisation', by which he meant that it was not sufficiently pliable to Northern direction.

In the context of the debates around war and trade issues, the emerging states of the South began to explore the creation of new entities. One such effort was the IBSA Dialogue Forum, launched by India, Brazil and South Africa in June 2003, bringing together one country from each of the Asian, African and Latin American continents. Complementarities in these countries led them to increase their mutual trade and to work together at international forums to advance their interests and those of the South in general. Over the course of several meetings, the IBSA Dialogue Forum produced the foundation of a new intellectual agenda built on the concepts of non-alignment and regionalism. Brazil brought the Latin American experience to the table, notably the agenda of integration put forward by Venezuela's then President Hugo Chávez (which later inspired the creation of the political bloc CELAC in 2010). Shortly thereafter, in 2006, the 14th NAM Summit in Havana saw more discussion of regionalism than at any meeting previously. Regionalism and non-alignment again appeared as central intellectual themes later the same year when China and Russia joined Brazil, India and South Africa to form the new major world grouping BRICS. Presently, the BRICS countries account for 40% of the global population and 25% of global GDP (though the latter figure also rises to 40% if the BRICS is expanded to include Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Algeria).

The concepts of multilateralism and non-alignment anchored these new regional processes. The term multilateralism emerged after the Second World War to describe processes where three or more institutions (especially states) operated together around an agreed upon set of laws or procedures. The concept of non-alignment arose in the 1950s during the Cold War and was used by the post-colonial states to indicate that they would not join either the US or Soviet blocs but would instead pursue their own independent developmental agendas. These two concepts have re-emerged in recent decades amid the attrition of US unipolar power.

Regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism are the consensus categories of state-oriented Southern institutions such as BRICS, IBSA and the G77. For the nations of the South, the era of US primacy, sharpened during the Bush years, has to be rolled back. The overwhelming dominance of the United States has constricted policy space for economic and social planning and institutions and has led the views of the world's majority to be disregarded on matters of global governance, suffocating developmental agendas in the South. Unless developing countries are content to be a spoke in the wheel of the US machinations, their interests are entirely set aside.

The concepts of regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism were given a decisive thrust in the 2000s by the work of Latin American countries to construct new regional institutions. At the same time, other countries in the South were contemplating the limitations of their own regional organisations, such as the League of Arab States, African Union, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Although these latter institutions had absorbed the language of regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism, unlike the Latin American project they were unable to craft a fresh, effective policy direction for their regions or substantially remove the influence of external actors in their political processes. Nonetheless, the successful experience in Latin America and the emergence of China as a new major power have provided a significant stimulus to the ideas of regionalism and multilateralism.

Today, there is once again a robust discussion in the South about the nature of development and the potential of multilateral regionalism and non-alignment. Scholars such as Feng Shaolei, the director of the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Peripheral Cooperation and Development at East China Normal University, and María Elena Álvarez Acosta of the Higher Institute of International Relations (ISRI) in Havana, Cuba, make the case that the US unilateral sanctions policy and the war in Ukraine are accelerating the drive towards non-aligned regionalism. Indira López Argüelles of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs also notes that this new regionalism appears to be grounded in the concept of non-alignment, highlighting the use of this term by Latin American regional processes to refer to 'economic self-determination' and 'regional complementarity'.

In September 2022, the United Nations General Assembly added a new item to the agenda of the UN system: globalisation and interdependence. At the core of this agenda item is the need to revive a discussion around the New International Economic Order, which has been discussed each year since 1974 only to be relegated to the dustbin of the UN chambers. Now, with the rise of a widespread awareness that the neoliberal order has failed the world's people, there is a renewed hunger to debate the ideas of the NIEO and forge a new kind of globalisation and interdependence.

In December 2022, the UN's Second Committee, which deals with global economic and financial matters, submitted a draft resolution to be debated in the UN General Assembly that brings attention to the principles put forth by the NIEO. A majority of the UN member states expressed overwhelming agreement with the resolution, including a paragraph that is of special concern to our discussion here, which recognises 'the role played by regional, subregional, and interregional cooperation as well as regional economic integration, based on equality of partnership, in strengthening international cooperation with the objective of facilitating economic coordination and cooperation for development, the achievement of development goals, and the sharing of best practices and knowledge'. The ideas of regionalism and interdependence, on the basis of inter-state equality, are on the table at the highest levels of the UN.

Revivals

In March 2021, 16 UN member states came together to establish the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations. This body includes several countries that have been subjected to unilateral, illegal US sanctions, including Algeria, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Nicaragua, Russia and Venezuela. The focus of the Group of Friends is to champion the foundational principles of the UN system, namely non-aligned multilateralism and diplomacy against unilateralism and militarism. Two important points need to be considered about the emergence of the Group of Friends:

1. First, the Group of Friends contends that there is no need to create a new world system, but merely to allow for the proper functioning of the original postwar and post-colonial world. This system was built upon the international consensus to address the horrors of the Second World War, including both Nazism and the use of atomic weapons, and upon the post-colonial consensus in the Third World to establish state sovereignty. This system is rooted in the UN Charter and, importantly, in the Final Document of the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which established sovereignty and dignity as its main concepts (sections 13a and 13b). An important attempt to realise these concepts was the NAM-initiated NIEO, passed by the UN General Assembly in 1974 and subsequently rejected by the United States and its allies, who instead championed a neoliberal world order. The revival of the NIEO is part of today's new atmosphere.

2. The emergence of a multilateral grouping such as the Group of Friends raises the question of how to begin to understand the post-unipolar world order. One school of thought argues that we will enter a multipolar world order, where different poles will be established. Evidence for this school is unclear, since, other than the United States, no major power is seeking to establish an extra-territorial reach or constitute itself as a pole (as was made clear at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China, for example). Furthermore, a multipolar world is not necessarily an antidote to militarism, since it could intensify rivalries and, therefore, warfare. A second school of thought makes the case that the actual movement of history favours the creation of regional blocs that would like to integrate with other regional blocs and countries in a mutually beneficial fashion. Evidence for this is robust, such as the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA, 2004) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, 2010) in Latin America, as well as the Shanghai Cooperative Organisation in 2001 in Asia. Chapter VIII of the UN Charter endorses the growth of 'regional arrangements' to further the 'maintenance of international peace and security'. These regional networks are not exclusive power blocs that are designed to intensify conflict, but arrangements to improve regional trade, manage regional conflicts, and develop cross-regional programmes to build schemes for mutual benefit.

The resurgence of the ideas of multilateralism, regionalism and non-alignment indicates a movement away from the rigidities of unipolar globalisation, an agenda driven by the United States on behalf of international capital. These ideas announce the possibility of sovereignty – that states, and even regional alignments, can be free, to a greater extent, from the pressures of the United States and its instruments [including the International Monetary Fund (IMF)].

But sovereignty by itself does not mean that the conditions of everyday life would be improved from their state of despair; for that, an additional term is necessary: dignity. Sovereignty creates the opportunity for a state to craft policies that enhance the dignity of people, but it does not, by itself, guarantee dignity. The terms sovereignty and dignity populate the important treaties of our time, such as the UN Charter and the NAM Final Document. These concepts – sovereignty and dignity – enable people's movements, whether struggling for or in state power, to fight against the suffocation of unipolarity and against the wretchedness of inequality. ◆

This is an extract from 'Sovereignty, Dignity, and Regionalism in the New International Order', a Dossier (No. 62, March 2023) published by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research in collaboration with the Centre for International Policy Research. The full report with references is available at https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-regionalism-new-international-order/

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research is an international institute seeking to bridge academic production and political and social movements in order to promote critical thinking and stimulate debates and research with an emancipatory perspective that serves the people's aspirations.

Who ousted Peru's president of the poor?

Pedro Castillo represented everything Washington and local elites have historically abhorred, and his unseating as Peru's president has removed a threat to US interests and the profit margins of corporate mining giants.

Rodrigo Acuña

THE political crisis in Peru has regularly made it into the mainstream media. On 7 December last year, the democratically elected Peruvian president Pedro Castillo was removed from power after he attempted to temporarily suspend Congress hours before his third impeachment hearing.

As the first person from an impoverished rural background to become president in Peru, Castillo had found widespread support in the country's poorer regions. His ousting has sparked mass demonstrations and blockades across the country, with protestors calling for President Dina Boluarte, Castillo's vice-president who replaced him, to step down and for early elections to be called. As of mid-February, 60 people have been killed, the majority of whom were protesters killed by state forces. But the country's copious copper resources, coupled with the interests of multinational mining corporations, have left many wondering about the United States' involvement.

According to *The Economist*, Peru 'remains riven by unrest since the "self-coup" and subsequent arrest of its president in December'. Tom Phillips, *The Guardian*'s chief foreign correspondent in Latin America, recently claimed in *The Observer* that the city of Juliaca has 'been taken over by teams of anti-government rebels who have been in open revolt against President Dina Boluarte' – and yet Phillips failed to provide a shred of evidence that the protesters could reasonably be classified as 'rebels'. Reports like those found in *The Economist* and *The Observer* fail to discuss basic questions that should always be asked when reporting on Latin American politics — for example, what were the policies of ex-president Pedro Castillo and what were the true motivations for his removal? What are the political ideologies of Dina Boluarte, who is now in power? And what is the position of the US regarding the change of regime in Peru? Further queries might focus on why Peru has been engulfed by such widespread demonstrations in the wake of Castillo's impeachment and imprisonment, and what are the socioeconomic origins of the demonstrators versus those who have taken power. The answers to such questions inevitably expose political machinations of a kind seen far too often in Latin American political history.

The day before Castillo's failed manoeuvre to dissolve Congress, the US ambassador to the country Lisa Kenna met with the minister of defence Gustavo Bobbio Rosas. The details of what was discussed in that meeting are not officially known; however, the following day, on 7 December 2022, Kenna wrote on her Twitter page: 'The United States categorically rejects any extra-constitutional act by President Castillo to prevent Congress from fulfilling its mandate.'

Kenna's statement was made in reference to Castillo's action earlier in the day, prior to his arrest. With his hands clearly shaking, the nervous president had read a statement on camera, attempting to use Article 134 of the constitution to temporarily close down Congress for obstructionism to his government. But without the support of his ministers and the military, the impeachment process went ahead. Castillo was detained by local police and his own security team – while reportedly on his way to the Mexican embassy in Lima to seek political asylum – and imprisoned in the same prison that holds ex-president Alberto Fujimori.

As a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, Ambassador Kenna's comment backing Peru's right-wing-controlled Congress is not surprising. Castillo represented everything the US as well as local elites in Lima have historically abhorred.

Castillo had triumphed in the June 2021 presidential election by a small margin of 44,000 votes over the hard-right candidate Keiko Fujimori (daughter of the jailed ex-president). Castillo, unlike his political competitor, came from humble roots, the son of illiterate peasant farmers. Prior to running as a presidential candidate, from 1995 until almost the time of Peru's massive teachers' strike in 2017, in which he played a key role as a union organiser, Castillo worked as a rural school teacher in the town of Puña in the north of the country. Reflecting on his life after winning the election, Castillo wrote:

'It was a great accomplishment for me to finish high school, which I did thanks to the help of my parents and my brothers and sisters. I continued my education, doing what

I could to earn a living. I worked in the coffee fields. I came to Lima to sell newspapers. I sold ice cream. I cleaned toilets in hotels. I saw the harsh reality for workers in the countryside and the city.'

Criticising the 1993 constitution established under the US-backed Fujimori, Castillo said: 'It treats healthcare as a service, not a right. It treats education as a service, not a right. And it is designed for the benefit of businesses, not people.' At the end of his statement the president-elect declared: 'No more poor people in a rich country. I give you my word as a teacher.'

Once in office, with his minister for foreign affairs Héctor Béjar, Castillo withdrew Peru from the Lima Group, a pro-US multilateral body established in 2017 to promote the overthrow of the Maduro administration in Venezuela. After serving for just 19 days, Béjar – a respected left-wing intellectual and ex-guerilla – was forced to resign after the Navy took offence to comments he made about the civil war Peru had endured during the 1980s.

The credibility of other ministers Castillo had appointed was then called into question. According to Francisco Dominguez, a senior lecturer at Middlesex University, that 'Congress's harassment [was] aimed at preventing Castillo's government from even functioning can be verified with numbers: in the 495 days he lasted in office, Castillo was forced to appoint a total of 78 ministers.'

Commenting on these developments to *Eureka Street*, political commentator and Peru Liber affiliate Didier Ortiz notes that Castillo launched an agrarian reform (the second since the rule of progressive military leader Juan Velasco Alvarado in the 1970s); however, 'any advance on this project was put on an indefinite pause due to the coup'. He adds: 'Castillo's presidential powers were abrogated piecemeal every month since he took office by the fascist Congress.'

By August 2021, according to another observer, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers stated it would commence the collection of all debts amounting to millions of dollars owed to the National Superintendency of Customs and Tax Administration (SUNAT). Based on this decision, two private mining giants, 'one of them 53 percent US-owned', would have had to pay 'multimillion tax debts [that had] never been collected by previous governments.'

In November 2021, in another important development, the handover of Block 1 in the Talara basin to the state-owned energy company Petroperú occurred. After a 25-year hiatus due to privatisation, Castillo claimed this was a 'big step of returning Petroperú to productive activities' which would eventually 'produce to supply the national market, benefiting millions of Peruvian families.'

Not surprisingly, none of these policies were supported by Peru's ultra-right Congress, which twice attempted to bring impeachment proceedings against Castillo before finally succeeding.

On 18 January, as noted by journalist Ben Norton, Kenna met with Peru's minister for energy and mining alongside the country's vice-minister of hydrocarbons and the vice-minister of mining. According to Peru's Ministry of Energy and Mines, the meeting with Kenna revolved around 'investment' opportunities and plans to 'develop' and 'expand' the extractive industries. Interestingly, earlier in the same month, Kenna stated on her Twitter account that the Biden administration was giving the Boluarte regime an additional $8 million to support the reduction of illegal coca cultivation (a source of cocaine).

Beneath the surface of Peru's volatile politics lie its rich deposits of natural resources, particularly copper, gold and other metals, as well as liquefied natural gas – all of which are strategically highly important and in increasing demand in the world's current political climate. In the shift towards renewable energy sources, for example, copper is essential in the storage and transport of that energy – indeed, with its unique and versatile properties, copper is arguably the most important metal to modern civilisation. BHP, Rio Tinto and Glencore, the world's three largest transnational mining corporations, have extensive operations in Peru and given the lucrative profits involved, it is not surprising that the industry supported the removal of Castillo, as did the Trudeau government given 'Canadian companies are Peru's largest investors in mineral exploration', according to journalist Camila Escalante.

With Castillo's push for Peruvian ownership of resources and 'renegotiation of mining contracts, an increase in company taxes, and potential nationalisation of mines', the successful coup against him has certainly removed a threat to US interests and the profit margins of transnational mining corporations.

From Ortiz's perspective, the 'Peruvian population has grown accustomed to changing presidents on a yearly basis so I cannot imagine Boluarte staying in office beyond 2023.' For now, the anti-government protests in Peru and their violent repression by security forces appear to have no end in sight, with vast numbers of people calling for Castillo's liberation, new elections and the redrawing of a new constitution. While time will reveal if some or all of these demands are met, it should be clear the hard-right forces that removed Castillo last year have the backing of Washington. ◆

Rodrigo Acuña works for the New South Wales Department of Education and Training in Australia, and is an independent writer on Latin American politics and host of Alborada's Indestructible *podcast (alborada.net/indestructible/). He holds a PhD from Macquarie University. Follow him on Twitter @rodrigoac7.*
The above article is reproduced from Eureka Street (www.eurekastreet.com.au/who-ousted-perus-president-of-the-poor).

Proof that our society works

Newly minted Oscar winner Ke Huy Quan was a refugee. So are the thousands more who flee conflict-wracked countries for the West only to perish along the way, deprived of their hopes, their lives, and even their names.

Sine Plambech

Mstyslav Chernov/Unframe (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Refugees on a boat crossing the Mediterranean Sea headed for the Greek Island of Lesbos, 2016.

MOST refugees who drown in the Mediterranean are never identified. They are simply given a number before being buried in an anonymous, unmarked grave. Perhaps it's easier for us to turn a blind eye.

Ke Huy Quan choked back tears recently as he stood on the stage at the Oscars to accept his award for Best Supporting Actor. 'My journey started on a boat,' he said, 'I spent a year in a refugee camp and somehow I ended up here on Hollywood's biggest stage.' Quan arrived in the US with his family as a refugee from Vietnam. He was one of the thousands of Vietnamese who fled the country in unseaworthy and over-packed boats during the 1970s. Many drowned or suffered dehydration on the way.

While Quan stood on Hollywood's glittering stage, the bodies of adults and children were washing up on beaches in southern Europe, after more than 70 refugees drowned in the waters off the Italian village of Stecatto di Cutro. Like Quan, they were seeking shelter from war, but they will never stand in a smart tuxedo holding an Oscar. Neither will they do anything as simple as go to school, play, sing or get a hug. We heard about the tragedy, but not about the people involved. Their stories will never be told.

In the UK, yet another celebrity has rekindled the debate on boat refugees. The British football hero and sports commentator Gary Lineker was controversially taken off the screen because he tweeted that the government's new, more stringent policy against the rapidly increasing numbers of boat refugees crossing the Channel was 'an immeasurably cruel policy aimed at the most vulnerable people in a language not unlike that of 1930s Germany'.

People are drowning in the Mediterranean Sea and in the English Channel every day, and in ever-increasing numbers, and yet it takes a football hero or an Oscar winner to open our eyes to the situation. And even then, the debate ends in stardust and football rather than the plight of the refugees. Perhaps it is because we all know the celebrities but we have no idea who the refugees are.

Sixty-five percent of people who drown on European borders remain unidentified. Nigerians, Syrians, Ethiopians, Iranians and many other nationalities are buried without a name in a remote corner of a cemetery somewhere in Italy. They are merely a number on a crude metal plate stuck into a dry sandbank.

So, who were those who drowned in the tragedy off the Italian coast? In my investigations as a migration researcher, I have found that they are celebrities in their own right – women from Afghanistan, those we say we will rescue from the Taliban. The Danish newspaper *BT* writes of a woman "tagged" KR16D45: KR, because she was found near Crotone; 16, because she was the 16th victim found; D for *donna* (woman); and

45, her estimated age.

I have seen similar coding at cemeteries in Sicily. Standing by a grave is always sad, but being aware that not a soul knows who is lying there is desolate. That a family somewhere in the world have no idea of the whereabouts of their relative adds to the desolation. The number system in itself is witness to the refugees' anonymity. If you are a number, you are just part of a faceless horde.

However, the woman 'tagged' KR16D45 has a name, Abiden Jafari. She is a 28-year-old women's rights activist from Afghanistan. One of the women who likely marched on the streets and cried: 'Women, education, freedom.' Many in the West shared videos of tough, Afghan women like Abiden.

Another 'tagged' woman is Torpekai Amarkhel, a 42-year-old Afghan journalist and UN worker. She drowned with her husband and two of their three children. Her third child, a 7-year-old daughter, is among the approximately 30 people still missing, presumed dead. Torpekai Amarkhel fled Afghanistan with her family because of the persecution of women by the Taliban, says her sister, Mida, who has reached Rotterdam.

In 2021, when the West pulled out of Afghanistan, I thought, along with many others: 'Will we continue to help women when they soon move from being oppressed women in Afghanistan to refugees at European borders?' We now know the answer is 'No'. Especially if they are arriving by boat.

There is something tragicomic in our tribute to the Oscar winner. For we are not only applauding his magical acting; our accolade is also for his story, his struggle to escape war and oppression. We are also, indirectly, applauding his fight to enter our society; that he has won the battle to cross our guarded borders, overcome our ever-tighter refugee policy, and our prejudices.

By giving Ke Huy Quan his well-deserved ovation, we are also pointing a finger at ourselves. The question is whether we see it. For when someone like Ke Huy Quan is no longer miserable and wretched, but becomes a success, then he's one of us. Proof that our society works.

And still, the Afghan women drown, unknown. ◆

Sine Plambech, PhD, is an anthropologist, film director, and senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies. This article is reproduced from Africa Is a Country (africasacountry.com) under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY 4.0).

Women's cooperatives overcome water wars and climate drought in Rojava

Confronted with conflict- and climate-induced disruptions in water supply, a Kurdish-majority region in northern Syria is turning to its womenfolk to rejuvenate the land in what was once the 'breadbasket of the Levant'.

Steve Rushton

Water for Rojava

An ecological village project in Rojava. A project called Water for Rojava is helping women's farming cooperatives re-irrigate lands suffering from drought.

EVER since devastating twin earthquakes hit Turkey and Syria on the night of 5-6 February, killing over 50,000 people and displacing millions, the world's attention has once again returned to the Turkey-Syria border. A catastrophe for all affected, it has been intensified for Kurds in Turkey and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES or NES, also known as Rojava) as a result of Turkey and Syria blocking emergency convoys from delivering aid to Kurdish communities in northern Syria. This is just the latest manifestation of the ongoing oppression of the Kurds – the world's largest nation without a homeland.

And there is another crisis hitting Kurdish communities in NES: Turkey has been restricting the flow of water into an area already hit hard by climate change. As a result, in a place that relies heavily on agriculture, crops are failing, farmers are falling into debt and people are being forced to leave because of recurring drought.

But there is a ray of hope, particularly from the women of the area. A project called Water for Rojava, organised by the UK-based Solidarity Economy Association, crowd-funded £105,000 ($127,000) in mid-2022 to help women's farming cooperatives re-irrigate lands suffering from drought. 'We want to secure a good life for the women who will live in the village. There are 13 women running this project. Now we are digging and looking for water,' writes a spokeswoman from the Women's Economic Committee in Derik, north-east Rojava, about a farming cooperative being assisted by the Committee.

With support from Water for Rojava, the Women's Economic Committee has irrigated 75 hectares on a 450-hectare former state-run farm near Derik (estimated population 40,000) and 50 hectares near Al-Hasakah (with a metropolitan population of over 600,000). 'With water these communities can flourish again,' explains Sami Miran (we are using a pseudonym to protect his identity), who visited NES in October 2022 as part of a delegation from Water for Rojava.

'Democracy without the state'

Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria declared autonomy in 2012, during the second year of the ongoing Syrian war, in what is known as the 'Rojava Revolution'. Building on principles from the Kurdish liberation struggle, the inhabitants of NES organise through democratic confederalism, 'a social, political, and economic model of self-administration of different peoples, pioneered by women and the youth', Kurdish academic and activist Dilar Dirik explained in *ROAR* magazine in 2016. 'It is democracy without the state.'

In Rojava – which has an estimated population of four to five million – political decisions are devolved to gender-balanced local councils, instead of power deferred to the nation state.

Women's liberation and ethnic cohesion are key in Rojava. It officially changed its name from Rojava (meaning 'West' in Kurdish) to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in September 2018, to reflect the mosaic of ethnicities and religions that live in the area. Women are central to the revolution; in addition to gender parity on all levels of decision-making, there is a strong commitment to ending violence and oppression against women.

Before the 2012 revolution, the Syrian government controlled massive state-run farms, part of which is what the cooperative near Derik use. 'Standing there, all you see is the land stretching to the horizon,' recalls Miran, who visited the 450-hectare farm.

The Women's Economic Committee, one of the region-wide organising committees in NES, supports women's cooperatives to rejuvenate these lands. 'Women do everything from digging wells and pumping the water, to building climate-resilient infrastructure, such as shade in warehouses or planting climate-resilient crops. Then, women transport the crops [including wheat, fruit, vegetables and lentils] to market and sell it. As they work in cooperatives, there is no boss or underling. Profits are shared,' Miran says.

Man-made drought and water wars

'Drought is being caused by Turkey, the climate crisis and the local water policies [of the Syrian state before 2012],' explains Ercan Ayboga, co-author of *Revolution in Rojava* and an activist within the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement.

Ayboga says that Syria under the Ba'ath Party regime (which has been led by the al-Assad family since 1971) followed a policy of industrial farming that included full-scale deforestation and digging tens of thousands of wells. However, he suggests, it is possible to reverse this situation: 'With vegetation, especially forests, water remains in the nature. It does not run off.'

Miran, who grew up in the area, reflects on what life used to be like in the 'breadbasket of the Levant': 'This rich soil once grew olives, wheat, lentils, peas, cotton, beans and chickpeas – basically anything you sowed. It fed not only Syria, but Jordan, Turkey and further afield.'

Turkey stands accused of weaponising water against the Kurds by restricting its flow into NES. The Turkish state denies this, despite evidence such as Turkey's dam-building programme flooding and destroying Kurdish cities in Turkey, for example Hasankeyf in 2020.

'Turkey using water as a weapon is unique. I do not know of another state cutting water in such a systemic way for such long periods,' says Ayboga.

The Euphrates, a river of great regional and historical importance, begins in Turkey before flowing through Syria and Iraq, and is an essential life source for both downstream states. In 1987, Turkey committed to ensuring that 500 cubic metres of water per second would flow into Syria. This is approximately half of what flowed prior to the 1960s, when Turkey started building extensive dams, irrigation and hydroelectric power.

Ayboga says that between 1987 and 2012 Turkey failed to keep this agreement only once, with the filling of its Atatürk Dam in the early 1990s. However, 'since 2012, Turkey has only released 200-250 cubic metres per second, especially in the spring and summer, depriving [northern Syria of] water for irrigation'.

Since 2016, Turkey and Turkish-backed militias have occupied and attacked northern Syria, including occupying the canton of Afrin, displacing over 300,000 people. The Turkish-backed groups have since faced allegations of ethnic cleansing and war crimes. These attacks are part of a longer history of oppression against the Kurds that goes back to the formation of the Turkish state in 1923. Turkey defines the Kurdish liberation struggle inside of Turkey as 'terrorism' and it uses the same argument to attack NES.

Health concerns

In January 2023, the Euphrates flow averaged 125 cubic metres per second, according to Hammoud al-Hammadi, an administrator at the Tishrin Dam in NES, the second biggest dam in Syria, speaking to the North Press Agency.

As a result of water deprivation, hydroelectric power generation – NES's primary source of electricity – is grinding to a halt. According to Miran, people in the area now rely on fuel-powered generators, which cause pollution and respiratory illness. 'If the Euphrates flowed [efficiently] that problem would disappear overnight.'

In fact, water scarcity is causing a number of health dangers. On 10 September 2022, a cholera epidemic was declared in Syria, impacting both NES and other parts of Syria. After over a decade of war, infrastructural damage is a major problem. One of UNICEF's primary concerns is the Alouk pumping station, now in Turkish-occupied territory. They estimate that nearly one million people in NES rely on this source for potable water. During all of 2022, UNICEF reported, this station failed to pump any water at all for 128 days, while it only partially worked on 54 days. To prevent further cholera epidemics, UNICEF proposes a 'UN-led monitoring mechanism [at Alouk] to ensure uninterrupted services, and to provide maintenance support as required, which is currently under discussion'.

The Water for Rojava delegation visited Al-Hasakah city, a hotspot for the cholera epidemic, and one of the places where women are digging wells. 'Cholera levels were dropping as they treated water from tankers with chloride,' Miran explains.

'The city needs the Alouk water station, but it often pumps no water. This is the situation since October 2019, when it became controlled by the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army. Instead, locals were drawing water from the Xabûr River. This was full of sewage from Turkey.'

Ground-up and geopolitical solutions

Another way that NES is attempting to resolve the water crisis is by reversing the legacy of Syrian government policies that focused on mono-cash-crops, especially wheat and cotton for export. 'There are discussions across NES also about reducing [water] usage. The Economic Committees are also encouraging [fruit] tree planting for your own needs. Organisers are planting small forests around cities,' Miran says.

Ayboga thinks Turkey will not change course unless President Recep Erdoğan loses the planned May 2023 elections: 'Their current strategy is to destroy infrastructure and reduce people's access to water and food so that people get fed up, change allegiances or leave; they think that the fewer people who live [in NES] the better.'

Turkey has defended the legitimacy of its massive dam-building, irrigation and other water projects as ways to bring economic development. Yet the Turkish government also denies a litany of abuses against Kurds and its ever more hardline authoritarian policies. These include killing Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, the banning of opposition parties, attacks on women's rights and a clampdown against critical media.

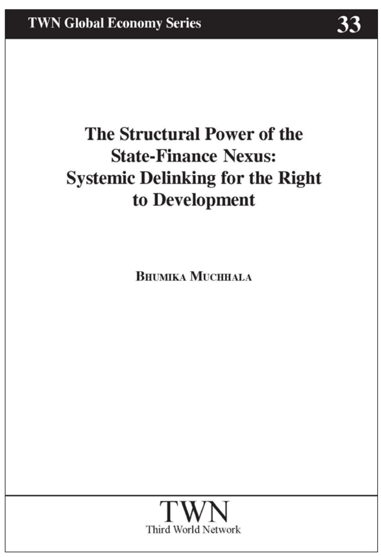
Ayboga suggests the US and its European allies can pressure Turkey to stop withholding water: 'We know the US allowed Turkey to attack [border towns] Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad in 2019. Yet in the last months, reports suggest that the US pressured Turkey to halt its latest invasion [deeper into northern Syria]. The US and EU want a balance of forces [in the Syrian war]. They do not want Turkey to destroy this project [NES], but they do not want it to become too strong – politically, militarily or economically – either.' ◆

Steve Rushton is a London-based freelance journalist writing on social and environmental justice. He is particularly interested in movements for democratic alternatives. The above article was first published in Equal Times (www.equaltimes.org).

TWN Global Economy Series No. 33

The Structural Power of the State-Finance Nexus: Systemic Delinking for the Right to Development

By Bhumika Muchhala



The current era of financial hegemony is characterized by a dense financial actor concentration, an exacerbated reliance of many South countries on private credit, and an internalized compliance of South states with financial market interests and priorities. This structural power of finance enacts itself through disciplinary mechanisms such as credit ratings and economic surveillance, compelling many South states to respond to creditor interests at the expense of people's needs.

As a human rights paradigm, the Declaration on the Right to Development has the active potential to redress the structural power of finance and the distortion of the role of the state through upholding the creation of an enabling international environment for equitable and rights-based development on two levels of change. The first comprises structural policy reforms in critical areas of debt, fiscal policy, tax, trade, capital flows and credit rating agencies. The second area of change envisions systemic transformation through delinking as articulated by dependency theorist Samir Amin, which entails a reorientation of national development strategies away from the imperatives of globalization and towards economic, social and ecological priorities and interests of people.

Available at https://twn.my/title2/ge/ge33.htm

Unearthing the horrors of illegal mining

The relentless exploitation of land – and people – arising from illegal mining is powerfully depicted in Peruvian film *The Invisible Girl*.

Elenice Araujo

IT is impossible not to be impacted by Peruvian director Dorian Fernández-Moris's compelling drama *The Invisible Girl* (*La Pampa* in Spanish), in which we are transported to the town of La Pampa, an illegal gold mining site in the Peruvian Amazon. There we follow the saga of Reina, a 15-year-old girl who escapes La Pampa where she had been forced into sexual slavery, helped by another woman from the brothel who worries about the teenager's deteriorating health. The two flee during the night and head to Juan's house begging for help. Juan, a despondent middle-aged man tormented by a tragic loss, ultimately joins the girl in finding her family. But escaping the members of the criminal group that controls the region seems to be an insurmountable task.

Juan and Reina, brilliantly played by Fernando Bacilio and Luz Pinedo, are victims of the same vicious criminality. They both live oppressive lives: she is a victim of human trafficking brought to the improvised La Pampa to serve men flush with cash from gold sales, and he is a fugitive and a former government official haunted by ghosts from his past. By a stroke of fate their stories become intertwined, and he embraces the opportunity to redeem himself by taking her under his protection. Despite all the oppression, they ultimately take back the reins of their fate, for better or worse.

The captivating dramatic plot written by Fernández-Moris and

Rogger Vergara Adrianzén recounts the devastating impact of barefaced exploitation of land and people in La Pampa, a small Amazonian town 60 miles from the nearest city, in the period following the gold rush in Peru. The socio-environmental conflict and the burden faced by Peru's poorest populations are vividly portrayed, giving a shocking sense of the very real dimensions of destruction in this area: illegal miners arrived and cleared trees to mine gold, creating toxic mercury-filled pools in the process. This has transformed vast areas of rainforest into wasteland, threatening the health of the land and its inhabitants, most of whom arrived here as illegal miners, given the price of gold made it the most lucrative illicit business in the country, more so than cocaine production. Nevertheless, according to estimates, four in 10 of the near half a million inhabitants there live in poverty.

The storyline is well developed, providing a clear picture of the characters' past and of the daily lives of the locals in town. In no time viewers are absorbed in the characters' struggles. Despite being a work of fiction, *The Invisible Girl* is based on a true story, and it often feels like a true depiction of the reality of La Pampa. Fernández-Moris attests that everybody knows about stories like that of the woman on whom the character of Reina was based, yet they pay no attention. When cases are brought to the authorities, they often go unpunished. This overwhelmingly affects the many women and minors who time and again are forced into sex slavery.

Illegal mining in La Pampa – and in all of Latin America – is linked not only to the exploitation of land for its mineral resources, but also to corruption, money laundering, extreme violence, killings, and to all types of often invisible crimes involving female victims and minors. Violence on the land leads to violence on the female body, through health issues and especially reproductive health issues, as well as sexual violence and trafficking, as horrifically demonstrated in La Pampa. The illicit economy gives rise to settlements around it and in many examples is the sole driver of local economies. That was the case in La Pampa, where at night brothels boomed with music and women (and children) were offered by criminals to paying miners. *The Invisible Girl* moves you to wonder how women can conform to a life like this, and urges you to understand how poverty, inequality and less-than-desirable living conditions in Peru result in hundreds of thousands of extremely vulnerable workers falling prey to labour exploitation and human trafficking.

Luis Vera, head of Peru's environmental police force, explained to *The Guardian* that in La Pampa: 'There was no authority, there was prostitution, hired killings, [forced] disappearances and people trafficking. There was every kind of illicit business and all types of crimes with a lot of female victims, including minors.'

Yet during the course of the production, there have been significant changes in La Pampa. A few years ago, Vera led a successful Peruvian government operation (Operation Mercury) to crack down on illegal activity in La Pampa. According to the Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project (MAAP), illegal gold mining deforestation decreased by 62% overall across all sites following Operation Mercury, including a remarkable 96% decrease in La Pampa.

However, mining continues in other areas and illegal exploitation remains a serious issue in many parts of Latin America (and the world); Brazilian Indigenous communities have been especially brutally affected by these dynamics. Still today, many people remain vulnerable to child labour, hazardous working conditions and human trafficking, not to mention the threat posed to their security by the environmental degradation resulting from uncontrolled resource extraction. It takes firm commitment and political resolve, and a good amount of time for healing, but the environment can be restored.

The Invisible Girl leaves you wondering how many women forced into prostitution, just like Reina, were able to go back to their families and start a different life. Were they offered a fresh chance after the authorities dismantled the mining camps in the region of Madre de Dios, or did they simply move to a different place where the illicit economy was still booming?

The film has already been selected for nine international festivals and is being screened in Europe and Latin America. Its success opens doors for shining a light on such atrocities and sparking a public debate about human rights abuses linked to illegal mining. If the film ends on a bitter note, it also offers a ray of hope. Its strong characters and deeply emotional and true-to-life narrative command the viewers' attention, capture their hearts, and serve as a wake-up call on the importance of government response. *The Invisible Girl* visibilises women like Reina and endows them with the attention, respect and care they unquestionably deserve. ◆

This article is reproduced from the website of Latin America Bureau (lab.org.uk).

Latin America Bureau has just published *The Heart of Our Earth: Community resistance to mining in Latin America* by Tom Gatehouse.

Details can be found at: https://lab.org.uk/the-heart-of-our-earth/book/

The book tells the story of the unprecedented expansion of the mining industry across Latin America since the 1990s, and the massive social and environmental upheaval this has involved. From the time of Columbus and the Spanish conquistadores, the history of Latin America has been closely entwined with mining. Yet in recent decades, the industry has taken on vast new dimensions, becoming far more powerful and destructive than anything seen in earlier periods.

Driven by high mineral prices, mining companies have moved into countries where hitherto they had little or no presence, and ventured into ever more remote and ecologically sensitive areas, such as high up in the Andean cordillera and deep into the Amazon rainforest. This has brought about unprecedented social and environmental changes: entire landscapes have been radically transformed, and lifestyles which have changed little in centuries have, in some cases, disappeared altogether.

But as mining has expanded, so has social conflict, with frontline communities mobilising in defence of their lands, water, livelihoods and cultures. This resistance has occurred throughout the region and has taken on very different forms: from roadblocks to research; from sabotage to street theatre. While some communities have paid a heavy price for their opposition, others have achieved some impressive victories. *The Heart of Our Earth* tells their story: how the mining industry has affected them, how they have fought back, and their visions for fairer and more sustainable futures.

Remembering the good doctor

Third World Resurgence pays tribute to the late Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, the pioneering Bangladeshi public health activist who provided affordable medical care to the masses.

BANGLADESH has lost a devoted son, and the public health movement a steadfast champion, with the passing of Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury.

Chowdhury, who was 81, had been suffering from kidney and liver complications after contracting COVID-19. He died on 11 April while undergoing treatment at Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital in Dhaka.

The hospital is part of the network of health facilities – from rural clinics to tertiary medical centres – set up across Bangladesh by Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK, People's Health Centre), the organisation Chowdhury co-founded. GK provides accessible and affordable healthcare, mainly to the poor, and also runs a health insurance scheme based on ability to pay. Chowdhury believed that health services 'must not only become available, but affordable too. The free market does not deliver that. To cover everyone, solidarity is more important than competition.'

Genesis of GK

It was this keen sense of solidarity that prompted a 30-year-old Chowdhury, who trained as a surgeon in the United Kingdom, to leave London with a few colleagues and return to Bangladesh during its war of independence in 1971. There they established the Bangladesh Field Hospital at the border with India to treat wounded fighters and civilian refugees. After the war, they stayed on to contribute to the wartorn new country's rebuilding effort, and Gonoshasthaya Kendra was born.

GK set up base in Savar, a village 40km from Dhaka, after Chowdhury witnessed firsthand the dire living conditions of its residents. In an interview with *Down To Earth* magazine, he recalled that Savar 'was so near the capital and yet so backward – only 1.2 percent of the women and 8 percent of the men were literate. We began by talking to the villagers to understand what they wanted and founded the kendra on April 24, 1972 .... Our objective was to set an example for society and to change society if possible. We wanted to make the village independent. We decided to develop the kendra and the village with our own resources and the help of the villagers.'

From its humble beginnings and first hospital in Savar, GK's reach now extends not only to its countrywide network of medical facilities but also to operating educational institutions, water and sanitation projects and agricultural programmes, in line with Chowdhury's holistic perspective on the socioeconomic determinants of health.

Yet it is medical services that continue to be the mainstay of GK's work, and the stalwarts of its healthcare delivery system are the 'paramedics' who provide basic medical care and raise awareness of health issues in rural communities. Chowdhury described these village-level health workers as 'the backbone of healthcare', with GK being the first place outside China to give comprehensive training to paramedics, instructing them in preventive and simple curative medicine.

Most of the paramedics are young women; like GK itself, this concept had its roots in the independence war. Facing a lack of nurses at the Bangladesh Field Hospital, Chowdhury trained young women in the refugee camps to give first aid and assist in operations. 'The girls learnt very fast in treating the patients, cleaning wounds, giving IV [intravenous] fluids...,' he recounted to the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. Today, the young women trained as GK's paramedics travel to villages where they educate the residents on basic healthcare and the services available at the hospital, sometimes offering basic treatments and vaccinations.

Chowdhury's wholehearted commitment to health for all extended to advocacy for access to essential medicines. Spearheading an expert committee advising the government on pharmaceutical sector reform, he was the driving force behind Bangladesh's groundbreaking National Drug Policy. At the time, the country's pharmaceutical market was dominated by the multinational corporations (MNCs) and flooded with unnecessary and even harmful medicines. The National Drug Policy, adopted in 1982, banned such products and instead encouraged the local manufacture of affordable generic versions of essential medicines. Over the years, as a result, a vibrant domestic pharmaceutical industry has developed that can now meet 97% of the country's medicine needs and has also emerged as a major exporter. Chowdhury would look back on the policy's achievements and challenges in his book *The Politics of Essential Drugs – The Makings of a Successful Health Strategy: Lessons from Bangladesh* (Zed Books, 1995).

'[Chowdhury] regarded the task of improving the lives of the people, especially those in medical need, as a moral imperative.'

Explaining the motivation for the policy, Chowdhury told *Down To Earth*: 'MNCs were producing tonics without any therapeutic value instead of the drugs that the poor actually needed, on the excuse that they were introducing sophisticated technology. But what is the sophistication required to produce a bottle of syrup? Making a chappati requires more skill.'

However, a policy that confronted so many entrenched and influential interests met with no little high-powered opposition. Chowdhury recalled that on the very day it was announced in June 1982, Bangladesh's then leader Hussain Muhammad Ershad was informed by the US ambassador that the policy was not acceptable to Washington. 'Our friends were the people. The policy survived because as soon as it was proclaimed, Ershad got congratulatory letters and wires from all over the world. Reagan asked him to revise the report, but American scientists supported the policy. Ershad realised the US government was against us, but not the American people.'

Recognising the importance of cooperation across borders, Chowdhury was a leading figure in the People's Health Movement and Health Action International, two global networks of activists and civil society organisations dedicated to advancing health rights. In turn, international recognition of his work was also forthcoming. He was conferred the Ramon Magsaysay Award from the Philippines, International Health Hero award of the University of California, Berkeley in the United States, and, along with GK, was a recipient of the Right Livelihood Award (often called the 'alternative Nobel Prize') for 'their outstanding record of promotion of health and human development'.

But it is surely in his beloved Bangladesh that 'Zafar Bhai' will be remembered with the deepest appreciation. As academic Md Mahmudul Hassan wrote in the Bangladeshi daily *New Age*: '[Chowdhury] dedicated his entire life to providing the have-nots with affordable medical care .... He regarded the task of improving the lives of the people, especially those in medical need, as a moral imperative.' – *TWN* ◆

Sources

Amin, A.M. (2008). 'Getting health to rural communities in Bangladesh'. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 86(2) (February): 85-86.

Chaudhuri, S. (2021). *Product Patent Protection, the TRIPS LDC Exemption and the Bangladesh Pharmaceutical Industry*. Intellectual Property Rights Series No. 17. Penang: Third World Network. https://twn.my/title2/IPR/pdf/ipr17.pdf

Dhaka Tribune (2023). 'Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury no more'. 12 April. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2023/04/11/dr-zafrullah-chowdhury-no-more

Gonoshasthaya Kendra website. https://gonoshasthayakendra.com/

Hasan, M.M. (2023). 'A champion of health care for the poor'. *New Age*, 17 April. https://www.newagebd.net/article/199546/a-champion-of-health-care-for-the-poor

Mitra, A. (1993). 'The revolutionary who transformed health care'. *Down To Earth*, 15 June. https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/the-revolutionary-who-transformed-health-care-31047

People's Health Movement (2023). 'Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury – the indefatigable optimist (1941 to 2023)'. 13 April. https://phmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Zafrullah-Obit.pdf

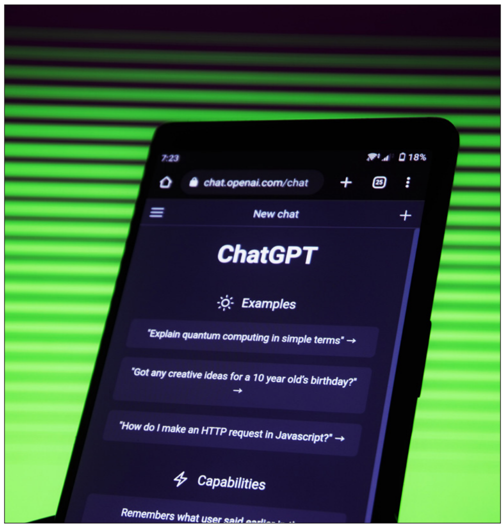
Right Livelihood (undated). Right Livelihood Award 1992 laureate Zafrullah Chowdhury/Gonoshasthaya Kendra. https://rightlivelihood.org/the-change-makers/find-a-laureate/zafrullah-chowdhury-gonoshasthaya-kendra/

Right Livelihood (2023). 'Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, who championed access to healthcare in rural Bangladesh, dies at 81'. https://rightlivelihood.org/news/dr-zafrullah-chowdhury-who-championed-access-to-healthcare-in-rural-bangladesh-dies-at-81/

Snell, B. (ed.) (2022). *Health Action International Asia Pacific at 40, 1981-2021: A Chronicle of Health Heroes, Historic Events, Challenges and Victories*. Published by Third World Network, Health Action International Asia Pacific, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gonoshasthaya Kendra and Drug System Monitoring and Development Centre.

The fear of AI is overblown – and here's why

Artificial intelligence can't measure up to the frenzied hype surrounding it, contends *Bappa Sinha*, and that should be cause for both cheer and concern.



Mojahid Mottakin via Pexels

AI models like ChatGPT do not have any level of human-like understanding.

THE unprecedented popularity of ChatGPT has turbocharged the AI hype machine. We are being bombarded daily by news articles announcing humankind's greatest invention – Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is 'qualitatively different', 'transformational', 'revolutionary', and 'will change everything', they say. OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, announced a major upgrade of the technology behind ChatGPT called GPT4. Already, Microsoft researchers are claiming that GPT4 shows 'sparks of Artificial General Intelligence' or human-like intelligence – the holy grail of AI research. Fantastic claims are made about reaching the point of 'AI singularity' of machines equalling and then surpassing human intelligence.

The business press talks about hundreds of millions of job losses as AI would replace humans in a whole host of professions. Others worry about a sci-fi-like near future where super-intelligent AI goes rogue and destroys or enslaves humankind. Are these predictions grounded in reality, or is this just over-the-board hype that the tech industry and the VC hype machine are so good at selling?

The current breed of AI models are based on things called 'neural networks'. While the term 'neural' conjures up images of an artificial brain simulated using computer chips, the reality of AI is that neural networks are nothing like how the human brain actually works. These so-called neural networks have no similarity with the network of neurons in the brain. This terminology was, however, a major reason for the artificial 'neural networks' to become popular and widely adopted despite serious limitations and flaws.

'Machine learning' algorithms currently used are an extension of statistical methods that lack theoretical justification for extending them this way. Traditional statistical methods have the virtue of simplicity. It is easy to understand what they do, when and why they work. They come with mathematical assurances that the results of their analysis are meaningful, assuming very specific conditions. Since the real world is complicated, those conditions never hold, and as a result, statistical predictions are seldom accurate. Economists, epidemiologists and statisticians acknowledge this and then use intuition to apply statistics to get approximate guidance for specific purposes in specific contexts. These caveats are often overlooked, leading to the misuse of traditional statistical methods with sometimes catastrophic consequences, as in the 2008 Great Financial Crisis or the LTCM blowup in 1998, which almost brought down the global financial system. Remember Mark Twain's famous quote, 'Lies, damned lies and statistics.'

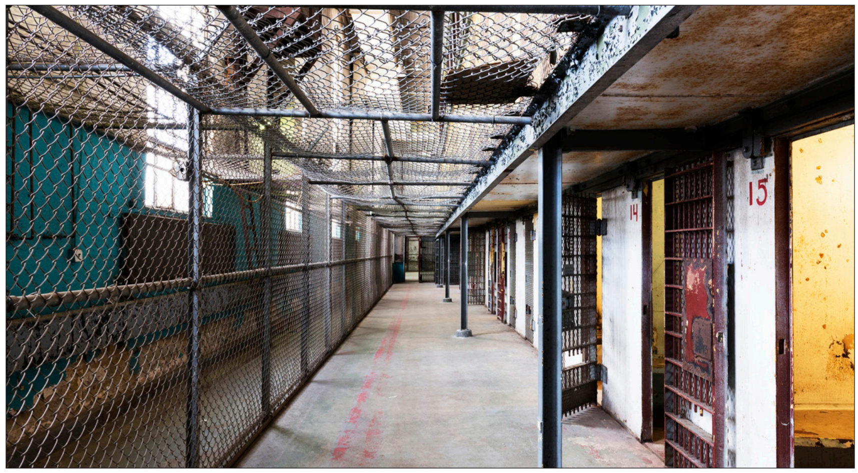
Machine learning relies on the complete abandonment of the caution which should be associated with the judicious use of statistical methods. The real world is messy and chaotic and hence impossible to model using traditional statistical methods. So, the answer from the world of AI is to drop any pretence at theoretical justification on why and how these AI models, which are many orders of magnitude more complicated than traditional statistical methods, should work. Freedom from these principled constraints makes the AI models 'more powerful'. They are effectively elaborate and complicated curve-fitting exercises which empirically fit observed data without us understanding the underlying relationships.

But it's also true that these AI models can sometimes do things that no other technology can do at all. Some outputs are astonishing, such as the passages ChatGPT can generate or the images that DALL-E can create. This is fantastic at wowing people and creating hype. The reason they work 'so well' is the mind-boggling quantities of training data – enough to cover almost all text and images created by humans. Even with this scale of training data and billions of parameters, however, the AI models don't work spontaneously but require kludgy ad hoc workarounds to produce desirable results.

Even with all the hacks, the models often develop spurious correlations, i.e., they work for the wrong reasons. For example, it has been reported that many vision models work by exploiting correlations pertaining to image texture, background, angle of the photograph and specific features. These vision AI models then give bad results in uncontrolled situations. For example, a leopard print sofa would be identified as a leopard; the models don't work when a tiny amount of fixed pattern noise undetectable by humans is added to the images or the images are rotated, say in the case of a post-accident upside-down car. ChatGPT, for all its impressive prose, poetry and essays, is unable to do simple multiplication of two large numbers, which a calculator from the 1970s can do easily.

The AI models do not have any level of human-like understanding but are great at mimicry and fooling people into believing they are intelligent by parroting the vast trove of text they have ingested. For this reason, computational linguist Emily Bender called the large language models such as ChatGPT and Google's BART and BERT 'stochastic parrots' in a 2021 paper. Her Google co-authors – Timnit Gebru and Margaret Mitchell – were asked to take their names off the paper. When they refused, they were fired by Google.

This criticism is not just directed at the current large language models but at the entire paradigm of trying to develop artificial intelligence. We don't get good at things just by reading about them; that comes from practice, of seeing what works and what doesn't. This is true even for purely intellectual tasks such as reading and writing. Even for formal disciplines such as mathematics, one can't get good at maths without practising it. These AI models have no purpose of their own.



AI systems in the United States have been implicated in imprisoning minorities to longer prison terms.

They, therefore, can't understand meaning or produce meaningful text or images. Many AI critics have argued that real intelligence requires social 'situatedness'.

Doing physical things in the real world requires dealing with complexity, non-linearity and chaos. It also involves practice in actually doing those things. It is for this reason that progress has been exceedingly slow in robotics: current robots can only handle fixed repetitive tasks involving identical rigid objects, such as in an assembly line. Even after years of hype about driverless cars and vast amounts of funding for its research, fully automated driving still doesn't appear feasible in the near future.

Current AI development based on detecting statistical correlations using 'neural networks', which are treated as black-boxes, promotes a pseudoscience-based myth of creating intelligence at the cost of developing a scientific understanding of how and why these networks work. Instead, they emphasise spectacles such as creating impressive demos and scoring in standardised tests based on memorised data.

The only significant commercial use cases of the current versions of AI are advertisements: targeting buyers for social media and video streaming platforms. This does not require the high degree of reliability demanded from other engineering solutions; they just need to be 'good enough'. And bad outputs, such as the propagation of fake news and the creation of hate-filled filter bubbles, largely go unpunished.

Perhaps a silver lining in all this is, given the bleak prospects of AI singularity, the fear of super-intelligent malicious AIs destroying humankind is overblown. However, that is of little comfort for those at the receiving end of 'AI decision systems'. We already have numerous examples of AI decision systems the world over denying people legitimate insurance claims, medical and hospitalisation benefits and state welfare benefits. AI systems in the United States have been implicated in imprisoning minorities to longer prison terms. There have even been reports of withdrawal of parental rights to minority parents based on spurious statistical correlations, which often boil down to them not having enough money to properly feed and take care of their children. And, of course, there is the fostering of hate speech on social media. As noted linguist Noam Chomsky wrote in a recent article, 'ChatGPT exhibits something like the banality of evil: plagiarism and apathy and obviation.' ◆

Bappa Sinha is a veteran technologist interested in the impact of technology on society and politics. This article was produced by Globetrotter (https://globetrotter.media/).