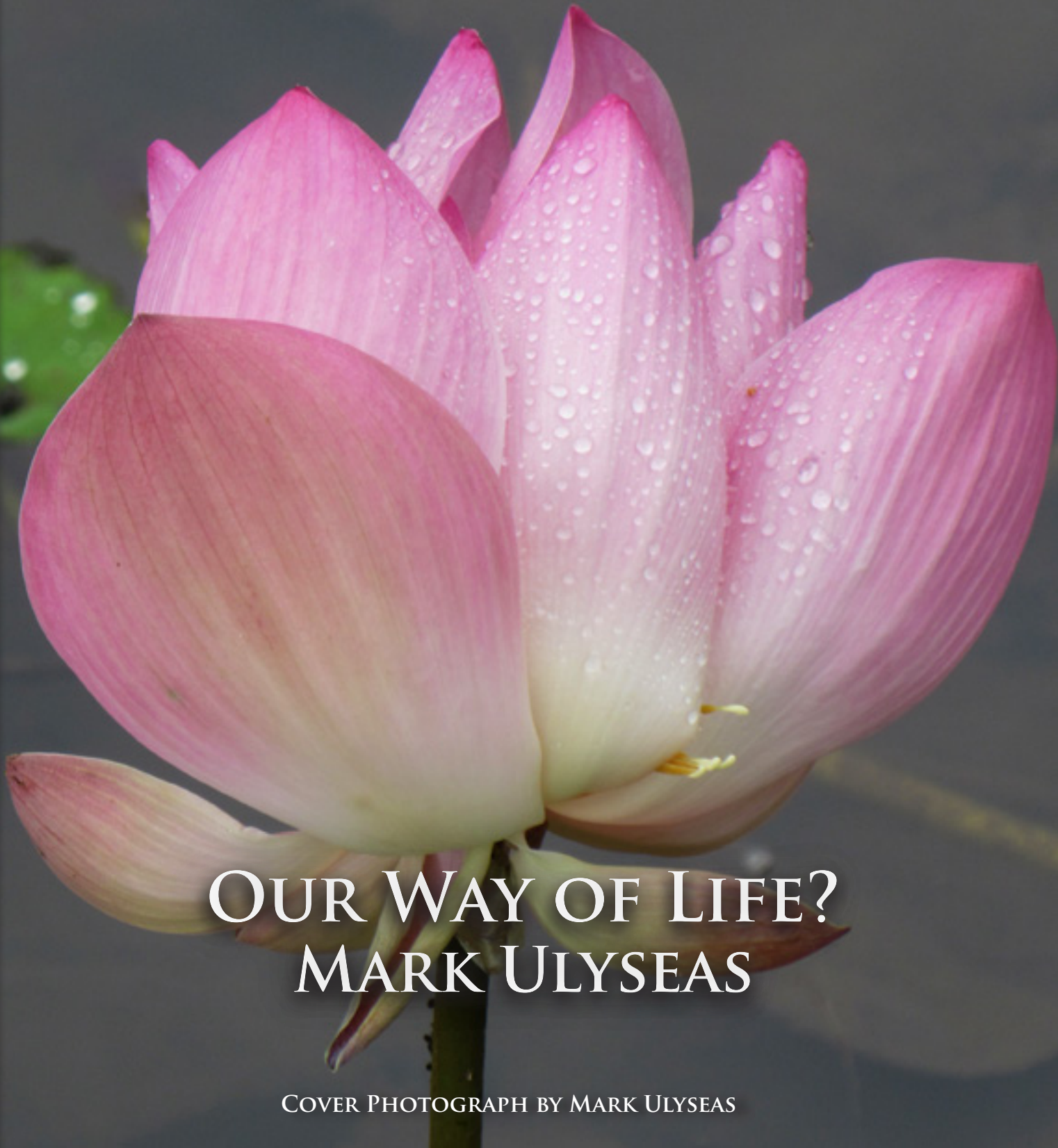


10TH ANNIVERSARY 2010-2019



Live encounters

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
APRIL 2020



OUR WAY OF LIFE? MARK ULYSEAS

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK ULYSEAS



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Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of the magazine.

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. Please help spread the free distribution of knowledge with any amount for this just cause.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photographer. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 181 publications (upto April 2020). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*, *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. www.amazon.com/markulyseas <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/>

MARK ULYSEAS

OUR WAY OF LIFE?

The unseemly display by western consumers pushing, shoving and beating each other up over rolls of toilet paper; and the rush on supermarkets has revealed how 'fragile' a 'civilised' society can be in the face of a pandemic. How easily it falls apart from within.

But it doesn't end here; politicians have jumped into the fray to mouth untruths about it being military germ warfare (?). The evidence of schadenfreude in the utterings by some elements in western governments of the deaths due to the virus in China and Iran leaves one to question – what is our way of life, our values?

While innocent people have been infected and thousands have died and continue to die in nearly 200 countries, racism has raised its ugly head with the beating of those who look 'Chinese' by 'locals'. An Indian Jew from the east of India living in Israel faced the wrath of 'locals' and ended up in hospital because he looked 'Chinese'. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/indian-immigrant-beaten-in-tiberias-in-apparent-coronavirus-linked-hate-crime/>

And the madness continues with a hearing in the US House of Representatives when [CDC](#) Director Dr. Robert Redfield mentioned the fact that posthumous tests carried out on some of those who had died of the flu proved they had suffered from Covid-19. (The [CDC](#) reported that in 2018-2019 in the USA 16,500,000 people were affected by the flu and 34,000 died. As of January 2020, 8,000 people have already died of the flu, and the season has not begun; so how many people have died of the flu, and how many of Covid-19?)

Truth has become elastic. Facts have become subjective. Trade warfare is the key element in creating this dangerous situation for humanity. The abject failure by countries to pay heed to the *Wuhan Effect* has resulted in heart breaking scenarios in Italy, Spain and elsewhere; and the rising infections and deaths across the world.



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Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

By criminally fiddling and misrepresenting the statistics related to actual cases of COVID-19 in order to serve State/political requirements we have become the executioners of the truth, much to the detriment of those afflicted by the virus. Perhaps more than 100,000 people may have already died and tens of millions infected, but we will never know – at least not the *living* public in general - for the dead have been interred or cremated, they cannot speak.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

If anything, this pandemic has revealed humanity's lack of humanity. Profiteering even on petty consumer goods is rampant and governments appear to be blind to this continued commercial 'rape' of the consumers. In war time profiteers would be shot.

But why should one not be surprised? This is the age of **#me**.

It was reported that the President of the USA, Donald Trump, attempted to buy a vaccine being developed by a German company, to make it available exclusively for the citizens of his country. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/not-for-sale-anger-in-germany-at-report-trump-seeking-exclusive-coronavirus-vaccine-deal>

Let's take a look at our humanity and how it is working in the age of the virus:

Italians over 80 'will be left to die' as country overwhelmed by fatalities. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/14/italians-80-will-left-die-country-overwhelmed-coronavirus/>

Media coverage of Italy's initial outbreak from northern countries was at times unsympathetic, and some believed Rome's response was over the top. The French ambassador to Rome was forced to apologize after a skit about a "Corona pizza" by French television caused outrage. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/italians-look-at-aid-from-china-and-a-series-of-slights-from-the-eu-1.4206136?fbclid=IwAR18eTQz37xnap1p2fRTmBJrPhx9VnEwjygeA_RZfq2s8IT_vrWBi04L_0

Early decisions were made by some EU member states to refrain from exporting medical equipment to Italy – the EU country that has thus far been hit hardest by the pandemic. https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/corona-the-eu-struggles-for-relevance-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus-a-83052f57-ed42-4a69-85fd-61e6795a4d20?fbclid=IwAR1aYd0Q_dRnlVoFfQSeVoRnlhoWJV-xzOqKMvsXJOzA-HzGG9sOrVwt7jeA

'Over 90s should NOT go to hospital if they get Covid': Government's ex-chief scientist Sir David King <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8154673/Governments-ex-chief-scientist-Sir-David-King-blasted-telling-frail-stay-home.html>

British shoppers hoard food worth £1bn – and should be 'ashamed'. NHS staff are facing empty supermarket shelves as panic-buying customers cause needless shortages during the pandemic. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/21/britons-should-ashamed-stockpiling-1bn-worth-food-coronavirus/>

Private labs, clinics and opportunistic go-betweens have been snapping up diagnostic kits, often selling them at steep markups. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/europe/uk-coronavirus-tests-profiteering.html>

De Blasio says city hospitals could run out of basic medical supplies within weeks. <https://nypost.com/2020/03/18/de-blasio-says-city-hospitals-could-run-out-of-basic-medical-supplies-within-weeks/>

In the USA people are lining up to buy guns. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/coronavirus-us-panic-buying-guns-ammo-nra-a9403886.html>

How an Austrian ski resort helped coronavirus spread across Europe <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/24/europe/austria-ski-resort-ischgl-coronavirus-intl/index.html>

When Donald Trump (USA has the highest number of known COVID-19 cases in the world) deliberately plays the race card by calling it the Chinese Virus he is opening the sluice gates to history.

Is the H1N1 a Mexican Virus or USA Virus? Are smallpox, bubonic plague, chickenpox, cholera, the common cold, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, measles, scarlet fever, sexually transmitted diseases, typhoid, typhus, tuberculosis, and pertussis that killed off most of the indigenous peoples of the Americas - European diseases?

And if Donald Trump expects China to foot the bill for the 'Chinese Virus' then his government (as descendants of the settlers) and the EU (original perpetrators) will have to foot the bill for millions of deaths caused by the diseases they brought to the Americas.

The time has come to make a profit from COVID-19 drugs?

<https://www.msf.org/msf-calls-profiteering-covid-19-drugs>

There is money to be made in war, in the manufacture of weapons but not in the health of a nation. Medical staffs and nursing staffs, the beleaguered foot soldiers - many have fallen ill and some have died due to the virus - are fighting a deadly battle to save lives despite the huge shortage of basic medical supplies.

‘At War With No Ammo’: Doctors Say Shortage of Protective Gear Is Dire - The lack of proper masks, gowns and eye gear is imperiling the ability of medical workers to fight the coronavirus — and putting their own lives at risk.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/health/coronavirus-masks-shortage.html>

Fortunately for Italy, it has received support with the arrival of doctors from Cuba and China with massive medical supplies from Russia. But this development has not gone unnoticed by the war hawks in some countries. Many of whom are terming these gestures as propaganda. But they themselves are doing little to help the Italians. What a shame.

Meanwhile in Asia countries are grappling with the massive movement of people and trying desperately to contain the spread of the virus.

How will the world’s largest democracy, India, protect its billion+ people? <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-coronavirus-news-amid-criticism-over-lockdown-centre-says-response-was-not-unplanned-2202209?pfrom=home-bigstory>

China has done its bit by lying from the start about the virus and the extent of the infection that had spread across the country. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/26/the-reaction-to-the-outbreak-has-revealed-the-unreconstructed-despotism-of-the-chinese-state>

This has further exacerbated the problem. Not surprising China baiters were quick to use the race card quite effectively and innocent Chinese have been caught up in the deadly game of political brinkmanship.

Tens of millions in South East Asia who depend on tourism for their livelihood are facing bankruptcy. Mushrooming joblessness has become a dangerous development for governments that have to maintain a delicate balance in societies already faced with social and religious problems.

And what about the rising cases of infections in Africa and in war zones?

The fragile peace of *lock downs* will not last long. Something has got to give and it is not going to be the powers that be but the people who are locked down who will decide the fate of a country.

Voices can be heard - concerns related to job and food security, and primary healthcare, and who is going to foot the bill, eventually. This pandemic has revealed the genetic dark side of humanity, the ugliness, the greed and the sheer selfishness of many who claim to be ‘civilised’.



21,000* people die every day due to hunger.
But hunger is not a virus, so we can overlook these deaths.

* <https://editorials.voa.gov/a/world-hunger-day-2019/4935420.html>



David Morgan is an editor and writer based in London and Manchester. He is involved mostly in historical research and has edited a number of books for the Socialist History Society: such as '1917: The Russian Revolution, Reactions and Impact' and 'The Labour Party in Historical Perspective' to which he contributed essays on Freud and Leonard Woolf respectively. He is currently finishing a book that will reappraise the ideas of John Ruskin. David also writes on political issues, especially the Kurds in Turkey. He is a long-standing member of the Peace in Kurdistan campaign for which in 2019 he co-edited a book, *Peace Poems for Ocalan*, with Estella Schmid. David also writes poetry.

David Morgan offers some reflections on the coronavirus and what it means for the world.

DAVID MORGAN

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Like many, I entered the world during a period when humanity was overshadowed by crisis. I was born in the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a time when people feared that a nuclear confrontation between East and West would bring about the end of the world as they knew it. That didn't happen, of course, but a nuclear arms race gathered pace and proxy wars were fought over continents as wide apart as Asia and Latin America. Millions died in those wars, although humanity was not annihilated. The shadow of the bomb hung over us until the Soviet Union collapsed which brought different uncertainties. As a student in the 1980s I wore my CND badge with pride tinged with a certain amount of fear. The nukes posed an existential threat and many feared that the extinction of the entire human race was imminent. Today, climate change and environmental catastrophe have awoken similar fears in millions of young people, including school students who left their classrooms and took to the streets to shame the world's political leaders into taking some action before it is too late. The extinction rebellion has now subsided because of the new threat posed by the coronavirus. This virus is claiming more victims around the world and government responses so far are proving ineffective in halting its merciless progress, at least in Europe and the United States, the so-called advanced "First World". Ironically, South Korea and China, part of the so-called "developing world", appear to have got the virus under control.

The threat from the virus remains real. It is a shared experience that will mark us all for the rest of our lives. Things will never be the same again. Nor should they be.

David Morgan

When the usually untouched celebrities can be struck down, when the elite are knocked off their feet, when the heir to the British throne is diagnosed as positive, along with the Prime Minister and other political leaders at home and abroad, we can perhaps be oddly comforted that we are all in it together. It is a shared experience though not one we would ever welcome. At the same time, we are instructed to stay at home, to isolate ourselves in our family units and to practise “social distancing”. It is beneficial to be anti-social, at least for the time being.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson pic courtesy <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/03/coronavirus-live-updates-china-reports-125-new-cases-as-its-numbers-drop.html>

We are compelled to spend more time at home, which is all very well if you have a pleasant home in which to live, one with plenty of space and amenities. If, however, you are confined in a tiny flat or squalid dwelling that lacks amenities and comforts, you are in big trouble. The prospect of such confinement is real and horrific for many. We should never forget the worse off as we seek to cope with our enforced confinement and try to make our own entertainment. One thing I most miss is the theatre, which admittedly is a very small price to pay for survival. I don't seek or expect great sympathy. In the 1980s when I became interested in the theatre, one of the most successful innovative companies in the UK was named Shared Experience. That group was founded in 1975 by Mike Alfreds, its first artistic director. He was followed, I believe, by Nancy Meckler in 1987 and Polly Teale in 2000. These names will be quite meaningless to many people. Shared Experience, which still exists, earned a reputation for its productions of some of the renowned classics of the modern stage, such as the plays of Chekhov and Ibsen, which were reinterpreted from a feminist and Brechtian perspective. The company's approach was highly influential and had many imitators. Its work helped make the modern theatre more meaningful and relevant as a genuine shared experience. I took from this the idea that creativity and culture were essential aspects of human wellbeing. Going to the theatre was not simply a form of entertainment, but about understanding life, human behaviour and social interaction. The closure of the theatres is a tremendous loss to our civilisation. Everyone should have the opportunity to partake of this shared experience. But for the moment, we face far greater challenges. What is uppermost in our minds is pure survival and this time there is not even a CND badge to offer any comfort.

As we are all now only too fully aware a shared experience does not always have to inspire positive feelings. We are compelled to experience darkness as well as light; adversity as well as delight; destructiveness as much as creation. At present the threats are all around us and they are growing. We are all in the same boat and it seems to be one that is sinking rapidly. When the usually untouched celebrities can be struck down, when the elite are knocked off their feet, when the heir to the British throne is diagnosed as positive, along with the Prime Minister and other political leaders at home and abroad, we can perhaps be oddly comforted that we are all in it together. It is a shared experience though not one we would ever welcome. At the same time, we are instructed to stay at home, to isolate ourselves in our family units and to practise “social distancing”. It is beneficial to be anti-social, at least for the time being.

The salutation “Keep Safe” quickly replaced “Yours Sincerely” and “Best Regards” as the preferred sign off when concluding a letter or email; actually letters written on paper virtually ceased to exist a very long time before the present crisis gave a tremendous boost to communications technologies and the expansion of virtual reality. We are forced to withdraw into our own little worlds, retreating more and more into an inner space, which we suppose we can more easily control, retreating as we fear the unruly reality that exists untamed outside our doors, beyond our consoles, laptops, tablets and smart phones. The present crisis has massively increased a trend that had been growing over past decades, at least since the invention of the internet and social media.

Where we will be when this crisis has blown over not even the experts can yet foretell. What we have all probably started to realise is that we cannot go back to how things were. Life will never be the same again. We might be told that “normal service will be resumed as soon as possible”, but we will all be changed by the experience. The world has shutdown and when it reopens many people will demand that the world is run differently, if they learn the right lessons from history and draw the correct conclusions from their recent experiences.

After the global financial crash in 2008, a decade of austerity was imposed on the people who were punished for the crimes of others. Similar austerity measures were introduced across continents. The people were forced to pay a high price for the mistakes of the privileged few. The weakest among us suffered the most and the rich continued to thrive and prosper; their partying never stopped. It became obvious that we were not really all in it together.

When the Second World War ended in 1945, people in Britain voted out of office their war leader, Winston Churchill, who had sought to scare voters that his political opponent, Clement Attlee, was about to introduce a “gestapo” into Britain and that Labour's socialist programme was alien to the British way of life. The people remained unconvinced and opted to put their trust in Attlee, who went on to create the modern welfare state and established the National Health Service, which we all enthusiastically applaud today without one single dissenter daring to raise one word of criticism; the free marketeers for the moment have been vanquished. The NHS is now regarded as our saviour as we fight the menace of another formidable enemy in the shape of the coronavirus, COVID-19.

But the series of curfews, executive orders, edicts and stringent penalties, amount to social controls unknown to any modern democracy in peacetime. For the present there is no end in sight; we must lay our trust in our leaders. Our vulnerability as free individuals has been brought starkly to our attention and our utter dependency on authority goes virtually unchallenged. Not even the most militant activists are going to be able to organise a protest march when conditions of martial law have been imposed with the consent of the public, many of whom demand even tougher measures, at least for the moment.



<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51796072>

In many respects, this development is proving to be a great gain for human advance and well-being. The crisis is showing us every day the true value of cooperation and highlighting how much we exist in a community, underlining the vital importance of collective action, the need for public spending, the strategic role of government in providing for the people. What is not so good is that the technologies of surveillance and the sophisticated mechanisms of social control have been unleashed as never before and this goes unchallenged by all but a small minority of isolated sceptics. “Big Brother” is watching over us and the frightened people are demanding even more of it. We are assured that the emergency measures that states around the world have introduced in their attempts to combat the spread of the coronavirus will be only temporary restrictions on our freedoms. We must endure short-term pain for long-term gain; that is the necessary remedy. We must all take our medicine.

But the series of curfews, executive orders, edicts and stringent penalties, amount to social controls unknown to any modern democracy in peacetime. For the present there is no end in sight; we must lay our trust in our leaders. Our vulnerability as free individuals has been brought starkly to our attention and our utter dependency on authority goes virtually unchallenged. Not even the most militant activists are going to be able to organise a protest march when conditions of martial law have been imposed with the consent of the public, many of whom demand even tougher measures, at least for the moment. Opinions will certainly change as people begin to break the curfews and flout the rules, as they seek to play, to socialise, to do what comes naturally. Only time will tell how much pain and discomfort we can tolerate.

The shopping malls, the cinemas, theatres, clubs, stadiums, bars, restaurants, hotels, schools, museums, galleries, bookshops have all closed. Consumerism has been suspended and many may warmly welcome that; we can breathe again because there are fewer flights polluting the air, there is no traffic on the roads, the streets are silent, the motorways and highways are empty; fish can swim in the rivers again as the once fetid waters start to shimmer as never before. City dwellers awake to the sound of bird song for the very first time. Let’s hope that encourages a greater appreciation of the beauties of Nature.

In these times of adversity, we are forced to invent a new culture, to create new forms of entertainment, to make use of our enforced free time in different ways. We can read books. For those who have never picked up a book in their life until now, this will be a very hard task, but many might try it and they might find that reading is at least as enjoyable as their usual pursuits. People can change.

Leisure time does not need to be squandered away in the pub or watching sport on a big screen among groups of rowdy revellers. Cerebral activities are as needed for the mind as physical exercise is for the body. Both are essential for our wellbeing. Let people learn to live as full human beings developing themselves to their fullest capacity.

Things will never be the same again, that is for sure. People are realising the virtue of community, public service, extensive public investment in the economy, a strong public sector, financial support for the weak and the vulnerable; even the homeless are being taken off the streets. The world that existed before this crisis was not all perfect; far from it. We must be vigilant and make sure that we don’t go back to the bad old days, the bad old ways. We desperately want our freedoms back as soon as possible, that is natural, but we also want to continue to help each other. Wealthier countries must help the less developed just as stronger citizens should help the poorer. Excess and scarcity exist side by side, but there is an urgent need to close this gap. This is a lesson that can be learned in these tumultuous times that we are all going through together. Nobody should be left to sleep on the streets; no household should be crushed by punishing debt repayments just as no country should be crippled with debt too. If we are truly all in this together, we must all be given a stake in our society during the good times as well as the bad. That is the positive lesson we can learn from this shared experience as we confront the current crisis. The world can and will be a better place. But it is all up to us.

Poet, writer and artist Greta Sykes has published her work in many anthologies. She is a member of London Voices Poetry Group and also produces art work for them. Her new volume of poetry called 'The Shipping News and Other Poems' came out in August 2016. The German translation of her book 'Under charred skies' has now been published in Germany under the title 'Unter verbranntem Himmel' by Eulenspiegel Verlag. She is the chair of the Socialist History Society and has organised joint poetry events for them at the Poetry Café. She is a trained child psychologist and has taught at the Institute of Education, London University, where she is now an associate researcher. Her particular focus is now on women's emancipation and antiquity.

<https://www.gretasykes.com/>

DR GRETA SYKES

The feathered punk angel and the sisters

The music resonates in my ears from the instruments played by the rose and ochre coloured angels. But who is the shadowy dark green, feathered figure with a cockerel's comb, like a punk, who lurks amongst them? His ringed fingers also hold a musical instrument. Erna and I are visiting Grünewald's Isenheimer Altar in Colmar, painted during the time of the Great Plague. It had ravaged the lives of local families. The torment was so unbearable that the priests attempted to bolt. Matthias Grünewald, a local artist, had been asked to paint the altar pictures. Perhaps the display of suffering could soften the pain of the people. His distorted figures with their swollen bellies would even move a stone to tears and thus ease the lonesome pain of the plague ridden victims.

The train sped from Karlsruhe to Colmar almost weightlessly as if flying with the geese along sandy acres, winter vegetable fields and distant blue hills. Erna is my older sister. She has an irresistible desire to teach me as if I was twelve years old. She laughs with her eyes almost closed and her painted lips wide in an exaggerated display of great amusement, whether shared by me or not.



Dr Greta Sykes

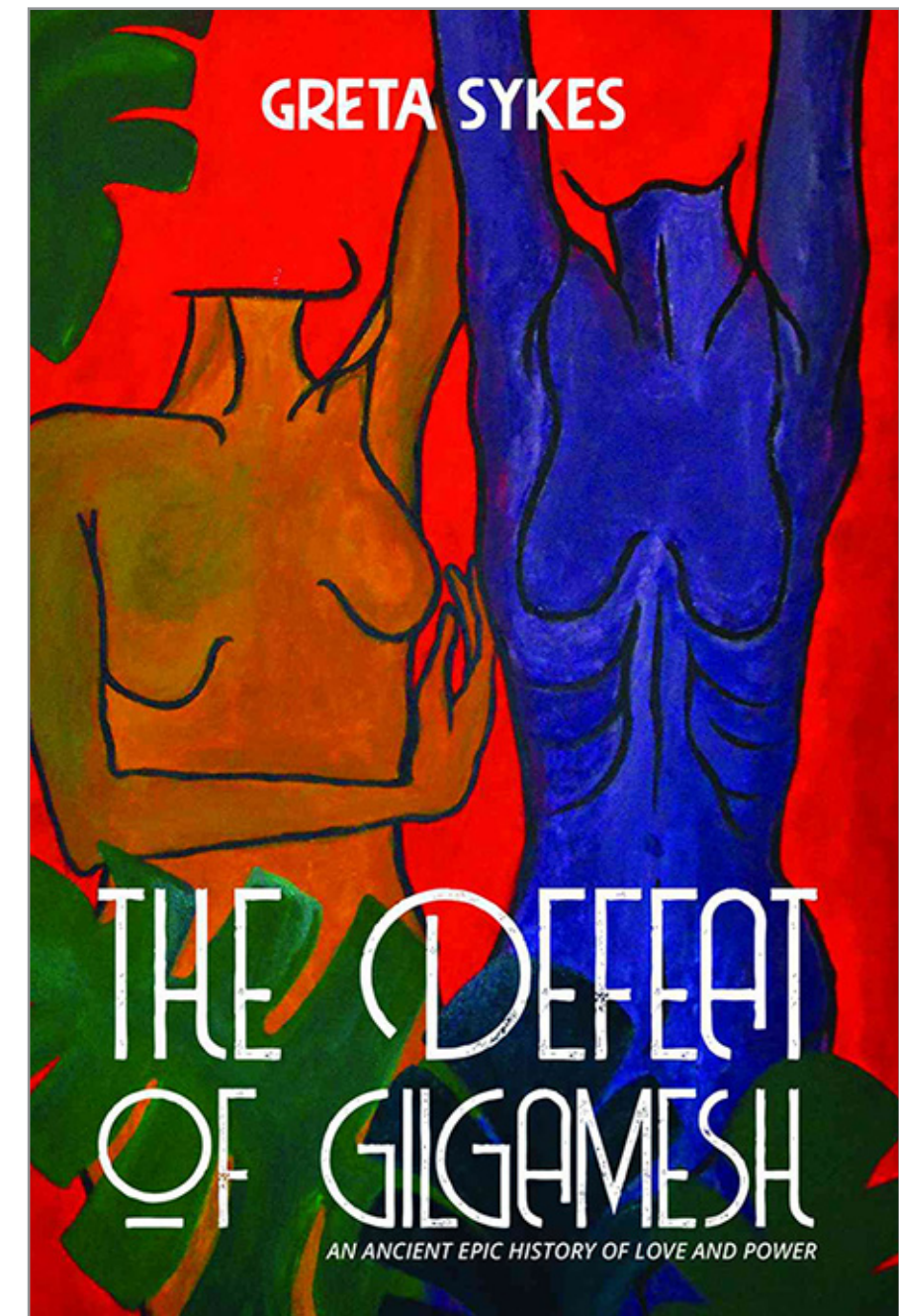
‘Sic nos rodunt omnes gentes.’ Erna chatted, mingling the occasional Latin phrase into her speech, like a diamond you want to show off. She had a habit of turning her whole face frontally towards mine Shiva like, her face a mask, both of us embroiled in a dance for survival, or perhaps to escape childhood. Her black contoured green eyes were trying to gaze into my face, catching me out, like an insect in a Venus flytrap. She is beautiful and exotic, I thought, like one of those plants that, as a small insect you want to keep away from. I felt irritated by feeling like a child impulsively disobedient and ready to escape. At one point she said exasperatedly:

“Could you turn to look at me and also move your hair aside a little, so that I can see your face.” She was spoiling my peaceful enjoyment of the landscape, and I stubbornly continued to eye the fields. After a while she suddenly exclaimed: “What beautiful hands you have, such long fingers, so graceful and artistic.” She smiled deceptively. I wondered when the unpleasantries were going to start, I mused and felt caught in judgments, like a bird in a cage. Extra bars could be placed on it any moment. She was sitting very upright close to me making sure I was not straying elsewhere.

I kept my eyes firmly fixed on the ebbing hills and meagre green shoots of the winter wheat, while part of my brain lit up pictures of Hänsel, Gretel and the witch in the forest. Is she going to come out and ask me to show my finger to see if I was fat enough?

Thoughts like these intermittently ruffled my mind, but mostly I thought of this strange man called Gruenewald. An experienced multi-media artist in water art, soap making and fine art Gruenewald’s life story remains to this day shrouded in the mists of the past. He lived through the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century and worked at the time of other great modernisers of painting who came under the influence of the Reformation, like Albrecht Durer, Hans Holbein and Lucas Cranach. His Isenheimer Altar painted to give relief to those suffering from the plague or ‘Johannisfeuer’ is one of those pieces of art that every school child in Germany was taught about with great reverence and awe. Some call Gruenewald the stormiest of all artists who ‘produced a tornado of unbridled art that pulsates past us and drags us into its current’.

We reached Colmar, the medieval town huddled in the Elsass under a bright and cold February sky. Suddenly we were in the tiny museum chapel in front of the altar. Blood red robes drape the figures that seem to relate to each other in a kind of trance dance. They look as if they are unsuccessfully attempting to move away from an endlessly bleak, forlorn land with just shadows suggesting light.



THE DEFEAT OF GILGAMESH

An ancient epic history of love and power by Greta Sykes.

Available at <https://www.gretasykes.com/>

Amazon, bookshops and publisher <https://www.austinmacauley.com/book/%C2%A0defeat-gilgamesh>

The wasted pale yellow and green tinged body of Christ, coloured all over with faint marks, suggestive of the plague, hangs in front of us with his head sunk on his chest. Over there stands John the Baptist tall and imposing and as if he is reflecting on the desperate scene he is witnessing. With an evocative gesture that seems to say ‘learn from this’ his hand is raised towards the figure at the cross with his long finger pointing at the dying Christ, giving a lesson in sorrow and pity.

“Someone told me the red drapery of the cloth is meant to be a symbol of the tongue,” Erna whispers into my ear.

“Why the tongue?” I mutter. The expressive folds of wine coloured cloth seem more a symbol of passion and love, than eroticism. We meander to and fro amidst the visitors to look at other aspects of the Altar. Each panel is presented separately, so that it can be viewed individually.

“I want to find the feathered angel,” my sister demands, pointing at the green punk figure on the exhibition flier.

“I think it is this one,” I reply wondering why she is keen on him. His dark presence amongst the joyful musicians is disturbing. There is an eerie sense of foreboding in his thickly furred body, his feathered arms, his huge olive coloured wings, his querying glance into the heavens. Everything is thrown into question in his look. Hidden cloven hoofs come to mind. Erna leans into the painting for a closer glance. For a moment she seems to become the punk angel with his reddish high toupee like a cock’s comb. Is her hair not also wound into a high reddish toupee? My stomach tightens. We move to another altar scene.

“Do you think this is a cradle?” she asks me, pointing to an item next to the joyous Mary holding her newborn baby in its rags of cloth.

“I think it’s her bed”, I reply. I am lost in the haunting and fragile depiction showing Mary in the intimacy of her bedroom with the water butt and a chamber pot present. Erna is determined to argue about the bed. She wants it to be a cradle. Her face closing in on mine Lucifer like and, with a devilish grin, she murmurs:

“We are slandering! I think we are upsetting these people here.” She looks triumphantly around herself, relishing the conspiracy, as if the other visitors were to be despised for their innocence. Despi-sed, my mind hums Handel. Had the feathered punk angel stepped out of the canvas? On another panel called ‘Saint Anthony’s temptation’ the old man is tugged along the murky ground by his hair. His facial expression shows him yelling with pain and fear at the sight of the nightmarish beasts who threaten him with claws, clubs and fangs. All around him pock marked monsters and reptiles peer out of the darkness at him, while a desperate plague ridden sick man with a swollen belly and open wounds leans into the corner of the painting, ready to give up his soul.

The altar was exhausting and we needed a break. I was relieved to see the ordinary stone pavement and street signs outside, as if we had made a lucky escape. We found an open café. We chatted about the sights and had soup and tea. I wondered why she had not mentioned that she had already visited the exhibition with our sister Marta.

‘You’ve already seen the exhibition with Marta, haven’t you?’

“How do you know?” she asked sharply, as if I had betrayed a confidential secret.

“I talked to her the other day,” I replied nonchalantly.

She continued to make conversation and ignored my question. I was not going to let her off the hook that easily and asked her again directly, addressing my sister Marta’s health issues.

“How was she, when you saw her?”

“She has suffered, so I just let her talk. She wanted to tell me a lot of things.”

When I spoke to my sister Marta recently about Erna she also told to me that she had just listened, because Erna needed to talk a lot. By now we were rushing back to the station in the growing darkness. She continued.

“I don’t want to talk about her. She behaved very badly at my husband’s funeral. I can’t forgive her for that.”

I began to feel sad for her. She seemed so lonely. She had not seen Marta for many years. Her contact with our sister Ulla had also broken off. Her husband was dead, her children far away in other countries. The terrifying dog- and frog-eyed reptiles started to lurk in the shadows of the waning light. I tried to find reassuring reasons for the lonely and angry feelings plaguing her, that did not involve blaming our sisters.

“Maybe, it was the men in your lives that stopped you getting on with each other.”
I am thinking of the jealous intrigues caused by a man who had first wooed Erna, the oldest, only to change his mind and choose a younger one.

“No, it wasn’t,” she retorted sharply.

“I just did not get on with mother. She could not handle me. Did you know that when our mother was pregnant with Ulla, they gave me away to a children’s home for two months. When I was brought home again, I had lost all my speech and my hair. I was weak and feeble!”

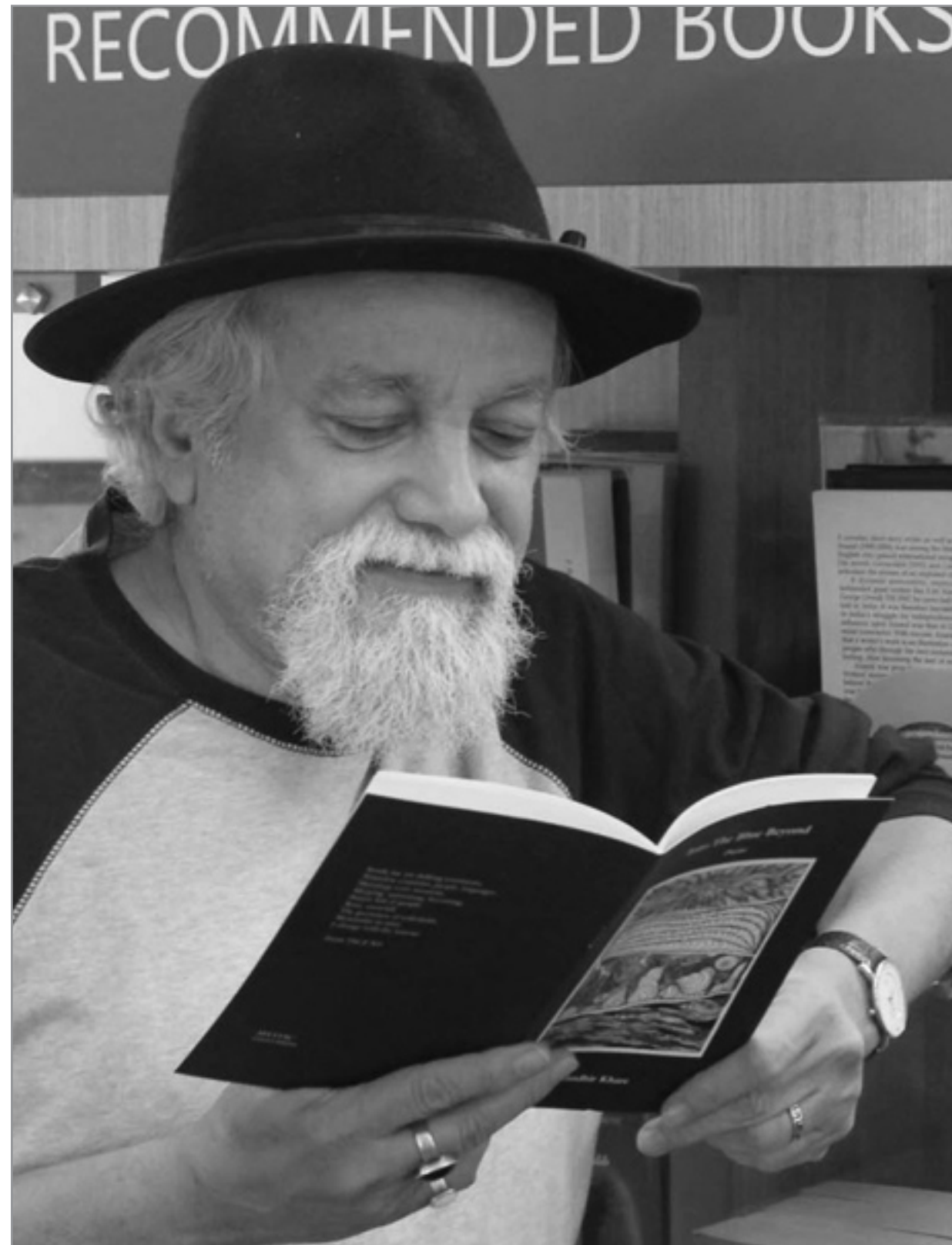
We are close to the station at last. So here was one of the dark secrets she had harboured all these years. Erna as a victim. I shuddered but could hardly believe it. It was all the fault of our mother whowas long in her grave! She knew how fond we were of our mother, a generous and kind person. My stomach crunched tightly. I saw the feathered punk angel raise his huge bronze wings and fly off into the night contemptuously. She added:

“I never got on with mother. She found me too difficult. She was not intelligent enough for me.”

That remark grazed me as if with cut glass. My mother became kneeling Mary Magdalena with her beautiful hair holding her clasped hands high in utter misery. My sister Erna a wounded, neglected child? Hardly. Her disdainful and vain behaviour just a façade? What was the hidden truth behind the deceptive mask-like smile she kept pushing into my face? Soon enough we were seated in the flying train amidst the darkening landscape. Hills, fields, pylons rushed by and so did the dark shadows from the stories of the family’s past, like Grünewald reptiles with cold, glassy frog’s eyes, horns and claws. I wondered about the lonely anguish she had harboured all these years. Idle

reptiles from Grünewald’s temptation walked past the glass door of the compartment of the train. Lucifer’s comb shone. I tried an appeasing smile towards her in an attempt to soothe her brittle feelings but was met by a stony glare. My eyes returned to the fading hills outside with a wish to banish the ghosts from the past when she suddenly hissed in my ear: “You have mother’s mouth.”

‘I have my own mouth,’ I replied stupefied by her spiky outburst. Her obsessive studying of my face had enclosed me in a prison of her past. I had become the bad mother who had sent her child into exile. A frozen moment in her life a long time ago was transformed into molten lava, as she tried to lure me into her past. I turned to look at her. Her pale-reddish hair rose high above her forehead. Her eyes were cold and bland, her mouth had closed down. The huge amused smiles were gone. Who was the fallen angel now? The fallen angel with the cock’s comb sat next to me enticing me to feel guilty. Her mental image of the past had nothing to do with me. I had become wise to the games she was playing. I shrugged my shoulders internally. I decided to ignore her and all the glassy eyed reptiles. I pondered how she could be a badly behaved child who wanted me to be the cruel mother. But that was a game I was not prepared to play.



Randhir Khare is a distinguished writer, artist, teacher and theatre personality. He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards for his unique contribution to culture and education. His 36 volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, translation from tribal dialects and other writings as well as his seven solo exhibitions all explore themes of identity, belonging and the struggle to stay human in a violent and fragmented world. He has more recently spearheaded an initiative to enrich formal education through the experience of the arts. <https://randhirkhare.in/>

RANDHIR KHARE

Without The Sound of My Heartbeat

“I can’t bear it anymore,” said my neighbour, when he caught up with me on my morning walk.

“What can’t you stand?” I enquired, valiantly trying to focus on my steady pace and breathing.

“Strange fellow,” came the reply.

“Who is?”

“You.” Silence followed. Then he whispered hoarsely. “You are.”

I focussed on my walk, each footfall softly and firmly landing, one after another, the gravel and mud responded to my soles. Around me, the morning sunlight streamed through the trees and dappled the shaded lane ahead of me. High up from the green domes above, birdcalls flooded the air, each trill, whoop, whistle and sonorous song was uniquely individual and yet complemented the others in joyful union as if in agreement – “what a beautiful day.”

My neighbour’s presence now hung like an albatross around my neck. Though I was tempted to cut the cord and drop the dead bird by the wayside, I let it hang, swinging like a pendulum. “I’ll tell you what I am talking about,” he said with a sigh. “It’s these birds. They just don’t keep quiet. Even before the sun is up, a bloody whooping starts off just outside my window, announcing the start of a chaotic day, crazy with birdcalls. And let me tell you one thing, the night is no better. The street dogs everywhere either howl at the moon, chase cars and yap, fight over bitches in heat or challenge each other. I mean, this is crazy. In the gular tree giant fruit bats screech as they feed off the wild figs.... and cats bawling....its hell....do you sleep through it all?”

Randhir Khare



Visiting BulBul

I didn't respond, cut the cord and let the albatross slip off my neck and fall with a great floppy thump as I walked on, through the morning, beneath the domes of trees green with song. I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat. The space in me was filled with light.

That was two decades ago when this city was a sprawling lazy town and families of mongoose resided in gardens, discreetly hunting at night whilst owls, bats and night jars kept them company. The days were filled with numerous species of birds – resident, local migrants and long distant visitors. From the tiny Ashy Wren Warblers, Spider Hunters, Flower Peckers and Sunbirds to great flocks of Green Pigeon, Green Bee Eaters and Rosy Pastors and on to Black Necked Storks all the way from the cold reaches of the north and countless others from far away continents. At any time, there were more than fifty species of birds who fed, roosted, courted, created families and moved on.

At the time, I inhabited a studio apartment at the far of a housing society. I was on the second floor and my small terrace garden overlooked an open area lined by trees. Towering above the others was an Acacia with its rusty yellow blooms and high shady boughs. It was home to two families of Grey Hornbill, Jungle Crows and a host of other visitors. Among them, were house crows.

One season I sat with my binoculars, watching a koel (a member of the cuckoo order of birds) lay its eggs in a crow's nest. When the babies hatched, the cuckoo nestlings shoved the baby crows out of the nest. Four babies crashed to their doom. Oblivious of what exactly was happening, the female crow continued to feed her remaining babies till they were old enough to take off on their own. One of them, during practise sessions, would land on my terrace and perch on the green bamboo trellis. He was a shiny black male who seemed very pleased with his plumage and constantly preened. At the end of his display he'd stretch his neck and shuffle about trying to call like a House Crow, managing only a sad croak. Clearly, an identity crisis.

Then one day, the magic happened. A passing Koel called out passionately, filling the air with a series of beautiful rolling notes. The bird on the trellis began to shiver in seeming ecstasy and called in reply. Surprised by the unusual notes that came out of his body, he shot into the air, did three flips and vanished into the morning light, leaving behind faint traces of his song. He had found himself.



Baby Bulbuls visit my apartment.

There were other birds in my life at that time and I courted them with a large terracotta bird bath filled with water and a flat terracotta plate loaded with papaya and grain. My feathered friends came in droves, to bathe, drink water, eat and roost in the shade of the hibiscus, pomegranate and lime shrubs and among the shady creepers of bougainvillea. The Brahminy mynas (like true Brahmins) bathed before they ate whilst the others lower in the order, waited respectfully for their turn. The Ashy Wren Warblers and Spotted Fan Tail Fly Catchers were skittish whilst the Flower Peckers, Sunbirds and Tailor Birds just couldn't keep still. The Sparrows, poor dears, waited till all the others had left before they bathed and ate. There were three female Sparrows who would bring their young and teach them how to feed themselves.

I was blessed by the company of birds. For me, they were messengers of Freedom, Joy and Companionship. They were with me through my moments of loneliness and heartbreak. In fact, I was even adopted by one – a House Crow. She turned up one day on my terrace, perched on my arm-chair, cawing loudly, obviously asking for food. It was only after she had visited a few times, did I notice that she had only one leg. The other was devoid of its lower half. But her balance was perfect.

She wasn't interested in the grain and fruit in the bowl and plate outside but wanted something off my plate. One lunch time, she entered the studio, from under the curtain and sat watching me. So I offered her a morsel.

From then on, we ate together – I at my table and she outside.

She turned up like clockwork every day. About a week or so later, she started presenting me with gifts – a stinking piece of rotten meat, fish bones, entrails of a rat and a lot of other unmentionables. She'd place the offering on the terrace floor and then hop on to the back of the chair and caw her head off. "Greetings from Caw Land, I got ya an offering boss."

One day, came her ultimate gift – a little girl's T shirt decorated by a big beautiful butterfly, nicked from a nearby clothesline. She seemed extra excited that day and bobbed up and down on the chair.

"Surprise, surprise."

That was her last visit.

With the passing of time, change began mushrooming everywhere. Trees and gardens disappeared. Roads widened, avenues of ancient trees whose roots reached deep into the very womb of the city were replaced by lesser fast growing trees whose roots were shallow and wood soft...so soft that a single storm can bring them down. My companions visited less frequently. The sparrows disappeared, other smaller birds perished in large numbers. Artificial lawns began appearing. Opened spaces were steadily crusted by apartment blocks, car parks, malls and other urban scabs.

I shifted out of the studio apartment which I had inhabited to a larger apartment. For months I had no feathered friends, except for Pariah Kites that wheeled overhead, spiralling up and down the thermals, an occasional flock of swerving and dive-bombing Swifts, roosting Blue Rock Pigeons and House Crows – plenty of them.

Then came Spotted Munias who chose to weave elaborate grass nests in the bathroom windows, lay their eggs and rear their young, Tailor Birds who stitched leaves of shrubs together to make their nests and Red Whiskered Bulbuls who set up temporary abode in a large potted palm. Yes, they had returned. But it was not the same anymore. They were more wary.

One day, while working on a new exhibition, a young Spotted Munia who had just learnt to fly, alighted on my drawing in progress. It hopped around, as if doing a preview of the work, pecking the paper here and there and then finally delivering short bursts of droppings all over the sheet with perfect aesthetic precision. One week's work down the sewer. I should have reacted but I watched in amazement as the tiny bird hopped around gingerly. "Thanks," I said, "thanks."

I extended my palm and the bird hopped on and I took it for a sightseeing trip around the apartment. Not long after, two baby Red Whiskered Bulbuls turned up at my front door. I let them in and they fluttered around inspecting my abode. They were soon followed by the adults and other relatives who flew in, stopped for a quick inspection then shunted their young ones on to the terrace garden where they continued their trial flights.

Now with "Lockdown", "Quarantine" and "Social Distancing" becoming familiar words and suspicion and fear becoming the order of the day and streets and highways empty like the palms of the dead and human abodes closed into themselves and the empires of mammon brought to their knees and the precariousness of our human lives surrounding us every moment, I think of all my feathered friends and the unpardonable damage that we have done to their lives. I regret that I too stand guilty.



Bulbul chooses to perch on an amethyst.

Now with “Lockdown”, “Quarantine” and “Social Distancing” becoming familiar words and suspicion and fear becoming the order of the day and streets and highways empty like the palms of the dead and human abodes closed into themselves and the empires of mammon brought to their knees and the precariousness of our human lives surrounding us every moment, I think of all my feathered friends and the unpardonable damage that we have done to their lives. I regret that I too stand guilty.

Nevertheless, I thank my feathered friends for the gift of wonder and companionship that they have given me so abundantly.

Today, amidst the gloom of human silence I hear the singing of the birds. Everywhere. Life is aglow with sunlight, stars, the music of Nature.

The cluster of trees outside my bedroom window shiver with delight as Golden Orioles, Crimson Throated Barbets, Crow Pheasants and a myriad others are busy feeding, courting and roosting in the shade and the Grey Hornbills have returned.

Despite the gloom that is sticky on my skin and smells of death, a strange and beautiful realisation flowers in me. Birds are Nature’s angels. Though we have damaged their habitat and decimated them so ruthlessly – they have survived and flourished and are here today in this hour to delight our senses.

I live without the sound of my heartbeats.

I live with the songs of birds.

I feel privileged to have known them and delighted in them.

BIRDS

They say the dead
Return like birds
Clustered in an ark,
Through the deluge
Of dreams
And the thundering dark;

Huddled pairs sit
Waiting, whilst the world
Bubbles in sleep,
For a leaf-twig
Of dry land
Floating above the deep.

Sometimes with wings
Of longing
They rise and soar the air,
Search for all
The dreams they’ve lost,
All that they couldn’t share.

Sometimes they wander
Through our dreams,
Feathers wet with a glow,
We speak to them,
They answer
Then vanish with the flow.

Some say birds that
Find their dreams,
Feed on them through the night
Then burst the barriers
Of silence
And wander into the light.



Jebbe and Katie Costello

Katie Costello is a Hubbard, Ohio, USA native. Her greatest love and career is working with animals and she has surrounded herself with all aspects of helping them. She is the owner of *The Canine Campus Training and Wellness Center* and has two non-profit organizations, one co-founded with her father. When her father died of Agent Orange on July 8, 2015, Katie expanded her humanitarianism to helping victims of Agent Orange. Her first trip to Pleiku, Vietnam (where her father served), working with VAVA, occurred in April of 2017. <http://thecaninecampustraining.com/about/>
<https://www.facebook.com/caninecampustraining>

KATIE COSTELLO

A REALITY CHECK

“May all that have life be delivered from suffering”-Buddha

I grew up surrounded by animals. My dog Charlie was my best friend, I had 2 cats named Boots and Mittens, and a rabbit named Bunny all before I was 5. My Grandparents were farmers, and I wanted to be at their house all of the time. Some of my favorite childhood memories are of going out to the chicken coup with my grandma and collecting eggs, playing with the baby pigs with their ornery antics, and my personal favorite was a beautiful Holstein named Molly. How I loved spending time with her! There was a barn owl in one of the barns I would visit every day, and many farm spiders, Argiopes, that I loved very dearly. I can still see my Grandma showing me the spiders, and teaching me to appreciate them, which to this day, I do. Today my family saves bugs from the house, move earthworms off of sidewalks, and rescues wooly bears from the road. We love all animals, and it is reflected in everything we do. It is our passion, our love, our life, our careers. Not surprisingly, we also consider animals in our food choices.

I didn't live near many kids, and those animals became my life. And honestly, the only thing that ever truly made sense to me. I was in Mrs. Sox 1st grade class when she started teaching us the 4 food groups. Because I loved animals, when she said, “we get meat from animals” I had lots of questions. That fateful day would change my life. At 6, I ran out of my school classroom to the nurses office, sobbing, demanding to be sent home. I can still see Mrs. Sox face as my questions intensified. It was a traumatizing time for me! I didn't, and I couldn't possibly understand why we would kill any animal simply because they taste good.

That evening at home, I declared I would never eat meat again. That was 1977. Vegetarianism was only just beginning as a movement, and certainly I had no knowledge of it. I just remember sitting at the table and saying “I don't care if you make me sit here for the rest of my life, I will NEVER eat meat again.” And I didn't.

We forget the individual. We forget that there are lives attached to that food. Lives that were miserable due to our current state of affairs, and lives that are cut very short just to be on your plate. Even more confusing, some people in the west find it repulsive that many in the east eat dogs and cats. It is because of the connection we have with dogs and cats in the west. I find this curious, and somewhat incomplete thinking. I am that repulsed by any animal eaten. Why have we decided one is more valued than another? Why aren't they all valued as the sentient beings that they are?

We didn't have options in grocery stores, and my parents truly thought I couldn't survive if I refused to eat one of the 4 food groups. There were endless doctors visits. 12 years ago, after reading one of Gary Franchione's books, I landed at LAX airport and ate my very last vegetarian meal, a cheese quesadillas. I have been vegan ever since.

During my teens I would delve into learning and helping animals and I would spend all of my free time reading about animal rights and learning all I could about the serious injustices done to animals. I also worked at an animal shelter. I went to school to become a veterinary technician where I fell in love with animal behavior and training. My entire life is truly dedicated to animals. They are how I understand my world. I realize that people become vegetarians/vegans for many different reasons. I also know there are many reasons that people choose to eat meat. I hope to ignite your soul in one of the areas that I will write about that spur you to investigate further. I am only providing a jumping point in which you can read entire volumes about. In the end, my hope is that with an open and investigative mind you learn more about vegetarianism/veganism in the way you can most understand it.

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According to the World Economic Forum, "50 billion chickens (which is a figure that doesn't include the male chicks (see below) or the unproductive hens that are killed in egg production), 1.4 billion pigs (which has tripled in the last 50 years), 545 million sheep, 444 million goats, 226 million turkeys, 36 million cows, 28 million ducks, nearly 4 billion fish and 43 billion shellfish are killed a year." . Globally, 70 billion land animals are killed for food and the number of aquatic animals killed for food a year is in the trillions. In the last 50 years the number of people on the planet has doubled, but the amount of meat we eat has tripled.

In order to be more productive and efficient, we have created factory farms where we have crammed animals into very small containment centers and stripped them of everything it is to be alive. We pump them full of antibiotics (creating antibiotic resistance in many cases), keep them in non-stop cycles



With Mufasa, the mascot of the Canine Campus.

So, eating meat isn't good morally, economically, environmentally, or for your health. Now, how does it feed into a health crisis as well? Pandemics. As humans we destroy the habitats of wildlife that have no say in our chaos. They are stressed from losing their homes, they are hunted, they are stuffed in cages and sent to markets waiting to be purchased and killed. They are overpopulated and scared. They didn't choose to come into humans lives, humans decided that for them. It is our interference in their lives that allow the exposure in the first place for the virus to mutate and become a zoonotic pathogen. (meaning they can go from one species to another).

of producing milk, use artificial light to keep them producing more eggs, debeak them (without anesthesia) so they don't hurt each other from living in the unnatural overcrowded environment. And that is only the beginning, I can assure you. Day old male chicks are thrown into meat grinders alive because they are of no use to the business. Pigs are kept in pens that are crammed and stripped down concrete environments'. Overpopulation leads to disease and unhealthiness which means using antibiotics in mass quantity. About 40% of our antibiotics are used for the meat industry. It doesn't take a mathematician to see this doesn't balance. Something is very wrong with our current system.

Agriculture is responsible for 10-12% of greenhouse gas emission. There is pollution from fossil fuels. More problems with modern factory farms are excessive methane gas, deforestation and global warming. There are very serious environmental ramifications from our current factory farms.

Certain parts of the world have markets (including wet markets) where they bring wildlife in, stressed and overburdened by the thousands of people walking by, having been captured, and kept in very unnatural environments. We have sadly been taught this is all okay. Wildlife is stressed from being hunted, and the loss of their habitat devastating to their immune system -taking away from fighting different viruses.

Abstaining from eating meat also has some positive health benefits when done correctly, weight loss, decreased heart disease, decreased cholesterol, lower cancer rates, managing diabetes, improving kidney function, can reduce arthritic pain and is richer in certain nutrients. I might add that abstaining also means you aren't consuming the suffering of the animal that was killed to be on your plate.

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The most recent pandemics are all influenza viruses that mutated from animals. Think swine flu, bird flu, SARS, Ebola, and now also thought to be the cause of Covid 19. Zoonotic diseases are a big problem. It is time that we re-think our moral, ethical and actual footprint we leave on the world.

If we can all ascertain that these animals can feel, (and I can assure you they all will do what they can to avoid pain) then we all have a moral obligation not only to stop eating meat, but to advocate for them. I challenge you to make a diet change. I urge you to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Love and respect for animals can help us live a more healthy and happier life.



My daughter anastiya with Aksana the chicken.



This article was first published in Live Encounters Magazine, April 2015.
<https://liveencounters.net/2015-2/04-april-2015/chris-mercero-canned-hunting-in-south-africa/>



BY **CHRIS MERCER**
 DIRECTOR, WWW.CANNEDLION.ORG
CAMPAIGN
 AGAINST CANNED HUNTING

Canned Lion hunting and Regulatory Capture

Does the hunting industry target conservation structures in South Africa - and indeed all hunting range states - with a calculated strategy to invade and occupy conservation space?

DEFINITION of 'Regulatory Capture'

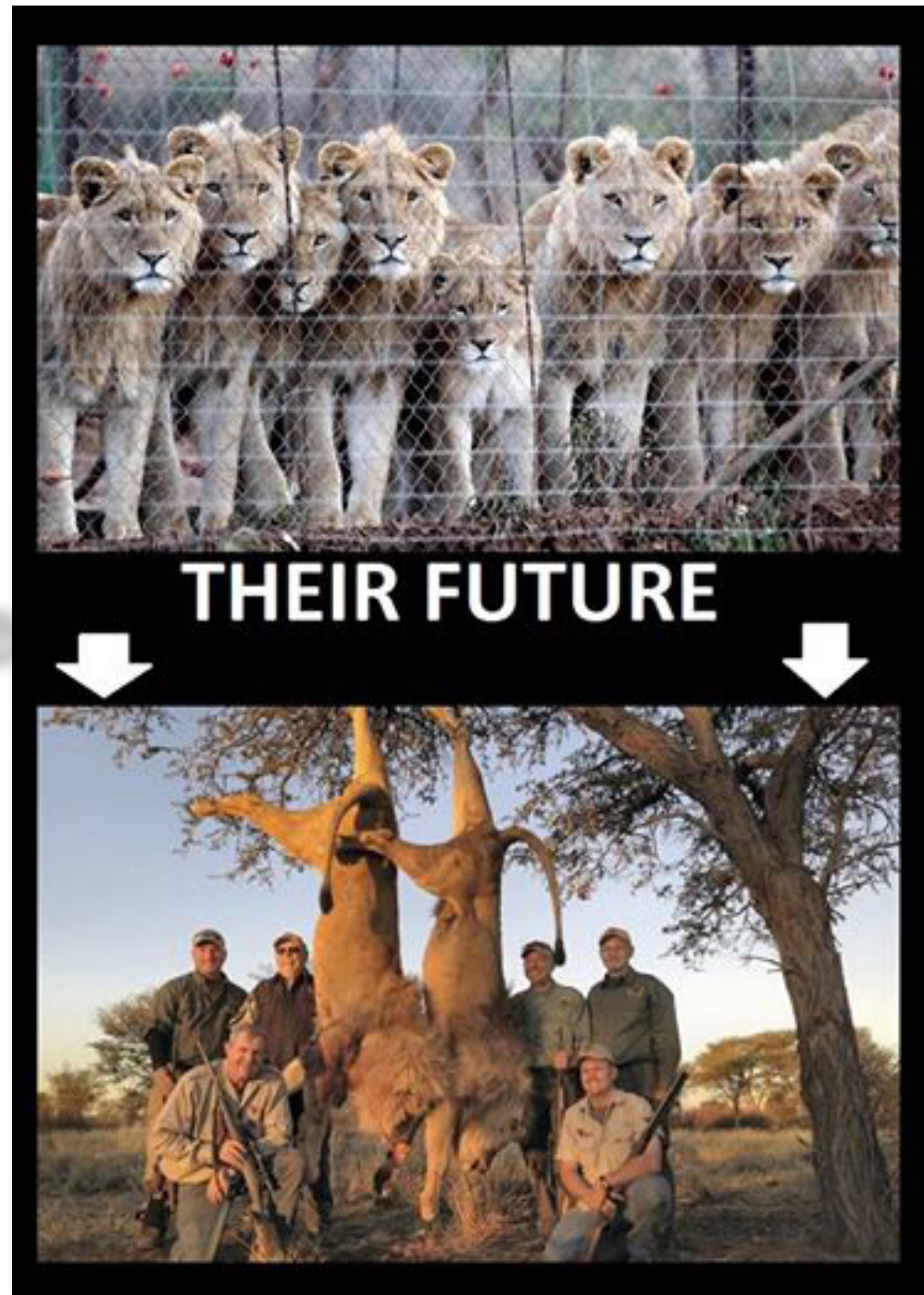
Regulatory capture is a theory associated with George Stigler, a Nobel laureate economist. It is the process by which regulatory agencies eventually come to be dominated by the very industries they were charged with regulating. Regulatory capture happens when a regulatory agency, formed to act in the public's interest, eventually acts in ways that benefit the industry it is supposed to be regulating, rather than the public.

1. think of the Big Banks and the revolving door between them and banking regulators.
2. think of the Tobacco industry, which occupied and controlled the regulatory body that concerned it, i.e. the Surgeon General's Office, until Robert Koop was appointed. Read his autobiography - he arrived to find that there was an office rule forbidding anyone from alleging that smoking was harmful to health!
3. Read the late Mario Ambrosini's article on how Big Pharma frustrated his efforts to legalise and promote the use of cheap, natural remedies for cancer. [LINK](#)
4. Here are some other examples: [LINK](#)

So we know that Big Business routinely occupies and controls its regulatory structures, and why should Big Hunting be any different?

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Photograph courtesy Chris Mercer.



How can we be sure? Let's examine the evidence:

First, the doctrine of Sustainable Use, adopted by South Africa via the Convention on Biodiversity.

Who is responsible for an internationally accepted Policy that treats elephants as if they were bacteria - a mere resource to be 'harvested sustainably?' The IUCN, of course. Using their obscene wealth and disproportionate political power, the hunting fraternity successfully introduced and/or promoted the adoption by the IUCN of the doctrine of Sustainable Use, thereby displacing real conservation - the preservation of natural functioning ecosystems - with a policy which is just a licence to kill animals.

Just see how effective this strategy is; take one example. The EU Commission recently called for input on whether to require hunters to apply for an import permit to bring their trophies in to the EU. Not a ban, just a permit. And the might of the IUCN - the World Conservation Union - has rallied to protect the hunters. Read Rosie Cooney's input on behalf of the sustainable use gang in the IUCN: [LINK](#)

When her abstract language is stripped down to bare essentials, all her complaints at the proposed permit requirement come down to this feeble excuse, namely, that it would inconvenience the hunting industry.

Second, consider the TOPS (Threatened or Protected Species) regulations in South Africa. Unbelievably, hunting organisations are granted self-government. They can themselves: -

'define criteria for the hunting of listed threatened or protected species in accordance with the fair chase principle;'



Crammed into overcrowded enclosures, to be grown out until they reach huntable size.

What does this legal verbiage mean?

It means that the hunting industry is allowed to regulate itself, to decide for itself what is ethical. And its decision has the force of law. The very industry which has so ill-treated wild animals has been given the power to decide how the animals should be treated. Like giving paedophiles the right to decide what they can do to children. Thus, the Norms and Standards for Hunting Methods, published in 2011, allow hunters in South Africa to shoot Cape buffalo with a bow and arrow, so long as:

- i. the kinetic energy of the bow should be at least 80 ft/lbs; and
- ii. the arrow weight should not be less than 750 grains.

Third, why are so many conservation officials themselves professional hunters? How can a PH who has a financial interest in the very industry he is supposed to control, possibly avoid a conflict of interest?

Fourth, let's look at the annual provincial Hunting Proclamations - which are supposed to limit the numbers of birds and animals hunted.

The annual hunting proclamations are a death list prepared by SA provincial officials and published every year, ostensibly to regulate sport hunting. There is no science-backed knowledge of the numbers of species who cling precariously to survival, so by law, officials ought to write 'data deficient' opposite every listed wildlife species, and then use the cautionary rule to impose a moratorium on all hunting in the province, until the numbers of wildlife populations have been accurately determined.

Instead, conservation officials pander to the hunting fraternity, irresponsibly setting grotesquely excessive daily bag limits. Go to the Home page of the Cape Nature [LINK](#) and you will see some smarmy assurances about how "We care for Nature" or "We conserve the unique natural heritage resources of the Western Cape". But if you go to the 'About Cape Nature' page the vision becomes "to establish a successful conservation economy.... to transform biodiversity into.... local economic development." Right there you see the problem: it is now all about money. Tax payers might naively expect their taxes to go to the preservation and protection of our wildlife heritage. But that is not Cape Nature's vision, which is to extract maximum financial benefit from the exploitation of wildlife 'resources'. Anyone who doubts that Big Hunting controls conservation in S.A. should read the 2015 Hunting notice: [LINK](#) (click on the sub-link that reads 'Download the Hunting notice for 2015'.)



The King of all animals has gone from being a symbol of strength and bravery, to a mere commodity. Photograph courtesy Chris Mercer.



Lion breeding has little to do with conservation and everything to do with profit.

The legal ban on bow hunting (because of its barbaric cruelty) in Sec 29 of the ordinance is simply 'suspended' - without public input or debate.

1. Are you mentally ill enough to want to hunt a buffalo with a bow and arrow? No problem, so long as you use a bow with a kinetic energy of 80 Ft/lbs and an arrow weight of at least 750 grains.

2. Want to shoot arrows in to wildebeest, nyala, zebra or impala? No problem - and there are no daily bag limits. You can kill as many animals as you like.

3. Want to shoot primates, namely vervets and baboons? No problem, you can kill two a day. (72 a year) WTF???? But both primate populations are severely compromised in the Western Cape. Cape Nature knows this. Primate groups are tightly linked families with a hierarchy and social structure. Killing animals randomly can have serious effects on the viability of the troop. Cape Nature knows this too. Now why would any true conservationist permit random slaughter of individual primates in troops that are already stressed? And what possible conservation reason can there be to allow ethically illiterate bozos to shoot such primates?

4. Love killing birds for fun? No problem, kill up to 10 guinea fowl and 40 pigeons/doves a DAY - with Cape Nature's blessing.

5. What about caracals and jackals/ No problem there either. Kill ten a day. But caracals are listed on Appendix 11 of CITES as deserving special protection? Why are our tax-funded conservation officials promoting and permitting the excessive killing of an Appendix 11 animal to which it ought to be affording special protection?

Well, it is plain to see that regulatory capture has taken place - Cape Nature has become an arm of the hunting industry, and the military wing of the landowners' war on caracals and jackals.

The departments' excuse for proposing excessive daily bag limits for all species, is that they should "not legislate for the ruthless animal exploiters and swindlers, but rather for the responsible majority of land-owners" who will naturally exercise restraint and therefore do not need to be controlled. Carte Blanche for animal abusers is therefore the philosophy that underlies the Hunting Notice. This philosophy is patently absurd. Think about it for a minute. It is like arguing that we should legalise bank robberies, because the responsible majority will not rob banks anyway. If we advanced such an insane reason for legalising bank robberies, intelligent people would conclude either that we were mentally defective, or, if not, then we must surely be bank robbers trying to advance our commercial interests.



After the walking comes confinement, then a hail of bullets or arrows.

We draw the alternative conclusion: that Nature Conservation in SA is owned or controlled by, the hunting industry. We do not think that Conservation officials are mentally defective.

Fifth, see how the SA government behaved towards the proposal by the Australian Parliament to ban the import of lion trophies. This policy move was made for purely moral reasons: that canned lion hunting is a cruel and barbaric 'sport'. So here was a civilised government revolted by what passes muster for conservation in South Africa. Actually, the Australians were merely echoing the principles of Kenya's founding father, Jomo Kenyatta, who banned all sport and trophy hunting thirty years ago on the basis that it was 'a barbaric relic of colonialism'.

What input (you might ask) did the SA government give?

Here is where it gets interesting: the SA government sided with the canned lion hunting industry. Throwing ethics out the window, and grubbing for blood money, the SA Minister for Conservation Edna Molewa signed a long letter pleading with the Australians not to ban lion trophy imports, because lion hunting brings in money.

Finally, there are statements made to me personally over the years by some conservationists who are acutely unhappy about the extent of control over all conservation issues by the vocal, wealthy hunting minority.

So there it is: enough evidence for me to form the opinion that Big Hunting has invaded and occupied South African conservation structures. This transfers meaningful policy decisions from elected SA officials to the headquarters of Safari Club International in USA. And perverts conservation services in to an arm of the hunting fraternity.

SA desperately needs a major shake-up of staff and policies in Conservation departments, bringing in competent people who are dedicated to protecting our wildlife heritage, and breaking the stranglehold of the hunting fraternity.

Why is the taxpayer funding Conservation services which serve no useful conservation purpose but, rather, choose instead to facilitate hunting? Most taxpayers are trusting - they expect their taxes to go into wildlife protection, not in to a protection racket for the hunting industry.

There can be only one answer – regulatory capture. And that is why South Africa is the canned lion hunting capital of the world.



Born in Munich 1954. 1973 studied with Ernst Fuchs and Salvador Dali. 1970 he painted *still-lives* in Switzerland introducing curved mirrors which reflect objects in most surprising ways and led to a proposal for the –elegant Universe. Moving to Tuscany in 1980 landscape and atmospheric effects crystallized to intense, portraits of nature. Since 1984 living in Bali. In his search for the- abstract. Papua New Guinea – Warriors combine the archaic with the futuristic. Wolfgang's motto – aesthetic = ethic – points to places where humans experience the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

AURA THE PAINTER'S DAUGHTER

ARTWORK BY
WOLFGANG WIDMOSER

Eventually an Artist endeavours to create works
because he is jealous of Woman to be able to create human beings.

The Beauty of the female has ever inspired Artists
to do their best work and will continue to do so.

Shiva (no- thing) is made visible - hearable - touchable - through works of Art
and I feel privileged to make Beauty accessible to the senses .

My beautiful daughters are the reason to continue my work with Love.

Wolfgang Widmoser



Aura Putri 2014, 80 x 100cm



Aura Putri 2008, 40 x 50cm



Aura Putri 2016, 80 x 100cm



Aura Putri 2011, 80 x 65cm



Aura Putri 2012, 150 x 125cm



Aura Putri 2019, 44 x 55cm

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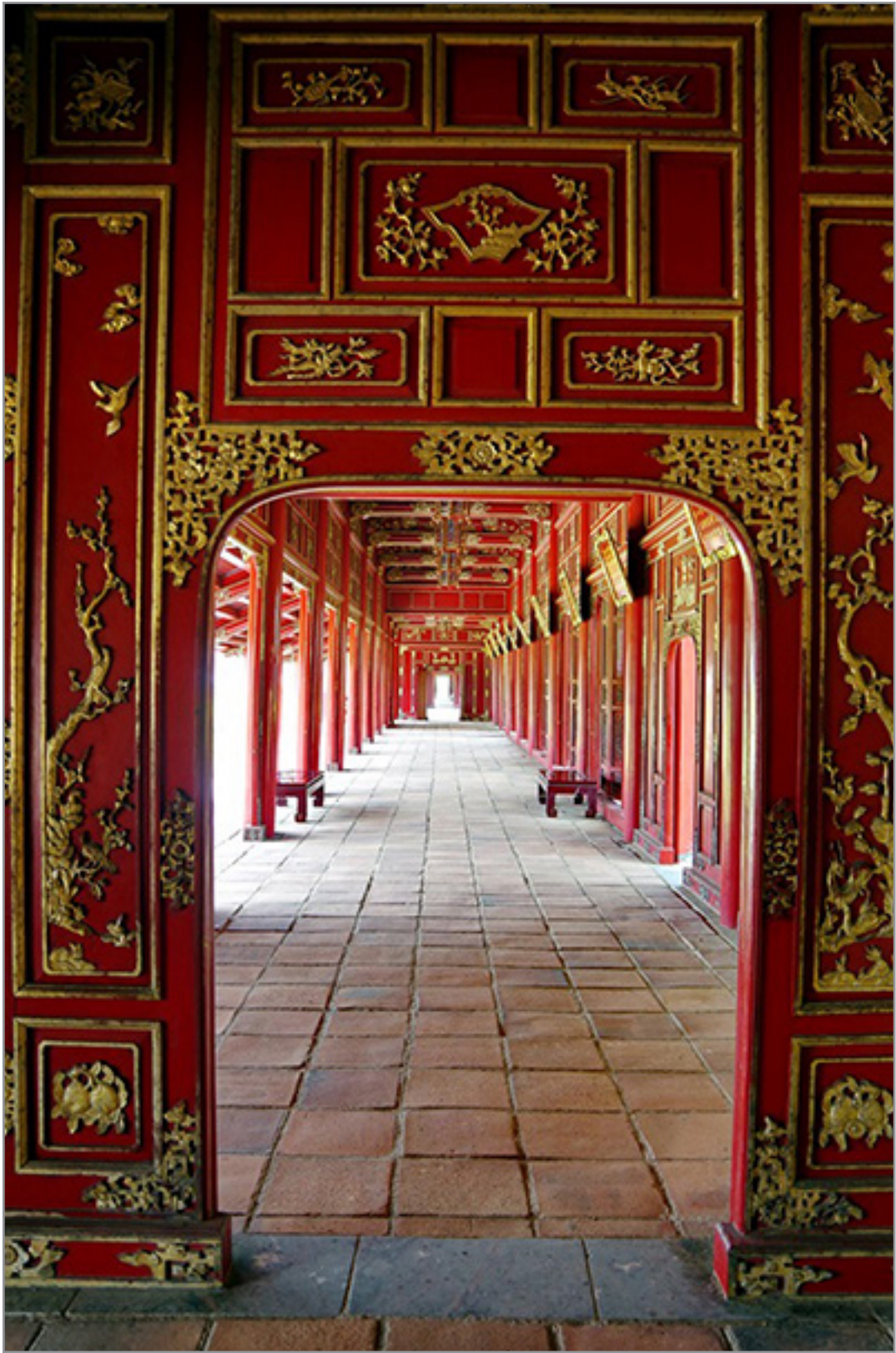
MY BEAUTIFUL VIETNAM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
VŨ TUẤN HƯNG

These photographs are from a collection
that embraces the spirit of this great land
and its vibrant ethos.

Vũ Tuấn Hưng



The Imperial City of Hue



The Imperial City of Hue



Mausoleum of King Tự Đức (1829-1883)
Nguyen Dynasty
Hue



Mausoleum of King Tự Đức (1829-1883)
Nguyen Dynasty
Hue



Cave Huyền Không, Marmo mountain, Danang.



Cave Huyền Không, Marmo mountain, Danang.



Guanyin Buddha Woman, Cave Huyền Không, Marmo mountain, Danang



Bà Mụ (Mother) pagoda in Hoi An.



Dragon Boat



Ha Long Bay



Hanoi



Dr Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

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DR SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA AFGHANISTAN'S FRAGILE POLITICAL TRANSITION: THE ROCKY ROAD TO PEACE

Abstract

In a dramatic turn of events following the conduct of presidential elections in September 2019 and signing of the US-Taliban peace deal on February 29, Afghanistan witnessed two presidential inauguration ceremonies on 9 March. While President Ghani had been declared a winner, Dr. Abdullah too staked his claims: this high drama took place just a day before the scheduled intra-Afghan dialogue with the Taliban, the next step in the U.S.-Afghan peace deal. As the political wrangling and jockeying for power occurs, the Taliban may take advantage of the lack of unity among the political elite in Kabul endangering the fragile democratic experiment that the international community has invested in the past 19 years. President Trump, on the other hand, would like to project the peace deal with the Taliban and withdrawal of U.S. troops as a 'success' in ending America's longest war for his reelection bid in November this year. Will this rush to exit and disunity in Kabul provide the space for an emboldened Taliban and their allies to consolidate their position and enhance their bargaining potential? Will the coming days witness Taliban move beyond its proclaimed objective of power-sharing and gradually attempting for complete domination? The fragile political transition and the timing of the peace deal pose serious questions for the long-term peace and stability of the conflict-ridden country.



Afghanistan President Dr. M. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah

Contested Elections and Issues of Legitimacy

The much-awaited results of the presidential elections in Afghanistan, held on 28 September 2019, were announced by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) on 18 February after a five-month long hiatus, amidst allegations of fraud and irregularities.[1] Incumbent President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was declared winner.[2] Timing of this announcement coincided with the move towards a peace deal between the United States (U.S.) and the Taliban, setting the stage for withdrawal of American troops. This peace deal, seen by many as 'exit deal' scripted by the U.S., to help President Donald Trump's reelection bid. However, far from bringing the contested electoral results to a closure, the IEC's announcement set in motion a series of reactions from the opposition leaders and the Taliban that could pave the way for further instability. Moreover, this bitter contestation impacts crucially on the representative character and legitimacy of the President's office in Afghanistan.[3]

The conduct of presidential elections was delayed from April to 28 September 2019. There were talks of forming an 'interim government' as a prerequisite for the signing of the peace deal with the Taliban in the summer of 2019. After such attempts failed in September, elections were held with very little time for preparations leading to allegations of fraud and irregularities between the two main candidates. In 2014, a carefully mediated deal by then U.S. secretary of state John Kerry had brought the two opposing camps of Ghani and Dr. Abdullah together under the National Unity Government (NUG). The novel nomenclature notwithstanding, unity remained the absent entity. I, then in Afghanistan, witnessed from close quarters how lack of unity and contrasting views of both camps on major issues affected the government's functioning. Moreover, this experiment never received the approval by the constitutional loya jirgah. The entire tenure of the NUG, therefore, lacked credibility, reinforcing the Taliban narrative of not negotiating with a 'puppet government'. Moreover, the government in Kabul was hardly able to deliver of basic services leaving large swathes of territory to come under insurgent influence and onslaught.

Parallel Government and Polarization

The IEC's announcement had been rejected by the former Chief executive and Ghani's prime opponent, Dr. Abdullah. On 18 February, he claimed victory and declared his intentions to establish an 'inclusive' government. Earlier his supporters had called to announce a 'parallel government' if the election results are announced despite the alleged fraudulent votes.[4]

This proposal received the backing of several prominent political figures including General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a key political figure and former warlord for the northern Afghan provinces. Other supporters of the parallel government included Ahmad Zia Massoud, brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Islamic Jamiat Party of Afghanistan led by Salahuddin Rabbani, the National Unity Party of Afghanistan led by Sayed Mansoor Naderi and the Islamic Solidarity Party of Afghanistan led by Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq.

In the face of an impending political deadlock, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad attempted in vain to broker a deal, a day ahead of the scheduled intra-Afghan dialogue. Abdullah demanded an executive prime minister's post to oversee the peace process, and sixty percent of the political posts in the government, which Ghani rejected. Ghani's proposal, on the other hand, included a power-sharing plan with Abdullah in the areas of security, governance and peace. Ghani offered 40 percent of his cabinet, including one National Security Council member post, to be filled with Abdullah allies, and he also offered the chairmanship of a "Supreme Peace Council" to Abdullah, which would engage in negotiations with the Taliban. These remained unacceptable to Abdullah.[5]

The Taliban strongly reacted to re-election of Ghani and called the election process 'fake and unlawful'. The group's statement read, "Holding elections and announcing oneself a president under occupation shall never remedy the problems of our Muslim Afghan nation just as it has failed to do so over the past nineteen years." [6] For the group, the fractured politics over election results and the peace process, is a point of advantage.

Peace or Exit deal?

On 29 February, the U.S. and the Taliban representatives signed the peace agreement in Doha. The group had reportedly adhered to the agreed condition for a week-long (22nd to 28th) reduction in violence (RIV). As per the agreement, the U.S. will establish a joint monitoring body to assess progress on the commitments. The Afghan government would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange of 1,000 members of the Afghan security forces held by the Taliban, before both sides sit down for direct negotiations. The U.S. will also review sanctions it has on Taliban members and start diplomatic efforts with the United Nations to remove the penalties. The two sides also agreed to a gradual, conditions-based withdrawal over 14 months. In the first phase, about 5,000 troops are to leave within 135 days.

The Taliban also agreed to not let the soil of Afghanistan to be used by terrorist groups against the U.S. and its allies. However, much less is known of two secret annexes[7] of the deal, in which the Taliban reportedly set the criteria of when and how the U.S. troops would leave the country, raising concerns not only among the U.S. members of congress but also other capitals.

The deal which has interesting parallels with the previous Paris Accords (a peace treaty signed by the U.S. to end the Vietnam War in 1973) has been damned as an abject surrender to the Taliban. While it may boost Trump's domestic electoral campaign, subsequent days have demonstrated the complexities of implementing the deal. Although some Taliban leaders in the past have declared the changed world view of the group with regard to women rights, girls' education etc., the core ideology of the group remains unchanged. The deal, for the Taliban, is merely a strategic move to achieve their end objective of sharing power, which may gradually evolve into a full-scale domination.

Reduction in violence & Shifting Goalposts

'Reduction in violence', which the Taliban duly observed, falls drastically short of the complete ceasefire that the Afghan government has been calling for. To make matters worse, violence started immediately after the deal was signed. Al Jazeera reported 'nearly 80 attacks'[8] by the Taliban within a week targeting mostly Afghan security forces and civilians. On 9 March, a rocket aimed at the presidential palace was fired marring the swearing in ceremony of Ghani. Some analysts sought to explain this pointing at the fragmented nature of insurgency. However, even the U.S. termed the level of violence as unacceptable, while accepting the fact that insurgent attacks on NATO forces have come to a halt.[9]

It is obvious that in the absence of a permanent ceasefire, the 100-day intra-Afghan dialogue would have to be held under a specter of violence. The dialogue would have little meaning if the insurgents target the opponents of the peace deal. There are concerns that release of 5000 prisoners would only add to the military strength of the Taliban before spring for another offensive. The group's rejection of an Afghan government demand of providing written guarantees that the released prisoners would not revert to fighting, has not helped. Although the insurgents may still abide by its assurances of not carrying out suicide attacks, continuing violence per se may sufficiently dampen the process of looking for ways to establish peace. Not surprisingly, the Ghani government tried to delay the release of imprisoned Taliban cadres. It is obvious that in addition to expressing its displeasure for having been sidelined in the peace process, it carries little trust in the Taliban's commitments to peace.

With over 60,000 fighting cadres, the Taliban today is probably the strongest compared to any point of time in their entire existence. However, at the same time, it is not a monolithic organization of pre-2001 days. Deputy leader of Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani penned an opinion piece in The New York Times on 20 February 2020 testifying the group's "commitment to ending the hostilities and bringing peace"[10] However, this would mean agreeing to work within the current political system for an extended period of time and making some compromises.

Intra-Afghan dialogue & (Dis)unity in Kabul

The intra-Afghan talks is expected to bring the Taliban together with a wide range of Afghan leaders, including government officials for consensus building. The Taliban refuse to recognize the Kabul government. A previous peace dialogue in Russia that had witnessed similar participation of Afghan political elites did not, however, show any progress. Will it be any different this time remains to be seen. The anti-Ghani sentiment may have united a large number of Afghan elites including former President Hamid Karzai under one umbrella making the Taliban amenable for negotiations. But will that unity last when pitched against the Taliban's uncompromised worldview on the constitution, elections, political institutions, justice, governance, and minorities and women's rights, remains an important question.

Internal fissures and polarization are likely to be exploited by the Taliban. Competition for one upmanship in which some of these leaders may either endorse or reject the peace process may introduce additional bottlenecks. The credence of the talk of a parallel government by Abdullah and other power brokers may actually dilute the Afghan government's credibility as well as willingness to be a part of the peace process. This could be a 'bargaining strategy' as the Afghan elites are jockeying for power and influence in the changing political dynamics that are being played out in Kabul and other regional capitals. In the event of the Taliban looking increasingly to dominate, the powerbrokers may defect to the side of the probable winner.

Divisions within the Taliban

For the Taliban, the deal is important from the point of their long and winding war with the NATO and Afghan forces, without an end in sight. The deal, they hope, would eventually lead to the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan and more importantly, bring them closer to regaining political power in Kabul, without having to fight for both objectives.

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US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar signing the peace deal in Doha, Qatar on 29 February 2020, Photo Courtesy: [NBC News](#)

To many of the Taliban's key actors this might look, however strategic in intent, as a sellout. Not surprisingly, a key component of the insurgency, the Peshawar Shura, which functions as its military wing has not conceded to give up fighting.

One of the factions is led by Mullah Mohammad Rasoul, the former governor of Nimroz province during the Taliban rule (1996-2001). Rasoul split with the Taliban group in 2015 after it became public that the group's leader Mullah Mohamad Omar had been long dead. Reportedly supported by the Afghan government, the Rasoul faction, known as the Renouncers, is active mostly in Helmand province and has fought the Taliban in Herat, Farah, Nimroz and Ghor provinces.[11] Rasoul has reportedly criticized the peace deal. In a statement in January 2020, following the killing of Mullah Mohammad Nangyalai, a regional commander of the faction in a U.S. drone attack, the group had issued a statement saying that it will continue to fight the U.S. and other forces.[12]

Afghan security and defence sources have previously pointed at the existence of 20 terrorist groups within Afghanistan including the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).[13] The latter has carried out a series of attacks on the Taliban in the eastern provinces and the Shia population in the past including a major attack in the week following the peace deal. On 6 March, 32 people were killed as the group attacked a memorial ceremony held in honor of Abdul Ali Mazari, an ethnic Hazara political leader who was killed by the Taliban in 1995. Dr. Abdullah who was attending the ceremony managed to escape. Earlier on 27 February, the group exploded a bicycle bomb in Kabul killing a civilian and injuring at least ten others.

The peace deal may have little impact on the operations of these groups. At one level, the Taliban are now seen as a useful tool to fight the IS-K, which contains elements of the Taliban deserters. At the other, drawdown of U.S. forces may even provide a boost to the IS-K and others. According to the terms of the peace deal, the Taliban have agreed not to let the use the soil of Afghanistan by any terrorist group against U.S. and its allies. Will that assurance cover the non-U.S. ally countries like India remains unknown.

Prognosis

The return of the Taliban to the seat of power in Kabul following a complete U.S. pull out may still be beyond its reach militarily. Assuming that the Afghan security forces remain intact, the Taliban can not expect to easily overrun the country as they did in the 1990s, not just for the scale of violence Afghanistan will witness, but due to the fact that the country has grown strategically important for Washington due to the latter's relations with neighbouring Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan. There are talks of retaining a limited number of troops for counter-terrorism (CT) and other (CT plus) purposes, an idea that has been categorically rejected by the Taliban.

In the days to come, Afghanistan is bound to witness increasing polarization and instability. Talks of the emergence of a Northern Alliance 2.0 have resurfaced with Russia, Iran and Turkey sending their representatives for Dr. Abdullah's swearing in ceremony. However, for this to materialize contentious group of actors will have to act and work like a cohesive political and military force in opposing the Taliban. As the latter starts dominating, its allies and followers may simply swell, scuttling imaginations of the formation of an opposing bloc and prompting some of the Afghan power brokers to consider defecting to the winning side. If disunity prevails among the Afghan political elites, the Taliban could emerge dominant through diplomatic means, i.e. eventually getting its emirate in negotiations.

As Afghanistan, traverses through a painful political and democratic transition, the international community needs to be better prepared to deal with the complexities and implications of holding elections in a conflict zone. Fraud marred elections have done little service to the gigantic and challenging task of political and democratic institution building. The installation of a President amidst bitter contestations reflects poorly on the mammoth, expensive and risky exercises of holding elections and the countries who fund these efforts. Until Afghanistan's institutional capabilities are built, instability and chaos will be a norm. Externally brokered peace deals with their inherent limitations cannot be provide a solution. The solution must emerge from within. The question is whether the Afghans who could make it happen are capable of it.

End Notes overleaf

End Notes

[1] Marked by allegations of fraud and the curious case of 300,000 controversial votes which the IEC never explained, the conduct of free and fair elections along with deepening of democracy remains a huge challenge in Afghanistan.

[2] According to the IEC, Ghani secured 50.64 percent of votes, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar received 39.53 percent and 3.85 percent votes respectively.

[3] The total turnout in the election was 1,823,948 which makes less than five percent of Afghanistan’s population if the whole population is estimated to be around 40 million. Ghani’s vote share amounts to less than 2.5 percent of the nation’s votes.

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[12] J P Lawrence, “Airstrike in western Afghanistan kills leader of Taliban splinter group, may have killed civilians”, Star and Stripes, 9 January 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/airstrike-in-western-afghanistan-kills-leader-of-taliban-splinter-group-may-have-killed-civilians-1.614105>. Accessed on 14 March 2020.

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Dr Bibhu Prasad Routray

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DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY MILITARY AND THE MONKS: FUTURE OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN MYANMAR

Abstract

There are widely held perceptions that the National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) has not only failed to act against the military perpetrators of crime against the Rohingya minorities, but has defended them openly. However, amid the din that seeks to disown the Nobel laureate and strip her off the awards bestowed by countless organisations, the NLD's painstaking efforts to rein in the Buddhist nationalists on the one hand and to limit the power of the Tatmadaw (Myanmarese military) on the other, is being lost. In the run up to the parliamentary elections of November 2020, the international community has to choose between ASSK and the Military.

Demonstration and Hate Speeches

On 9 February, about 1000 Buddhist hardliners including monks under the banner of Myanmar National Organization, demonstrated in commercial capital Yangon in support of the country's military and in opposition to the NLD's alleged moves to undermine 'Buddhism'. Several hate speeches were made targeting ASSK and Thura Aung Ko, the country's religious affairs minister. Both were accused for 'oppressing the country's majority religion by favouring non-Buddhists' and for 'proposing constitutional amendments that would reduce the political power of the military'. According to reports[1], some Buddhist monks who were part of the demonstration carried banners with "No Rohingya" written on them. Media houses who reported about the speeches were sent threat letters by the hardliners to take down the reports from their websites. Some persons even visited two media houses making similar demands. Broadcasters had to edit news reports about the protest that were webcast earlier. There is little doubt that the rally, which echoed the world view of the Tatmadaw, had its full support.

The military's active role in the violence carried out against the Rohingya is well documented and in July 2019, the United States (U.S.). imposed sanctions on four military leaders.[10] That has not stopped the Tatmadaw from promoting Buddhist nationalism and Muslim phobia in the country. At least one member of the military's political arm Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has been charged for having incited the Buddhists against the NLD and the Muslims.

The NLD versus assertive Buddhist Nationalism

In 2017, Ma Ba Tha (MBT, literally translating to the protection of race and religion), a hardline religious organization formed in 2012 was disbanded. The MBT had spearheaded most of the rhetoric that fueled anti-Muslim hatred in recent years. Speeches made by its leaders had preceded the anti-Rohingya program. In May 2017, the State-backed 47-member Buddhist cleric organization, State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, known as Ma Ha Na (MHN) declared MBT an unlawful organization and banned the group from operating under its current name. In response, the MBT quickly renamed itself Buddha Dhamma Prajñā Foundation (BDPF) and continued to operate from its headquarter in Yangon's Insein Township.

In May 2019, the NLD-led government decided to prosecute ultranationalist monk U Wirathu under section 124(a) of the Penal Code accusing him of sedition. Section 124 (a) punishes bringing the government into hatred or contempt with a maximum penalty of 20 years' imprisonment and a fine. The monk had ridiculed ASSK and the NLD government for their attempt to amend the 2008 constitution. Wirathu indirectly spoke of ASSK as someone, who was "sleeping with a foreigner"[2], referring to her dead British husband. Wirathu, who had been banned by the MHN from public preaching for a year in March 2017, was issued with an arrest warrant. Wirathu who initially said that "If they want to catch me, let them do. I will face it," however, went into hiding and is yet to be arrested. The government's move was condemned by BDPF as "a lawless action by the current democratic government", which staged rallies in Yangon and other areas to show support for Wirathu. The rights advocates, however, raised concerns that the government has targeted him not for his hate speech against the Muslims but for criticising the authorities.

On June 16-17, the BDPF organized its annual meeting. More than 1000 monks assembled in Insein township. In the meeting, monks came down heavily on the NLD-led government over its handling of the conflict with Rohingya Muslims, suggesting it had "tarnished the reputation" of Myanmar and the Buddhist religion.[3] In July, the Ma Ha Na summoned the chair and vice-chair of BDPF for their roles in organizing the celebration. While BDPF's vice chairman Mawkyun Sayadaw turned up, chairman Ywama Sayadaw sent a letter expressing his inability to come.[4] However, no specific disciplinary actions were taken against them. The Ma Ha Na merely ordered the foundation's signboards taken down within 45 days, saying that action will be taken in line with the 1990 Law Relating to the Sangha Organization if it fails to comply. In response, the BDPF said the organization had already removed all signage since 2018. "They can come and have a look", said the BDPF spokesperson.[5]

Unlike the Tatmadaw, which uses the monks for its attempts to safeguard its dominance in politics, the NLD has taken some steps to delink religion from politics. In June 2019, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture released a public statement denouncing any monk who gets involved in social and political activities in order to instigate community destabilization, saying they are not entitled to the status of "cleric". "They are just bogus monks who are damaging the dignity of Buddhism through their actions across the country," it said.

Civil- Religious-Military ties

Many in Myanmar blame the military for having carved out a group of supporters among the Buddhist groups. After the transition from military rule to civilian government in 2011, the military aligned itself with the ultra-nationalistic Buddhist leaders, who in return for financial support and gifts, worked to enhance the army's popularity and influence. A group of monks broke ranks with the largely non-political clergy to spread the pro-military propaganda and also hatred against the Muslims.[6] U Wirathu incidentally had served a prison term of eight years for inciting hatred. But after his release in 2014, the military backed-MBT became a powerful organization.

The NLD, on the contrary, did not view groups like MBT favourably. This compelled the NLD to add anti-NLDism and anti-ASSKism to its plan of action. The NLD tolerated it till the MBT started belittling ASSK. The challenge, however, that the government faces in taking action against the BDPF is that it enjoys the open support of the Tatmadaw; going after it could exacerbate tensions between the civilian and military wings of the government at a particularly sensitive time.[7] The Tatmadaw has said that MBT/BDPF is a necessity and should be supported in the name of Buddhism. In June 2019, the BDPF received US\$19,600 from the Yangon regional military commander.[8] The same month, BDPF issued a seven-point statement urging voters to shun the NLD in next year's general election, accusing the party of damaging the "country, race and religion".[9]

The military's active role in the violence carried out against the Rohingya is well documented and in July 2019, the United States (U.S.). imposed sanctions on four military leaders.[10] That has not stopped the Tatmadaw from promoting Buddhist nationalism and Muslim phobia in the country. At least one member of the military's political arm Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has been charged for having incited the Buddhists against the NLD and the Muslims.



Protesters take part in a rally against what organisers called “insults” to Buddhism and Myanmar’s sovereignty in Yangon on 9 February 2020 in Yangon. Photo Courtesy: [Mizzima](#)

On 3 August 2019, U ‘Bullet’[11] Hla Swe, a retired lieutenant colonel and former parliamentarian who had joined the USDP in 2010, criticized ASSK for not having chosen to protest against imposition of sanctions against the Tatmadaw leaders. He accused that civilian government had provided evidence to the U.S. that led to the imposition of sanctions.[12] His speech reportedly included the following statement. “If the United States came and bombed government ministries, I would accept that. Hey bombers, try it. If all [state leaders] died, that would be good.” He went on to say that while the U.S. can insult Buddhism (referring to an art exhibition organized by the U.S. embassy which displayed a photograph of Buddha in a gas mask), it does not dare to do so against Islam because, “Muhammad will bomb them with an airplane”[13]. In August 2019, Hla Swe was charged with sedition under Article 124(a) for making comments that the court deemed defamatory to government leaders. He, like Wirathu, is yet to be arrested.

The NLD hasn’t made secret of why fugitives like Wirathu and Hla Swe have not been arrested till now, in spite of court orders. On 4 February 2020, Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture U Aung Ko pointed at the government’s lack authority over the military-controlled Home Affairs Ministry, which oversees the police force; and suggested that the fugitives would have been arrested if the Home Affairs Ministry was under the control of the civilian government. This angered the Tatmadaw, whose spokesperson called on the government to take action against the minister[14].

Banality of 2008 Constitution

Months away from the general elections in November 2020, the NLD appears to have stepped up its efforts to be able to bring about some changes to the 2008 constitution that bestows extraordinary political powers on the military including controlling key ministries. In late January, a constitutional amendment committee, working over 11 months, submitted 114 bills to parliament that contain the proposed changes, including ones that would move oversight of the armed forces from the Defense Services Ministry to the elected president and gradually eliminate all military-appointed lawmakers. The committee’s other suggestions include clauses that will pave way for gradual reduction of seats reserved for the Tatmadaw and the threshold reduction for constitutional amendments. Curiously, however, these, under the present constitution, would need the military’s approval. In other words, the latter would have to vote for its own decline in influence, a phenomenon whose conclusion can be foretold. So, ‘while the amendments are unlikely to have any tangible effects on Myanmar’s laws, they are already having tangible effects on the relationship between the NLD and the military’[15].

The military can stall the moves in many ways. Two members of the military have resigned from the committee. Media house Irrawaddy has reported an ‘unprecedented levels of participation’ by military parliamentarians as of the 166 appointed military lawmakers, 164 are registered to join the upcoming parliamentary debate on bills to amend the Constitution, dates for which are yet to be fixed till the writing of this article. At the other level, the Tatmadaw is actively pepping up Buddhist nationalist sentiments by supporting rallies such as the one held on 9 February. A symbiotic relationship has developed between the military and monks, catering to their mutual needs and that explains why the Buddhist nationalists have come out in strong support of the military. Myanmar media has reported that many of the demonstrators in the 9 February rally are known participants in MBT’s activities.

Options for the International Community

Choosing sides in Myanmar has never been easy. ASSK was a preferred choice of the world before she assumed political power. However, she has lost much of her credibility in the face of her defence of the military vis-à-vis the Rohingya. Although much of the world would like her to win the battle to amend the 2008 constitution, they would also prefer her to be politically right in condemning the atrocities on the Rohingya, uphold press freedom and rights of the ethnic minorities. These expectations, however, may have been based on incomplete understanding of the power equations between the civilian government and the military, which she is desperately trying to alter. Till now, damning her has not done much good for the plight of the Rohingya. On the contrary, it may have weakened her position vis-a-vis the military and the ultra-nationalist Buddhists.

As tensions between the military and the government increase in the run-up to general elections in November, ASSK needs support of the international community. The alternative to an NLD-led government in Myanmar is a quasi-civilian set up propped up by the military. Will that sort of government deliver on the human rights front? Won’t incessant pressurizing ASSK minimize her options and push her into the lap of the military? The international community needs demonstrate a bit of patience and strongly support the NLD’s bid to bring about changes in 2008 constitution. That may seem a bit of irony at the moment given her public posturing vis-a-vis the Rohingya, but she still remains the best bet for democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

End Notes overleaf

End Notes

[1] Protestors chanted slogans such as protection of race, religion and sovereignty; protection of Section 59 (f) of the constitution that prevents Myanmar citizens with immediate family members holding foreign citizenship from contesting the presidency; non-emergence of false race Rohingya and non-acceptance of amendments to the constitution and criticizing the organizations trying to harm national sovereignty. “Mass rally held to denounce threat to race, religion and sovereignty”, Eleven Myanmar, 10 February 2020, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/mass-rally-held-to-denounce-threat-to-race-religion-and-sovereignty>. Accessed on 26 February 2020.

[2] Hannah Beech & Saw Nang, “He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw”, New York Times, 29 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/asia/myanmar-wirathu-monk-buddhism.html>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

[3] “Ultrationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization”, Radio Free Asia, 1 August 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ultrationalist-myanmar-monk-group-07302019164233.html>. Accessed on 24 February 2020.

[4] Htun Htun, “Religion Ministry Done Leaving Sangha to Govern Ma Ba Tha”, Irrawaddy, 31 July 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/religion-ministry-done-leaving-sangha-govern-ma-ba-tha.html>. Accessed on 24 February 2020.

[5] “Ultrationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization”, op.cit.

[6] “An Unholy Alliance: Monks and the Military in Myanmar”, Al Jazeera, 18 March 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2019/03/unholy-alliance-monks-military-myanmar-190309083316608.html>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

[7] “Is the Tatmadaw supporting an anti-government organisation?”, Frontier Myanmar, 9 July 2019, <https://frontier-myanmar.net/en/is-the-tatmadaw-supporting-an-anti-government-organisation>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

[8] Htet Naing Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha is a Necessity: Military”, Irrawaddy, 19 June 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-necessity-military.html>. Accessed on 18 February 2020.

[9] Kyaw Phyto Tha, “Buddhist Nationalists Urge Voters to Shun NLD at Ballot Box”, Irrawaddy, 18 June 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/buddhist-nationalists-urge-voters-shun-nld-ballot-box.html>. Accessed on 18 February 2020.

[10] These include Myanmar military’s Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing; his deputy, Soe Win, and two other brigadier generals Than Oo and Aung Aung and their families. These are the strongest action the United States has taken in response to massacres of minority Rohingyas in Myanmar. David Brunnstrom, Lesley Wroughton. “U.S. imposes sanctions on Myanmar military leaders over Rohingya abuses”, Reuters, 16 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-myanmar/u-s-imposes-sanctions-on-myanmar-military-commander-over-rohingya-abuses-idUSKCN1UB2QM>. Accessed on 26 February 2020.

[11] Hla Swe is the publisher of the ultrationalist Bullet News Journal and hence, uses ‘Bullet’ as his middle name. Facebook page of Bullet journal can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/soeyannnn33/>.

[12] Swe Lei Mon, “Court issues warrant to arrest former USDP lawmaker”, Myanmar Times, 13 August 2019, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/court-issues-warrant-arrest-former-usdp-lawmaker.html>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

[13] Htun Htun, “Muslim Leader Files Suit Against Ex-Officer for ‘Hate Speech’ Against Islam”, Irrawaddy, 6 August 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/muslim-leader-files-suit-ex-officer-hate-speech-islam.html>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

[14] Htet Naing Zaw, “Myanmar Military Asks Govt to Punish Minister for Police Remark”, Irrawaddy, 4 February 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-asks-govt-punish-minister-police-remark.html>. Accessed on 19 February 2020.

[15] Andrew Nachemson, “How Constitutional Reform in Myanmar Matters for the Country’s Democracy”, Diplomat, 31 January 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/how-constitutional-reform-in-myanmar-matters-for-the-countrys-democracy/>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

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