The Unremarkable Death Of Migrants In The Sahara Desert

Vijay Prashad

04-06-2024 ~ Sabah, Libya, is an oasis town at the northern edge of the Sahara Desert. To stand at the edge of the town and look southward into the desert toward Niger is forbidding. The sand stretches past infinity, and if there is a wind, it lifts the sand to cover the sky. Cars come down the road past the al-Baraka Mosque into the town. Some of these cars come from Algeria (although the border is often closed) or from Djebel al-Akakus, the mountains that run along the western edge of Libya. Occasionally, a white Toyota truck filled with men from the Sahel region of Africa and from western Africa makes its way into Sabah. Miraculously, these men have made it across the desert, which is why many of them clamber out of their truck and fall to the ground in desperate prayer. Sabah means "morning" or "promise" in Arabic, which is a fitting word for this town that grips the edge of the massive, growing, and dangerous Sahara.

For the past decade, the United Nations International Organization of Migration (IOM) has collected data on the deaths of migrants. This Missing Migrants Project publishes its numbers each year, and so this April, it has released its latest figures. For the past ten years, the IOM says that 64,371 women, men, and children have died while on the move (half of them have died in the Mediterranean Sea). On average, each year since 2014, 4,000 people have died. However, in 2023, the number rose to 8,000. One in three migrants who flee a conflict zone die on the way to safety. These numbers, however, are grossly deflated, since the IOM simply cannot keep track of what they call "irregular migration." For instance, the IOM admits, "[S]ome experts believe that more migrants die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea."

Sandstorms and Gunmen

Abdel Salam, who runs a small business in the town, pointed out into the distance and said, "In that direction is Toummo," the Libyan border town with Niger. He sweeps his hands across the landscape and says that in the region between Niger and Algeria is the Salvador Pass, and it is through that gap that drugs, migrants, and weapons move back and forth, a trade that enriches many of the small towns in the area, such as Ubari. With the erosion of the Libyan state since the NATO war in 2011, the border is largely porous and dangerous. It was from here that the al-Qaeda leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar moved his troops from northern Mali into the Fezzan region of Libya in 2013 (he was said to have been killed in Libya in 2015). It is also the area dominated by the al-Qaeda cigarette smugglers, who cart millions of Albanian-made Cleopatra cigarettes across the Sahara into the Sahel (Belmokhtar, for instance, was known as the "Marlboro Man" for his role in this trade). An occasional Toyota truck makes its way toward the city. But many of them vanish into the desert, a victim of the terrifying sandstorms or of kidnappers and thieves. No one can keep track of these disappearances, since no one even knows that they have happened.

Matteo Garrone's Oscar-nominated *Io Capitano* (2023) tells the story of two Senegalese boys—Seydou and Moussa—who go from Senegal to Italy through Mali, Niger, and then Libya, where they are incarcerated before they flee across the Mediterranean to Italy in an old boat. Garrone built the story around the accounts of several migrants, including Kouassi Pli Adama Mamadou (from Côte d'Ivoire, now an activist who lives in Caserta, Italy). The film does not shy away from the harsh beauty of the Sahara, which claims the lives of migrants who are not yet seen as migrants by Europe. The focus of the film is on the journey to Europe, although most Africans migrate within the continent (21 million Africans live in countries in which they were not born). *Io Capitano* ends with a helicopter flying above the ship as it nears the Italian coastline; it has already been pointed out that the film does not acknowledge racist policies that will greet Seydou and Moussa. What is not shown in the film is how European countries have tried to build a fortress in the Sahel region to prevent migration northwards.

Open-Air Tomb

More and more migrants have sought the Niger-Libya route after the fall of the Libyan state in 2011 and the crackdown on the Moroccan-Spanish border at Melilla and Ceuta. A decade ago, the European states turned their attention to

this route, trying to build a European "wall" in the Sahara against the migrants. The point was to stop the migrants before they get to the Mediterranean Sea, where they become an embarrassment to Europe. France, leading the way, brought together five of the Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) in 2014 to create the G5 Sahel. In 2015, under French pressure, the government of Niger passed Law 2015-36 that criminalized migration through the country. G5 Sahel and the law in Niger came alongside European Union funding to provide surveillance technologies—illegal in Europe—to be used in this band of countries against migrants. In 2016, the United States built the world's largest drone base in Agadez, Niger, as part of this anti-migrant program. In May 2023, Border Forensics studied the paths of the migrants and found that due to the law in Niger and these other mechanisms the Sahara had become an "open-air tomb."

Over the past few years, however, all of this has begun to unravel. The coup d'états in Guinea (2021), Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have resulted in the dismantling of G5 Sahel as well as the demand for the removal of French and U.S. troops. In November 2023, the government of Niger revoked Law 2015-36 and freed those who had been accused of being smugglers.

Abdourahamane, a local grandee, stood beside the Grand Mosque in Agadez and talked about the migrants. "The people who come here are our brothers and sisters," he said. "They come. They rest. They leave. They do not bring us problems." The mosque, built of clay, bears within it the marks of the desert, but it is not transient. Abdourahamane told me that it goes back to the 16th century, long before modern Europe was born. Many of the migrants come here to get their blessings before they buy sunglasses and head across the desert, hoping that they make it through the sands and find their destiny somewhere across the horizon.

By Vijay Prashad

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Source: Globetrotter

Widening The 'We'

04-03-2024 ~ Political polarization—the inability of groups such as political parties, religious sects, and cultural identity groups to cooperate even in basic, essential matters—has been a worry and a threat since American democracy began, and for many centuries before. James Madison called it "faction," and in *The Federalist*, No. 10, he wrote, "The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice."

Madison had good reason to be concerned. Seventy-four years after he wrote this, polarization turned toxic as the United States plunged into a bloody Civil War over slavery that has sent shock waves through American politics ever since. Some of those reverberations—over racial and social justice—have contributed to making the first half of the 21st century one of the most polarized periods in U.S. history, raising fears for the future of democracy and deeper concerns that our society could sink into tribal violence. A 2022 poll found that 28 percent of Americans considered "political extremism or polarization" to be "one of the most important issues facing the country, trailing only 'inflation or increasing costs' and 'crime or gun violence.'"

Polarization is not simple. At the most basic level, it is produced by rigid differences of outlook and opinion that make reaching a consensus on social aims difficult. Every issue appears to crystallize into an insoluble opposition: Black versus white, market efficiency versus social justice, unemployment versus inflation, and social security versus accumulating debt. Polarization turns toxic when discussion, let alone consensus, becomes impossible and violence seems

inevitable, ending with the elevation of popular movements into tyrannies and the consignment of opposing groups to prison or the guillotine. This is the outcome many fear is becoming possible today.

Toxic polarization is the product of three factors in individual and social development, all of which can be traced back to the beginnings of human society: malignant bonding, the scarcity mind, and historical and trans-historical trauma. Each factor develops independently, but they reinforce each other to produce a society that is prone to intractable and violent divisions.

Malignant Bonding

Bonding is a fundamental aspect of human culture. We bond in intimate relationships, as families, but also, and less obviously, in the multitude of associations—friendships, working partnerships, institutional and citizenship ties—that form a society. This promotes understanding and cooperation in the interest of building a community that addresses individuals' and groups' needs and aspirations. At its best, bonding is built on goodwill: an inclination in favor of empathy, good-faith communication, mutual aid, and an openness to finding common ground that is inclusive and widely beneficial to change.

But bonding can also be malignant, solidifying communities built on resentment, bigotry, and a desire to exclude those who are "different." The "longing to belong" can easily lead us to think that the only way to be "in" is not to be left out. The result is a narrowing of the "we"—the larger community's shared identity—as the powerful assert themselves and the fear of being excluded makes some types of identities and associations dangerous. The narrowing of the "we" reduces our ability to discuss urgent common problems such as climate change, social and economic inequality, and the upsurge in mass migration and displacement, let alone permit a consensus on policies to address these issues.

The absence of goodwill marks the difference between constructive and malignant bonding, and hence, between polarization and toxic polarization. When goodwill is present, it is possible to disrupt the perceptions at the root of toxic polarization and malignant bonding and open up space for the consideration of inclusive change. When goodwill is frozen out, this alternate course is almost impossible to perceive.

The Scarcity Mind

Malignant bonding is encouraged and perpetuated by a second factor: scarcity. The material condition of scarcity is very familiar to us today, given the mounting evidence regarding the effects of climate change, the race to lock up valuable natural resources, and mounting economic inequality.

But scarcity can also be a psychological state, the "scarcity mind": an imposition on experience that shapes it into how we observe and understand events and others. Even when essential goods and resources are not scarce, they are believed to be so. The scarcity mind operates independently and is dynamically connected to malignant bonding, deriving from history and prehistory. When lifespans were short, life itself was often perilous, and material scarcity was an ever urgent problem, bonding was a way to find security and alleviate want. Even when human societies became larger and more complex, this primal connection between bonding and scarcity remained psychologically powerful—and still is.

Historical and Trans-Historical Trauma

The third major factor in producing societies prone to toxic polarization is something universal to human experience: trauma. For individuals, trauma can be the result of accidents, physical, and psychological abuse in interpersonal, social, or institutional relationships, war, natural disasters, illness, or other disturbing experiences.

But it also has a millennial impact, having gathered over thousands of years of our species' often harsh and violent development. The fears and compensating behaviors that accumulate as a result of the physical and emotional violence, become coded into our collective behavior as societies.

Because its effects are so profound and persistent, trauma—from social pecking orders, predators, material rivalries, sexual selection, wars, precarious systems of sustenance, climate, and geographic shifts—has been and continues to be a critical ingredient in human development. We are always pushing back against the effects of various kinds of trauma, which tend to throw the positive aspects of bonding out of balance in favor of the malignant.

How and with whom we bond—individually and in communities—is driven by our desire not to experience either trauma or this imagined scarcity, even if it means drawing boundaries that leave many of us outside.

Institutional Scarcity

Trauma plays a critical role in generating and reinforcing the scarcity mind and then building it into the institutions—such as the government, commerce, household, and family—that make up our social infrastructure. The way those institutions function—and have functioned over time—produces what we experience as "common sense": our assumptions about how to make intelligent decisions. This common sense is therefore informed at least in part by malignant bonding, the scarcity mind, and historical and trans-historical trauma.

Pierre Bourdieu, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, called this "disposition" or "sense of the game": a partly rational but partly intuitive understanding of fields and of social order in general, giving rise to opinions, tastes, tones of voice, typical body movements and mannerisms, and other ingrained habits and assumptions. These help to reproduce prejudices and other social forms of domination, which eventually seem natural.

This "disposition" is then baked into our social, political, and economic institutions to produce a society typified by what we call "institutional scarcity": an acceptance of the scarcity mind and an accompanying set of assumptions about the limits to what's possible. The process begins as communities and cultures build distinctive technologies and ways of life and come into more frequent direct contact with each other, developing often exclusive territorial identities. Our institutions, in turn, ensure that these assumptions are kept wired into us as members of society, producing a "collective common sense" that frames our behavioral and political affinities.

This dynamic—of bonding over perceived scarcity—has persisted and still shapes our institutions, too often keeping goodwill approaches and solutions out of reach. Often, institutional actors—influential figures in politics, business, religious, or cultural life—build popular support by turning scarcity—real or presumed—into a critical yardstick for judging value: elevating the market against the common good, the possession of ideas ("intellectual property") against collaboration and sharing, and exploiting threats of insufficiency to exclude the foreigner and promoting malignant bonding.

The emotional and physical violence that inevitably results from institutional scarcity generates new waves of trauma among non-dominant, outsider groups. This, in turn, encourages all groups to shut themselves off and push back against change for fear of losing cohesion, having to share resources, or exposing

themselves to further trauma. The result is a further narrowing of the "we"—for example, those who can be regarded as part of our nationality, as respectable, as worthy of consideration or assistance by society as a whole—and a fierce attachment to that shrinking "we" by the people who feel entitled to claim membership in it. Often, these people hold more material wealth and feel a correspondingly greater desire to protect and preserve it; frequently, they are joined by people with far less material wealth but a shred of social capital—whiteness, maleness, and property—that they are just as fiercely determined to hold on to.

Institutional scarcity and the shrinking of the "we" affect our ability to communicate, inducing us to scrap the rules of engagement we normally apply to people we bond with. Powerful emotions like resentment make the listener less patient with the respectful, methodical discussion that characterizes good faith argument, and more welcoming of the sudden emotional outbursts and hyperbole—the catharsis—that a party in bad faith will indulge in when they feel they are losing the case. Catharsis, in turn, strengthens the pattern of toxic polarization, making it ever harder to break.

How We Learn and Change

Polarization and the elements that cause it are not going away. "The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man," Madison wrote, "and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society."

We are not destined to experience a future riven by toxic polarization and straitjacketed by institutional scarcity, however. We have a choice.

While malignant bonding, the scarcity mind, and historical trauma are powerful shapers of human society, there have always been powerful and, often, very effective counterbalancing factors. Three in particular have driven personal, social, and political changes at significant scales throughout human history:

– *The human brain's plasticity* and our emotional capacity to overcome trauma;

– *The persistence of variety* in the forms of social organizations that humans have created over millennia; and

– *Our historical experience* in struggling for social justice, as previously excluded

people have shaken off their oppression.

The human brain's plasticity: Findings in neuroscience tell us that our brains are more plastic—more flexible, and more capable of transformation and growth—than we had suspected. We can, literally, change our minds, and human interaction is often the fulcrum that makes this happen. These findings suggest that the human brain is uniquely wired to learn from and adapt to its environment, and for understanding, empathy, and reciprocity.

The persistence of variety: Social systems are not all the same; they range greatly in style and behavior and have borrowed from each other compulsively despite long episodes of conflict and isolation, demonstrating the power of human choice. While history is often taught as a progressive evolution ending in today's dominant system, the modern state ("the end of history"), recent research and scholarship in anthropology and archaeology—notably David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*—reveals a more complex history, dating back thousands of years, in which humans have adopted a multitude of different ways to organize themselves politically, socially, and economically.

Some of these societies had formal leaders, and some did not. Some emphasized cooperation over competition and organized along non-hierarchical lines, and yet created complex, sophisticated societies that lasted for centuries. The modern era is unusual in the narrow set of government structures it chooses from—but there is no reason to believe we are limited to only these.

Our historical experience: We are wired to include as well as exclude; conscious decisions to do the latter have a powerful motivational force of their own.

Research, including Benjamin Libet's famous experiments on the timing of volitional acts, has shown that apparently conscious decisions to act are preceded by an unconscious buildup of electrical activity within the brain. But this does not mean that humans will play no part in the initiation of action; on the contrary, people have the capability to veto "predictions" generated deep in the brain. Libet called this the "free won't," distinct from free will: the idea that conscious acquiescence is required to allow the unconscious buildup of readiness to be actualized.

We know, for example, that trauma can be processed, and its effects minimized. We also know that bonding can be achieved across racial, ethnic, and religious

lines. Powerful, disruptive transformations are ubiquitous in human history, often precipitated by forces that build up with little attention and then burst to the surface in a moment of crisis.

Historical examples abound. An end to feudal dues and economic subservience for the peasant class in France was considered unthinkable in the decades before 1789. Then, a fiscal crisis and collapse of royal authority made it unstoppable.

Pressure for Black liberation in the U.S. built up over many decades following the Civil War and Reconstruction, then acquired unstoppable momentum when African Americans first became vital to the war effort during World War II, they then leveraged the Cold War and the need for a national consensus to press successfully for integration of the armed forces, integration of public schools, voting rights, and an end to Jim Crow. All of this was achieved in less than two decades.

In both cases, a complex, carefully defined, and intensely unequal social order was overturned by long-building forces acting in response to a crisis of that social order. While the practical changes achieved were incomplete, the deeper cultural transformation amounted to what has been called a "transvaluation of all values": a reassessment of the worth of formerly accepted things in terms of their "value for life."

Conclusion: Beyond Polarization

In this article we have offered a framework for understanding how toxic polarization operates in our institutional structures and prevents us from addressing societal problems through goodwill and good faith; i.e., another frame of reference for understanding why and how humanity has repeatedly found itself locked into this social pattern, how it builds itself into our governing institutions, and how we have repeatedly found our way out of it.

"The CAUSES of faction cannot be removed," Madison wrote; "relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its EFFECTS."

But there is no single path forward in tackling these perennial elements of human society: toxic polarization as the product of malignant bonding, the scarcity mind, and historical and trans-historical trauma, which together produce a society-wide, institutional scarcity and a narrowing of the "we." There is no such thing as a permanent victory in this struggle; preserving and extending the capacity for

goodwill is a perennial challenge for human society. Nevertheless, we have repeatedly succeeded in opening spaces that have allowed us to solve problems we previously thought were insoluble.

A powerful argument for pursuing a more inclusive vision based on goodwill is that despite humans' propensity for divisiveness, greed, and aggression, something like it has always existed in some form. To address toxic polarization with a vision based on goodwill is to preserve and extend our will to bond positively, investing in and expanding our "we" dynamics. Nor does the persistence of the common sense of scarcity prove the opposite. All human society exists on a continuum of inclusion and exclusion, which is to say that neither is finally determinative.

There is no step by step, permanent solution to the pattern that creates toxic polarization; the struggle will continue. But the plasticity of the human mind, and the rich variety of historical experiences of humans exercising their free "won't," suggest that in every social context, there is a way to struggle effectively.

By Colin Greer and Eric Laursen

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Rising Talk Of School Closures Fuels Expansion Of The Community Schools Movement

04-03-2024 ~ "Instead of seizing the chance to close schools… communities across the country are pushing their districts to think about schools differently and the possibilities this moment gives us."

Judging by a rash of news reports beginning in late 2023, communities across the country may be gearing up for a massive wave of school closures in 2024. "A school closure cliff is coming," warned an article in the Hechinger Report in August 2023. The headline of a January 2024 article in the 74 read, "Exclusive Data: Thousands of Schools at Risk of Closing Due to Enrollment Loss." Also in January, an article in Education Week with the headline, "Pressure to Close Schools Is Ramping Up. What Districts Need to Know," highlighted potential or confirmed closures in Boston, Memphis, Tennessee, Wichita, Kansas, Jackson, Mississippi, Missouri, and Indiana.

The standard narrative in these reports is that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed families into online learning in 2020 and emptied school buildings. This was such a massive disruption that parents turned to alternative education options such as charter schools, private schools, microschools, and homeschooling. That transfer of students, along with the drying up of emergency relief funds that the federal government gave to schools to address the impact of the pandemic, have stressed state and local education budgets to the point of having to cut costs, including closing school buildings.

Both education reporters and policy experts tend to frame stories about school closures as "difficult" but "inevitable." Justifications for closures are steeped in

the language of business and economics with words like "efficiency" and "rightsizing" dominating the discourse. District leaders tend to be portrayed as pragmatic realists doing what's best for children, while efforts to include parents and teachers in decisions over how many schools to close and where are often cast as "placating the adults."

At the end of the typically torturous process of closing schools almost no one is pleased, especially in low-income Black and brown communities where closures most often occur.

Students, both those whose schools were closed and those in schools receiving an influx of students from the closed schools, are often negatively impacted by closures. And numerous studies about school closures for financial reasons have found that the promised savings from closing school buildings generally never materialize.

Because of the mostly negative results of closing schools, educators and public school advocates that Our Schools recently spoke with want school and policy leaders to rethink why and how they decide to close schools.

Many question the narrative about the need to close schools. They call for district and policy leaders to take steps to ensure families and community members are more involved in closure decisions. They also believe that school district leaders should be more proactive in avoiding school closures by implementing policies and programs that are more likely to attract and hold onto families.

Moreover, school closure skeptics are calling for policy leaders to change their thinking about schools and to regard them as permanent community assets rather than fleeting enterprises that come and go. Their strategy of choice for transitioning to an education system with long-term sustainability is for districts to adopt what's called the community schools approach.

It's a big ask, but one that might be perfectly positioned for a moment when policy leaders and government officials are faced with decisions over how to ensure every student has access to a high-quality neighborhood school.

'An Absolute Failure of Leadership'

"School closures are an absolute failure of leadership," said Cecily Myart-Cruz, "especially when the closures are in the most marginalized areas of the district."

Myart-Cruz is president of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the main representative organization for educators and school staff in the Los Angeles Unified School District, where talk of closing schools has been ramping up.

“The question that should be asked is how did [district leaders] let things get to this point?” she said.

“We don’t believe that school closures are inevitable,” said Moira Kaleida, the director of the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), a coalition of labor organizations, policy shops, and grassroots groups that advocate for public schools. Her organization is working with community groups in Pittsburgh, where the district is considering a plan to close and consolidate schools.

“We know that in the past, the schools that have been closed were those in Black and brown neighborhoods, or rapidly gentrifying areas—to be converted to condos,” she said. “We have been demanding a seat at the table.”

“Texas schools are being hit by a perfect storm of financial disinvestment from the state and student transfers to charter schools,” said Patti Everitt, a consultant who works with school districts and pro-public education organizations, including the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers.

School districts across the Lone Star State have announced or are actively discussing school closures for a variety of reasons, including enrollment declines and loss of students to charter schools.

“When districts realize the losses due to charters, they propose closing local neighborhood schools which infuriates parents,” Everitt said. “Closures are a big problem for parents, and district officials will always get the blame rather than state officials or charter companies.”

“Districts that start closing schools may very well find they are acting in haste,” warned Carol Burris, the executive director of the Network for Public Education, a national group that is pro-public schools. “Homeschoolers will trickle back, and more immigrants are arriving. It is the public school that will take care of them,” she said.

What the Data Says

Public school advocates are skeptical of the media narrative about the need to

close schools. They point to data from the U.S. Census Bureau showing that enrollments nationwide rebounded to pre-pandemic levels in 2022; although, they still remain lower than the 2018 levels.

Also, enrollment trends are uneven depending on grade level, as Education Week reported, as there have been increasing enrollments of older students, while enrollments have fallen in younger grades.

And, the idea that falling enrollments are mainly due to parents choosing to homeschool their children or sending them to privately operated schools is questionable.

Since schools have reopened after the worst years of the pandemic, charter enrollments have been "flat," Chalkbeat reported. "Private school enrollment has remained level," Burris noted, pointing to government data.

Burris acknowledged that there was a "surge in charter enrollment" due to the pandemic but attributed a lot of that surge to the explosive growth of enrollment in online charters, especially during the worst years of the pandemic. However, these online schools often have higher rates of student attrition than brick and mortar schools, and families leaving them will likely need the public system to fall back on.

"What has increased since the pandemic is homeschooling," Burris said.

Indeed, a 2023 study by the Urban Institute found that "between the 2019–20 and the 2021–22 school years, homeschool enrollment increased by 30 percent." But more than a third of students who are missing from public school enrollments are missing from the education system altogether. Are they homeschooling or "no schooling," said Burris, during her interview.

Indeed, some of the "trickle back" Burris predicted has been happening. According to a March 2024 Brookings study, in the 2022-2023 school year, "traditional public schools gained back one out of 5 percentage points in the share school-age children they lost between 2019–20 and 2021–22."

While the Brookings analysis found enrollment gains in the public sector during 2022-2023 are "not uniform," especially when declines among rural schools are accounted for, it concluded that "The dwindling student counts in some schools

signal opportunities to strengthen community and school supports."

'A False Narrative'

Because of these uncertainties over enrollment trends and the impact privately operated schools have on them, public school advocates are wondering if current calls for school closures are efforts to advance hidden agendas.

"As soon as there is any inkling of a conversation about enrollment declines, district leadership will present closures as the only solution," said Myart-Cruz. "They'll say that what's causing closures is something they have no control over. But that's a false narrative," she said.

"Those who oppose public education are seizing the opportunity [provided by] the pandemic as a chance to further dismantle it," said Kaleida. "This is just another repeat of the same plays we see every 10 years—San Antonio, Jackson, Mississippi, and Pittsburgh—where they are using an almost identical plan from their last attempt to close [public] schools."

In the many school districts where Everitt has worked, she has noticed a recurring pattern in which school leaders who were grappling with enrollment and demographic changes, which strain school budgets, brought in outside consultants specializing in helping districts navigate the school closure process.

Armed with a consultant-authored report, which predictably recommends closing schools, district leaders present closures as a forgone conclusion and limit discussions to deciding which schools, listed by the consultant, to close.

This strategy effectively fractures any opposition to the closure plan, as parents, frontline educators, and public school advocates find themselves arguing about how to whittle down the list of possible closures rather than challenging the need to close any schools at all. Invariably, schools where parents and teachers are better organized and empowered are more likely to get taken off the list while schools with the most marginalized families end up on the chopping block.

Educators and public school advocates want that practice to end and want to broaden discussions to questions about how to create a system in which schools are more sustainable and adept at acclimating to the changing needs of their surrounding communities.

An Alternative to a Market-Based Approach

"Instead of seizing the chance to close schools," Kaleida said, "communities across the country are pushing their districts to think about schools differently and the possibilities this moment gives us."

One such possibility that educators and public schools advocates want to see coming out of the dialogue over school closures is for more districts to adopt an increasingly popular approach to school operations called community schools.

In the community schools approach, schools are treated as essential hubs in the community for student and family services that go beyond academics, including taking care of their physical and mental health, nutrition, afterschool care, and career education.

Inherent in the community schools approach is a reliance on collaborative leadership that includes a wider circle of stakeholders in the school to determine policies and programs.

The community schools idea is a significant departure from what is called—by both critics and proponents—a market-based approach that has been in vogue for the last two decades or more. A market-based approach assumes that schools should operate more like businesses, competing for resources and "customers," and they should open and close based on market conditions.

The thinking is that when schools experience market conditions that constrain their financials—because, for example, the surrounding neighborhood's demographics change, or parents choose to send their children to the private sector—the ones that exhibit the most financial difficulties should close and the more adaptable schools should survive.

In contrast, the community schools approach considers schools to be essential infrastructure that communities rely on—much like they depend on parks, libraries, sanitation services, public works, and fire and police protection. And any consideration to closing a school would be determined through a democratic process with consideration of the multiple impacts that such closures would have on families and the community.

'Public Schools Belong to the People'

One place where this clash in the community schools approach is challenging the

entrenched market-based ideology is the San Antonio Independent School District. A proposal by the district administration to "rightsize" the district by shuttering 15 schools and shrinking the district's building capacity by more than 15 percent was approved in November 2023 by the district board of trustees.

Shortly after the district's plans for closing schools came to light, groups representing teachers, school staff, parents, students, and public school advocates formed the Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition in June 2023 to challenge what they called a "rushed" decision-making process and what they saw as the lack of community engagement in the closure plan.

"We knew a plan that would include school closures was coming down the pike," said Alejandra Lopez in an interview with Our Schools. Lopez is a school teacher and president of the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, the elected employee union in the San Antonio Independent School District. She also leads the Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition.

"Other districts around us have closed schools," Lopez said. "We knew the central office's perspective was to favor school closures. We knew most board members already had their minds made up to close schools. Our superintendent, who was hired in 2022, had been here for less than a year when he announced the rightsizing effort. He had previously served in Denver, Los Angeles, and Rochester [New York], which are all districts that follow the portfolio model. San Antonio also follows the portfolio model."

The portfolio model Lopez is referring to is an example of a market-based approach to school operations that relies heavily on an influx of charter schools. The basic idea is that school boards should invite competition from charters into the district and treat schools as if they were individual investments in a stock portfolio. Board members should be agnostic about who runs individual schools, and the role of the elected board becomes more about tracking the performance of each school, based on test scores, and closing schools—similar to selling off underperforming stocks—at the bottom or turning them over to other private contractors.

But rather than digging in and opposing closures outright, Lopez and her allies favor a more nuanced approach in which they focus their opposition on what she described as a top-down process driven by the administration that did not

adequately consider the voices of students, parents, teachers, and others in the community.

“We acknowledged the need to close schools,” Lopez said, referring to the district’s plans to shut schools that her organization held negotiations for. “We were more interested in attending to what community members wanted.”

What community members want, according to Lopez, is to have more control over which schools close and why.

“Our district has done better than most,” she said, “but it still came to the community with a list of schools to close rather than discussing with the community the factors that would put schools on the list.”

In a November 2023 letter supporting the Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition’s call for the district board of trustees to vote no on the rightsizing plan, the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization that is pro-public schools, accused the district administration of ignoring the coalition’s demands, following “the advice of school privatization consultants who have an agenda to close schools,” and building the case for closure on “redundant metrics” that created “a veneer of objectivity” to justify an “agenda and foregone conclusion to close schools.”

“Each community should be allowed to vote on a closure plan. Public schools belong to the people and people should get to decide,” Lopez said. And her coalition wants the metrics for school success to come from students, parents, and school staff perspectives and not just from the central office.

She and her allies also want a community-wide dialogue about how school leaders are prepared to address the negative effects of closures; how closures will affect class size, teacher planning time, and graduation rates; and what will happen to the shuttered buildings.

Lopez and her coalition members have also pushed for the district to adopt the community schools approach.

“Our coalition believes that adopting a community schools model would both ensure that our schools are meeting the needs of our students and communities in the aftermath of closures and would mitigate what the research says are some of

the negative consequences of closure. Plus, we also believe that a community schools model would attract more students to our district."

'A Great Solution'

Another advantage of the community schools approach is that it helps build a system of structures into the school administration—such as governance committees, assessments, and decision-making processes—that resist reform fads and the pet projects of school leaders who often use their tenures to job hop their way to evermore prestigious positions.

For example, Everitt described a situation in Austin, Texas, in which a coalition she helped organize had formed to counter district proposals to close a high school for academic underperformance. The coalition's effort successfully staved off the closure for a number of years, but it took an incredible commitment from parent organizers and volunteers who routinely showed up at public meetings, brought in experts to critique the district's plans, and worked doggedly to gain strategic access to district leaders.

But because the resistance to closure relied on the strength and stamina of individuals rather than a more resilient system of governance, it proved to be unsustainable, and when the district's superintendent departed, and a new leader who had other interests came in, the work the coalition had managed to achieve was thrown out, and the closure process restarted.

"The community schools approach is a great solution for giving parents what they want," Everitt said, yet she conceded that the approach's success is reliant on district leaders having access to sustainable resources and a willingness to reach out to parents and community and use the results of the outreach to shape policy.

"Most parents and community members just don't know the assets of their local public schools," she said.

'What Is Our Marketing Plan?'

"Community schools are the transformation we need," said Myart-Cruz.

She acknowledged that Los Angeles schools face a challenging terrain that includes an aging city population, declining birth rates, and market competition from charter schools, all while dealing with the lingering impact of pandemic disruptions. But rather than responding to those challenges by closing schools in

the most marginalized communities, she argued that district leaders need to take a lesson from charter schools and develop a plan for attracting parents back to district schools using the promise of the community schools approach.

“District leaders should ask themselves, ‘Are we being effective marketers to bring back families who’ve left and keep the families we have? What will hold families and foster a sense of belonging in a loving and safe space?’”

As evidence that the community schools model can be an effective strategy to woo back families to public schools, she pointed to the resurgence of Baldwin Hills Elementary School.

The school had experienced significant enrollment declines, so much so that the district determined Baldwin’s building was underutilized and decided to colocate a charter school there in 2016. The charter colocation led to more parents leaving the school when space that had been used for a computer lab, a yoga room, an orchestra program, and special education services, was taken over by the charter, according to KCRW.

But after the school adopted the community schools idea, enrollment rebounded, according to Myart-Cruz.

In the 2021-2022 school year, when Baldwin started its first year of the community schools implementation, it had 391 in attendance, according to district records. By 2023-2024, attendance levels had risen to 433, justifying the school’s demand to reclaim some of its lost space from the charter, which prompted the charter management company to leave the building for another location in the fall of 2023.

Another school, Miramonte Elementary, which had experienced significant enrollment declines in the wake of a horrendous sexual abuse scandal, also experienced an attendance rebound after implementing the community schools approach in 2021. According to district data, the number of students attending the school increased from 639 students in 2021-2022 to 683 in 2023-2024.

“Charters know they have to market to survive,” said Everitt, noting that an independent audit of the IDEA charter management company in Texas found the organization’s advertising budget was more than $15 million annually, as of June 2022.

“When charters want to increase enrollment they have a marketing plan,” said Lopez. “What is our marketing plan? If the main issue is enrollment declines, then there’s never been a better opportunity for the community to come together to create a plan to boost enrollment and to empower public school parents to voice their support for the public schools they want.”

By Jeff Bryant

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Source: Our Schools

The EU Is Marching Toward An Independent And Integrated Military

John P. Ruehl – Source: Independent

Media Institute

04-02-2024 ~ *The EU's evolving common defense network is decades in the making, yet remains hindered by its inability to match NATO and apprehension by some member states.*

At the European Defense Agency's annual conference in November 2023, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen warned member states from buying too much equipment from abroad and called for a European Defense Union. While the defense union is yet to materialize, the first-ever European Defense Industrial Strategy signed in early March 2024 marked another significant step toward achieving European Union (EU) military autonomy by focusing on improving European weapons manufacturing.

The EU's collective military spending reached almost $300 billion in 2023, more than China's official defense budget. Yet its collective weapons stocks remain low, its aircraft, ships, and tanks aren't ready for combat, and its member states lack logistical and coordination experience. With these shortcomings, debate continues over whether the military policies of EU member states are determined in their capitals, Brussels, or Washington, D.C.

Public support in EU states for a common defense and security policy has nonetheless remained above 70 percent in the 21st century. Washington has maintained a balancing strategy of encouraging dependency among European NATO/EU states, while ensuring they remain capable military allies. But fluctuating attitudes by U.S. administrations toward European defense initiatives have exacerbated uncertainty regarding their autonomy, and integration efforts have continued to evolve since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

France's 1951 proposal for a European Defense Community (EDC) among itself, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands found significant support in Washington. Seeking to create a complementary to NATO to collectively face the Soviet Union, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened an "agonizing reappraisal" during a 1953 NATO summit of Washington's role in NATO if the EDC failed to materialize.

Despite the rejection of the EDC French parliament, the Western European Union (WEU) military alliance was established in 1954 as a viable alternative. It

included the UK and West Germany, paving way for the latter's entry into NATO in 1955. France's dissatisfaction with the dominance of British and American interests in NATO saw it reduce its participation and integration in NATO during the 1960s, later emphasizing the WEU for greater European military integration.

However, French attempts to position the WEU as a credible alternative faltered. Even after the end of the Cold War and Soviet collapse, Europe continued to rely heavily on U.S.-led NATO, particularly evident during the 1990s Yugoslav Wars.

Yet U.S. policymakers viewed the establishment of the EU in 1993 as a challenger to NATO and capable of competing in defense contracts. In 1998, France and the historically euroskeptic UK signed the Saint Malo declaration, committing to create a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and envisaging a still-unrealized 60,000 strong European force. The Clinton administration expressed concern about potential discrimination against non-EU states, duplicating the role of NATO, and delinking it from the EU. Undeterred, the EU established the ESDP framework in 1999, and the WEU was transferred to the EU in 2000.

The burgeoning NATO-EU military rivalry was somewhat tempered by efforts to bolster cooperation and coordination, including the 2001 NATO-EU Framework Agreement and 2003 Berlin Plus Agreement. The creation of NATO's rapid reaction force in 2003 also blunted the EU's ambitions, while Eastern European states sought NATO assurances, not the EU's, because of concerns over Russia.

However, 2003 also marked the debut of the Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jet, a joint EU project involving Germany, the UK, Italy, and Spain through the Eurofighter GmbH consortium. Originating in the 1980s, this venture marked a major milestone in European defense collaboration, and today European defense firms such as Airbus, BAE Systems, Leonardo S.p.A., and Dassault, can compete with U.S. weapons exports globally.

Nurturing Europe's dependency on U.S. power has historically been an effective strategy for Washington to maintain control of the alliance. During the NATO-led intervention in the Libyan Civil War, the Obama administration urged European allies to assume a leading role, but they faced challenges due to limited weapons stocks and coordination. France, which rejoined NATO military command in 2009, was then provided significant U.S. assistance in Africa from 2014, including air-refueling flights and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, aligning with

broader U.S. initiatives in Africa.

Washington's long-term method of managing the EU's military autonomy suffered a significant disruption in 2016. The UK, traditionally the most skeptical of further EU military integration, voted to leave the institution, while Trump's election victory and open disdain for NATO added uncertainty to the alliance. With fewer constraints, the EU accelerated efforts to increase its autonomy.

Days after the Brexit vote, the EU unveiled its 2016 European Global Strategy, outlining a path to a more independent military and foreign policy. In 2017, the European Defense Fund was established to secure collective defense funding, as well as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to develop joint military projects.

The Trump administration cautioned against PESCO excluding non-EU states, fearing it could lead to interoperability issues and amid pressure from defense firms concerned about being marginalized in Europe's market. And after German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorsed Macron's calls for a European army, Trump was highly critical of the decision.

The momentum of EU military integration continued into the Biden administration. The approval of the European Peace Facility (EPF) in early 2021 provided the EU with a collective mechanism to procure and supply lethal weapons systems to other countries, enhancing its ability to influence conflicts beyond its borders and supply weapons to foreign states.

Although the U.S. has reasserted its central role to the Western alliance in Ukraine, its recent funding setbacks have seen attempts by the EU to seize the initiative and hasten its path to military autonomy. However, due to the EU's limited authority, it relies on member states to drive this process, which they struggle to manage independently or collaboratively.

Having withdrawn from Africa in 2022 and 2023, France has intensified training programs, equipment transfers, and intelligence sharing and cooperation with Ukraine since the start of its war with Russia. In March 2024, President Emmanuel Macron stated that France has "no limits" on its aid to Ukraine, and would not rule out building a coalition to send Western troops to the country.

France's status as the EU's only nuclear power and permanent member of the

United Nations Security Council affords it a distinctive position to drive European military integration. Against the backdrop of Trump's America First policies, Macron's 2019 proposal for a bilateral strategic dialogue with Russia calls to create a new "European security architecture" broke from Washington but elicited outrage among some eastern European countries.

France's shifting stance toward Russia since the start of the Ukraine War reflects its pragmatic approach. But concerns persist among other European countries over perceptions France is leveraging the EU to further its own ambitions. French weapons exports have surged to Ukraine, as well as to former Russian markets, and France has received more than a quarter of the European Defense Fund's budget for pilot programs.

In contrast, Germany has avoided attempting to assume a leadership role in for the EU's policies toward Ukraine but its military gravity in the EU has nevertheless amassed. Two Dutch combat brigades were integrated into German divisions in 2016, as well as some integration between their naval forces. The Czech Republic and Romania have also integrated a brigade each into the German armed forces in 2017, while all three Dutch brigades were integrated in 2023. But Germany appears unwilling to go further, despite being the only one capable of matching France's initiatives.

Adding to the EU's struggle to achieve military cohesion is the pro-NATO sentiment among certain eastern European EU states. Poland in particular has dragged its feet in greater EU defense collaboration, while the Baltic States who also prioritize their military partnership with the U.S. and NATO. In 2020, the U.S. and Poland solidified their defense cooperation further through agreements to send 1,000 additional U.S. troops to Poland, and a general preference for integration with U.S. weapons systems has entrenched U.S. influence across the region.

Since the departure of the UK from the EU on January 31, 2020, its capacity to direct and engage with EU states has diminished significantly. In a bid to bypass the EU and maintain connections with member states, the UK has sought to leverage its weapons industry and close military relationship with the U.S. to position itself as the leading European actor in the Ukraine crisis.

In a move that undermines the EU's efforts for unified military integration, Poland

and the UK signed the 2030 Strategic Partnership in 2023 to strengthen their foreign policy, security, and defense cooperation. Later that year, the defense ministers of Japan, Italy, and the UK signed an agreement to form a collaborative organization to develop an advanced fighter jet, providing London with another entry point into the European defense market. In early 2024, UK forces also led the NATO Rapid Response Forces exercises in Poland.

The array of EU institutions, which also include the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), Capability Development Plan (CDP), European Defense Agency (EDA), and the EU's Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDITB), highlight the challenges inherent in managing a large bureaucracy tasked with coordinating multiple states on military affairs. The EDA oversees 178 major weapons systems alone, while the U.S. manages just 30. The implementation of PESCO meanwhile suffered delays and the creation of a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of 5,000 soldiers by 2025 faces doubts. Additionally, the EU's struggle to supply weapons to Ukraine has been routinely criticized by officials from both sides of the Atlantic.

Adding to this are the lingering and often overlapping security arrangements among European countries. The Baltic Defense Cooperation, Nordic Defense Cooperation, and Lancaster House Treaty, Joint Expeditionary Force and European Intervention Initiative have all decentralized the EU's military cohesion, with many still including the UK.

The recent decisions by Finland and Sweden to join NATO meanwhile underscore the willingness of EU states to relinquish some autonomy in favor of aligning themselves with the protective cover provided by Article 5 of the NATO charter. In the absence of a cohesive and organized EU capable of projecting power effectively, NATO will continue to be the preferred military alliance, even with the possible reelection of Trump.

Of course, the EU has made significant headway in centralizing European defense over the last three decades. It is currently engaged in 10 military initiatives across three continents and has also participated in anti-piracy operations. In early 2024, the EU chose to launch its own naval mission to combat Houthi militant attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, rather than operate under U.S. command.

While the EU's defense infrastructure still relies on U.S. assistance, it possesses more than just the foundational elements needed for achieving military autonomy. Despite the protracted nature of this journey, the EU's consistent progress, even in the face of bypassing NATO, signals an even more independent future.

By John P. Ruehl

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Thailand Leads Southeast Asia: Parliament Approves Landmark Same-Sex Marriage Bill

03-31-2024 ~ *Thailand's lower house endorses historic same-sex marriage bill, paving the way for southeast Asia's first marriage equality law amid evolving LGBTQ+ rights landscape.*

Legislators in Thailand's lower house of Parliament have decisively endorsed a marriage equality bill, marking a historic step towards becoming the first Southeast Asian nation to legalize equal marriage rights for all people. On March 27, 2024, 400 out of 415 attending lawmakers voted in favor of the bill.

“This is the beginning of equality. It’s not a universal cure for every problem. Still, it’s the first step towards equality,” Danuphorn Punnakanta, an MP and chairman of the lower house’s committee on marriage equality, told Parliament while presenting a draft of the bill.

The bill must undergo approval by the Senate and receive endorsement from the Thai king. Following this endorsement, it would be published in the Royal Gazette and become law after 60 days. If it happens, Thailand will join Taiwan and Nepal as one of the few countries in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage.

The National Assembly has debated different versions of the legislation since December last year. Subsequently, the cabinet of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin sent the bill to Parliament. Initially, four draft bills on same-sex marriage were proposed by various political parties, which were later consolidated into one. In 2020, the constitutional court upheld the constitutionality of the country’s marriage law, which only recognized heterosexual couples. However, it recommended expanding the law to ensure the rights of other types of couples.

The law, which redefines marriage as a partnership between two individuals rather than solely between a man and a woman, grants LGBTQ+ couples equal rights. These rights include marital tax savings, inheritance entitlements, and the ability to give medical treatment consent for ill partners. Additionally, under the law, married same-sex couples can adopt children.

However, the lower house did not adopt the committee’s suggestion to replace the terms “fathers and mothers” with “parents.” A government survey conducted late last year indicated overwhelming support for the bill, with 96.6 percent of respondents in favor.

The rights to marry and form a family are fundamental rights acknowledged in Article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a treaty ratified by Thailand. Currently, 37 countries have included same-sex marriage in their national laws. Taiwan set a precedent in 2019 by becoming the first Asian country to recognize same-sex marriage. Meanwhile, Nepal acknowledged a nontraditional marriage in 2023 under an interim order from the Supreme Court, awaiting a final judgment.

In 2015, Thailand enacted the Gender Equality Act to offer legal safeguards against gender-based discrimination, particularly targeting unfair treatment of

LGBTQ+ individuals. Nonetheless, the law retains provisions that permit the justification of discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals on grounds of religion or national security. Furthermore, legal gender recognition remains absent, depriving transgender and non-binary individuals of the ability to officially alter their surname or gender on official records.

Same-Sex Marriage in Asia

In Asia, the legal landscape regarding same-sex marriage is evolving, with only Taiwan and Nepal currently recognizing such unions. Taiwan made history on 24 May 2019, becoming the first country in the region to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide. This milestone followed a landmark ruling by the Constitutional Court and subsequent legislative reforms. Meanwhile, Nepal has been a pioneer in LGBTQ+ rights, with the Supreme Court granting permission for same-sex marriage as early as 2008. This progressive stance was further solidified by the 2015 constitution, which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Despite strides towards equality, Nepal continues to navigate the legal intricacies of recognizing same-sex unions. In a significant move on June 28, 2023, Supreme Court Justice Til Prasad Shrestha directed the government to establish a dedicated register for sexual minorities and nontraditional couples, allowing for their temporary registration. However, a definitive verdict from the Supreme Court on the broader recognition of same-sex marriage is still awaited, underscoring the ongoing legal debate surrounding LGBTQ+ rights in the country.

Against this backdrop, November 2023 marked a historic moment in Nepal's LGBTQ+ journey. In Dordi Rural Municipality in western Nepal, Maya Gurung, a 35-year-old transgender woman, and Surendra Pandey, a 27-year-old gay man, legally formalized their union.

Meanwhile in India, the journey towards obtaining legal recognition for same-sex relationships has been rife with legal and societal challenges. A significant breakthrough occurred in 2018 when the Supreme Court of India took a groundbreaking step by decriminalizing consensual same-sex relations, marking a pivotal moment of progress for the LGBTQ+ community.

However, in a notable turn of events in 2023, the Supreme Court bench led by

Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud unanimously rejected the legalization of same-sex marriage. Moreover, the court voted 3 to 2 against acknowledging civil unions for non-heterosexual couples. This ruling dealt a blow to activists who had campaigned for equal rights within the realm of marriage.

This decision underscored the crucial role of legislative action in shaping the fate of same-sex marriage. The court abstained from interpreting the Special Marriage Act (SMA) 1954 to encompass same-sex unions, emphasizing that such matters lie within the purview of Parliament and state legislatures. Despite this setback, the court reiterated the fluid nature of the institution of marriage and affirmed the equal right of queer individuals to form unions, i.e., to stay as a live-in couple or have a relationship short of marriage.

The SMA is a piece of Indian legislation that allows individuals of different religions, nationalities, castes, or communities to solemnize their marriage through a civil ceremony. It provides a legal framework for interfaith and inter-caste marriages and offers provisions for the registration and validation of such unions.

Meanwhile, other prominent countries in Asia are also grappling with the complexities surrounding same-sex marriage. In China, there is no nationwide recognition of same-sex marriage. In countries such as Cambodia and Japan, partnership certificates are available only in specific cities or prefectures. In contrast, Hong Kong provides spousal visas and benefits to same-sex partners, highlighting stark differences from countries such as Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, where homosexuality can result in the death penalty.

The level of social acceptance towards LGBT individuals varies considerably, with evolving public attitudes and ongoing discussions influencing the trajectory of same-sex marriage rights across the region. Advocacy efforts and legal battles persist as communities strive for equality and acknowledgment in a continent marked by complex social dynamics.

By Pranjal Pandey

Author Bio: This article was produced by Globetrotter.

Pranjal Pandey, a journalist and editor located in Delhi, has edited seven books

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Source: Globetrotter

Sri Lanka: Govt-IMF Reach Agreement But Basic Question Remains

03-28-2024 ~ *Sri Lanka's economic crisis has worsened due to IMF deals, causing social unrest, unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity, and posing significant challenges for its people.*

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced on March 21, 2024, that it has reached a staff-level agreement with Sri Lanka regarding the next phase of financial assistance, granting access to $337 million from the previously approved $3 billion bailout allocated in 2023 for the financially strained nation. A staff-level agreement represents an initial consensus achieved between the personnel of the IMF and the governing authorities of a member nation concerning economic policies and reforms.

Over two weeks starting from March 7, a team from the IMF, led by senior mission chief Peter Breuer and deputy mission chief Katsiaryna Svirydzenka, conducted the second review of the bailout program in Colombo. The initial bailout, totaling $2.9 billion and spanning four years, was approved in March 2023. Two tranches of $330 million each were disbursed in March and December 2023.

Upon approval by IMF management and subsequent completion by the IMF

executive board, Sri Lanka will now gain access to SDR 254 million (approximately $337 million) in financial assistance.

Sri Lanka had declared its first-ever sovereign default since gaining independence from Britain in 1948 in April 2022.

The Sri Lankan Uprising of 2022

The 2022 protests in Sri Lanka, popularly referred to as Aragalaya (The Struggle), began in March of that year as a response to the government's policies. Criticisms were aimed at the government's handling of the country's economy, which had plunged into a severe crisis. The crisis, which sparked widespread unrest, was fueled by a combination of factors, including rampant inflation, frequent power cuts, and shortages of essential goods like fuel and domestic gas.

Massive protests culminated in a governmental collapse in Sri Lanka on July 13, 2022. A significant number of demonstrators had marched toward President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence asking for his resignation. Rajapaksa left the country for the Maldives, leaving Ranil Wickremesinghe to assume the role of acting president due to his position as prime minister. By evening, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe too had resigned, paving the way for the establishment of an all-party government.

Wickremesinghe, who had previously held the position of Prime Minister on six occasions and was serving as acting President, was elected as the eighth executive President of Sri Lanka following a parliamentary vote on July 20, 2022.

Crisis in the Sri Lankan Economy

Sri Lanka finds itself embroiled in a severe economic crisis, exacerbating the already pressing issue of food insecurity within the nation. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that 6.2 million individuals, constituting 28 percent of the population, are somewhat food insecure, with an additional 66,000 facing severe food insecurity.

The crisis, fueled by soaring inflation and prolonged political turmoil, has reshaped the landscape of governance in Sri Lanka, disproportionately affecting its impoverished communities. Once spending 32 percent of their income on food in 2019, in 2022, the same figure was a staggering 75 percent. The brunt of this crisis is borne most acutely by informal sector workers, with 86 percent of households reducing food intake, and some even skipping meals.

The food security challenge in Sri Lanka has been compounded by a significant decline in food production, impacting the 26.41 percent of the population dependent on agriculture. The United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs's (OCHA) Needs Assessment Report highlighted a serious decline in domestic agricultural output stemming from an unsuccessful transition to organic farming. In April 2021, the former government had imposed a ban on importing chemical fertilizers, which, even after being lifted in November, led to a 40 to 50 percent reduction in agricultural outputs for both Maha and Yala monsoon seasons.

Two in three households adjusted their children's eating habits during the crisis: over half of all children (54 percent) had to eat cheaper or lower quality food; over one-third (35 percent) had to reduce the quantity their children were eating; and about one in ten children (12 percent) had to reduce the frequency of their children's food intake.

In 2022, the youth unemployment rate in Sri Lanka reached a staggering 24 percent, reflecting a concerning trend in the labor force ages 15 to 24. Poverty levels have been on the rise since 2019, increasing from 11.3 percent to 12.7 percent in 2020, which equates to over 300,000 new individuals falling below the poverty line during that period. This trend continued into 2021, with poverty rates doubling between 2021 and 2022, soaring from 13.1 percent to 25.0 percent. This sharp increase has pushed an additional 2.5 million people into poverty in 2022 alone. Households have been profoundly affected by this economic turmoil, facing multiple challenges such as a 46 percent increase in prices, a contraction in service and industry jobs (forcing workers into lower-paying agricultural roles), a decline in remittances, and negative impacts on agricultural incomes due to the ban on chemical fertilizers implemented in 2021.

Austerity Measures and the IMF

IMF packages in Sri Lanka have negatively impacted the people. Austerity measures and structural reforms have led to cuts in public spending, increased unemployment, and reduced access to essential services. Privatization and deregulation have resulted in higher costs of necessities, exacerbating poverty and inequality. While these packages offer short-term financial aid, their long-term effects deepen social hardships for the most vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka.

With the imposition of various bailout packages, the Sri Lankan government has also implemented a series of austerity measures, increasing the challenges faced by its citizens amidst the country's severe economic crisis. These measures entail significant reductions in government expenditures across different sectors, including critical areas such as social protection measures, and essential public services like healthcare and education, further undermining the well-being of the population. Notably, each ministry's annual budget has been slashed by 5 percent.

In addition to these detrimental cuts, Sri Lanka's tax system has come under scrutiny for its regressive nature, characterized by a disproportionate reliance on indirect taxes such as the value-added tax (VAT), which accounts for 80 percent of tax revenue. This disproportionately affects lower-income individuals, who end up paying a larger share of their income in taxes compared to their higher-income counterparts.

Furthermore, the government's decision to privatize state-owned enterprises as part of its austerity measures has had negative consequences for both employees and consumers, leading to job losses and reduced access to essential services. Similarly, recent economic policy initiatives promoting labor "flexibility" have resulted in the erosion of workers' rights and welfare, exacerbating income disparities and labor exploitation.

Changes in pension regulations, such as the gradual reduction of pension gratuities for retirees, have further increased the financial insecurity faced by vulnerable segments of the population, particularly retirees relying on fixed incomes for their livelihoods.

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka's adoption of a significantly tighter monetary policy stance, characterized by successive increases in policy interest rates has had adverse effects on borrowing costs of both industries and citizens and economic activity in terms of production and consumer expenditure.

By Pranjal Pandey

Author Bio: This article was produced by Globetrotter.

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