

# MEDIA

## HIGHLIGHTS 2021



Nettavisen.

VICE

BuzzFeed

THE DAILY  
BEAST

ESPN

MOTHERBOARD

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EL PAÍS

The New York Times

HIR  
HARVARD INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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The Daily Dot

102.5  
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AMERICA

TIME

QUARTZ

VG

NBC

Slate

BUSINESS  
INSIDER

Hollywood  
REPORTER

NPK

sky news



South China  
Morning Post

theguardian

TheStar

The Mercury News

Dagbladet

THE JERUSALEM POST

The  
Economist

The Telegraph

THE VERGE

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

FOX  
NEWS  
channel

The  
Washington  
Post

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HRF

# IN THE NEWS

The Human Rights Foundation's (HRF) work is covered by the world's top media outlets, reaching millions of people around the world and ultimately inspiring change. In this media booklet, you'll find some of the most noteworthy articles authored by or written about HRF in the last year.

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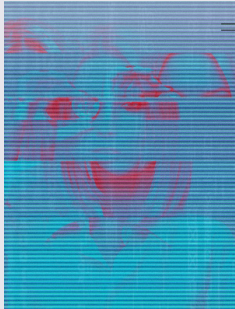


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**MEDIA MENTIONS**

BY THE  
**NUMBERS**



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**GLOBAL IMPRESSIONS**

**COVERAGE OF HRF PRINTED IN**  
**26 LANGUAGES**

- Arabic · Chinese · Czech · Danish · Dutch · English · French · German · Greek · Hebrew · Hindi · Hungarian · Indonesian · Italian · Japanese · Korean · Norwegian · Polish · Portuguese · Romanian · Russian · Spanish · Swedish · Thai · Turkish · Vietnamese

# TV & BROADCAST

HRF's work is consistently featured in top media outlets around the world. Besides print and online formats, HRF regularly makes appearances on television, the radio and podcasts. Here's a snapshot:

## **PBS' Firing Line with Margaret Hoover**

The Oslo Freedom Forum

October 10, 2021 | Margaret Hoover



## **Reason**

Iraqi Comedian Ahmed Albasheer:

The U.S. Invasion Created a  
Thousand Saddams

October 19, 2021 | Noor Greene



## **Reason**

Garry Kasparov:

From Communism's Last Chess  
Champion to Freedom Fighter

October 25, 2021 | Nick Gillespie

## **Lex Fridman Podcast**

Alex Gladstein:

Bitcoin, Authoritarianism, and  
Human Rights

October 16, 2021 | Lex Fridman

# Navalny from prison: Corruption flourishes when there's disregard for human rights

An official taking a bribe and a policeman pulling a bag over the head of a prisoner tied to a chair are one and the same person. Corruption flourishes when there is a disregard for human rights.

October 5, 2021

By **Alexey Navalny**

*Editor's note: [Maria Pevchikh](#) of the nonprofit [Anti-Corruption Federation](#), founded by [Alexey Navalny](#), will deliver this [speech](#) on his behalf at 10:20 a.m. EDT Tuesday.*

Pokrov, RUSSIA – There is nothing unique about my addressing a human rights forum by correspondence. Or virtually. This is how things are done now. But it is not COVID restrictions that are keeping me from delivering my speech, either in person or virtually, to the [Oslo Freedom Forum](#) in Miami to-

day. Many others, too many others, are in the same situation.

I am writing this address on a scrap of paper in the visiting room of a penal colony. They strip-search me every time I enter and exit this room. I have got about half an hour. And a warden is watching every word I write. It really feels like I'm writing an escape plan, or a bomb recipe, not a speech for a human rights forum.

World leaders may be good at solving certain global issues, but





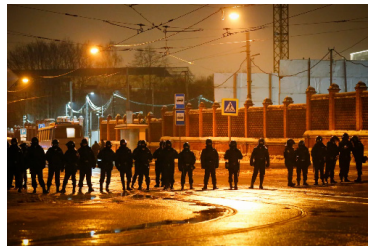
▲ *Russia opposition leader Alexey Navalny stands in a cage in court in Moscow in February. Alexander Zemlianichenko, AP*

their effectiveness leaves much to be desired when it comes to protecting human rights. I am afraid that it will soon be considered a miracle if a well-known activist from Russia, Belarus, Cuba or Hong Kong attended the forum in person instead of sending paper from a prison cell.

### **Human rights leaders warned us all**

When I speak to the leaders of the human rights movement, they, more than anyone else, have the full right to say a massive “I told you so.” It is true. You did tell us so. You did warn us. And you were absolutely right, and those who did not listen to you were immeasurably wrong. And I believe that every state leader should repeat these exact words to you.

But instead, we hear different words from them. Over the past 30 years, how many tales have we been told about the miracles of authoritarian modernization? How many times have “experienced diplomats” waving realpolitik banners whispered in our ears, “Don’t pressure this dictator about human rights, you will scare him away. He is ready for economic reforms, and that’s more important, you have to understand”? How many times have investment bankers winked at us from the pages of business newspapers, saying, “So what if there are some tortures here and there, what matters is that the economy is growing by 7% a year”?



▲ *Police block the street during a protest against the jailing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow, Russia, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. Russian police on Saturday arrested hundreds of protesters who took to the streets in temperatures as low as minus -58 to demand the release of Alexei Navalny, the country’s top opposition figure. Alexander Zemlianichenko, AP.*

A whole religion arose, which can be called "the Witnesses of the [Singapore](#) miracle." Many people from Washington to Frankfurt and London piously believed in it and continue to do so. Rwanda, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Chile were the prophets of this religion. They repeated like a mantra: "Don't pester us with human rights issues, just fill the country with investments and we will surely turn into a second Singapore."

But no second Singapore has ever appeared. Human rights defenders, while being silenced more and more often, turned out to be absolutely right. There will be no sustainable growth and real development in countries where human rights are not the foundation of the state. And as long as the observance of human rights in a particular country does not become a practical factor of domestic policy, as real as the interest rate of the Central Bank, this country can at best be an example of temporary authoritarian growth. Which will soon inevitably turn into problems and losses.

## **Fight for human rights starts in politics**

The [organization](#) that I founded specializes in fighting against corruption. And this, evidently, is enough to make it extremist in the eyes of my country's authorities.

While insisting that corruption is the root cause of many troubles and global challenges, from war to poverty, I also recognize that corruption flourishes when there is a disregard for human rights. To steal something from a person, you must first deprive this person of the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech and fair elections.

An official taking a bribe and a policeman pulling a bag over the head of a prisoner tied to a chair are one and the same person. His law is the superiority of the strong over the weak. The superiority of the interests of a corporation over the rights of an individual. The willingness to commit crimes as an act of loyalty.

Human rights issues must cease to be a formality, cease to be the last, least important point in a communiqué of yet another leaders summit.



▲ April 28, 2021: Municipal workers paint over graffiti of Russia's imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny in St. Petersburg, Russia. The words on the wall read "Hero of our time." Valentin Egorshin, AP.

Politics should be about the struggle for human rights, not about gas pipelines and the always vague "security cooperation." Any action or an event that does not lead to real improvement in human rights is at best useless.

*Alexey Navalny, an opposition leader, is being held in Penal Colony No. 2 in Pokrov in the Vladimir region of Russia, where he wrote this speech. It is being published as it is delivered at the Oslo Freedom Forum in Miami.*

The defenders of human rights have been trying to tell us this. They have been absolutely right all along, if only we would listen.

# Postcard from Oslo Freedom Forum

October 6, 2021

By [Ryan Heath](#)

This must be the first anti-dictatorship conference in Miami where Cuba was just one of dozens of storylines. But if ever there was a group of people in need of a break in Florida, it was this global collection of dissidents.

OFF is best understood as a human rights pep rally, with dissidents repackaged as TED talkers. There is a lot of pulling on heartstrings: probably because there is no better alternative. If they didn't nail their well-rehearsed lines, the truth is that you and I would probably ignore them.

Each day, the crowd jostled each other for food and coffee, and barely half wore the required masks: lives spent jostling with authorities and avoiding mind control don't lend themselves to neat queueing and following mask instructions.

**A community of dissidents:** The activists themselves spoke of how much they value real engagement, compared to other global conferences where they said they sometimes feel treated as props. The exiled Chinese artist Badiucao – who was awarded the Forum's Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent ([see his stunning take on the Beijing 2022 Olympics here](#)) – called the event “a global safe harbor” guarding against the loneliness of exile. “Here we do not feel lonely. We feel connected.”

“What we're trying to do is build a movement, a community,” said organizer Thor Halvorssen.

“We want to do it with energy, not in a way that sucks the life out of everything, like the U.N.,” he added.

Some of the speakers couldn't travel, including because those such as

Alexei Navalny are in jail. [Navalny's speech](#) was provided in writing and delivered by Maria Pevchikh, head of the investigative unit of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Others were there because they felt they no longer had a choice to sit on the sidelines. "I didn't ask for this," said Hatice Cengiz, whose fiancée Jamal Khashoggi was murdered by the Saudi government. "So many people were just living their lives before governments overreached and ruined their lives," said Halvorsen.

Some attendees simply walked in off the street. Global Insider chatted with a doctor who had recently moved to Miami, wandered past the forum and was drawn in by Badiucao's art: 24 hours later he was taking a class on using bitcoin to fund dissidents.

# 'Be Human'

October 15, 2021

By [Jay Nordlinger](#)



^ Berta Valle, wife of the Nicaraguan political prisoner Félix Maradiaga, speaking at the Oslo Freedom Forum in Miami, October 2021. Courtesy of the Oslo Freedom Forum

Someone says to me, "Jay, this is Andrei." I say, "Hi, Andrei." Then I look at his name tag, which includes his last name. My eyes widen. My heart skips a beat or two. He is Andrei Sannikov, the Belarusian statesman and former political prisoner. He was a presidential candidate in 2010. For his troubles, he was imprisoned and tortured al-

most to death. I wrote about him at the time (and about the Belarusian situation in general).

To see him alive, standing, well, laughing – it is very moving, I must say.

He tells me something like this: "I once met on the street someone I

had been in prison with. He looked at me and said, "You're alive!"

Sannikov's autobiography is called "[My Story](#)." He has a lot to say, a lot to relate. An interesting, emblematic, and brave life.

- We talk of various things, he and I. A quick sample:

Over the years, I have interviewed a fair number of people who crossed from East to West, in Soviet times. Musicians, in particular. They have all said the same thing: "I couldn't stop staring at the food. Marveling at the food. I did not take pictures of cathedrals or statues or parks. I took pictures of the food."

Sannikov chuckles and says, "That's what they censored, in Soviet times: images of supermarkets in Western movies."

- I meet another Belarusian, Tatsiana Khomich – whose sister I have just been writing about, unfortunately. Tatsiana's sister is Maria Kalesnikava, a democracy activist who has just been sentenced to eleven years in prison. Rather than go into exile, she tore up her passport.

Last month, I [wrote](#), "There was a phrase I used many years ago (with regard to young Cubans who were trying to practice independent journalism): 'unfathomable courage.'" That phrase very much applies to Maria Kalesnikava. Whose family is doing all they can to help her.

- I am at the Oslo Freedom Forum, which this year is being held in Miami. (This has to do with travel restrictions and related matters.) At this gathering, no one cares whether the tyranny is red or black. All they care about is that tyranny be opposed and defeated, and that freedom prevail.

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- As it is moving to meet Andrei Sannikov, Tatsiana Khomich, and

many others, it is moving to meet Gulchehra Hoja. I have interviewed her, but only via Zoom. For my piece about her, published last May, go [here](#). That piece is headed “A Uyghur Daughter, and Journalist.” The subheading is, “Get to know Gulchehra Hoja, who works for Radio Free Asia, and whose relatives are in the concentration camps.”

It is an added pleasure to meet Gul’s husband and three children. They are enduring a lot. As much as the Uyghurs in China now? No, but exiles and relatives have their own burdens – as you can imagine.

I want to share a quick, happy picture:



▲ *Gulchehra Hoja and Jay Nordlinger*

- There is a panel on myths of the Cuban dictatorship. I am to moderate it. One of our guests was to be Carolina Barrero, a Cuban art historian and activist. But she

has not come to Miami. Why? Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, the artist and political prisoner, has gone on hunger strike. Carolina and others have joined him in solidarity.

The things people do. The sacrifices they make. Extraordinary.

- Maria Werlau has joined us – one of my favorite people. She runs the Free Society Project, otherwise known as “Cuba Archive.” She and her project are a great source of information about Cuba: particularly the victims of that dictatorship. Go [here](#).

Also joining is [Vincent Geloso](#), an econ prof at George Mason – and an expert on the Cuban health-care system. This is one of those myths that float around the world: the glory of Cuban health care. On the contrary, it is a disaster.

- Leopoldo López? He is out of prison, and out of Venezuela, in fact. He made a daring escape a year ago. He now lives in exile in Spain. I have done a podcast with this formidable man: [here](#). A piece on him is to come.

- There will also be a podcast with, and a piece on, Masih Alinejad –



one of the blithest, bravest spirits I have ever met. She is an Iranian-American journalist, the recent target of a kidnap plot by the Iranian regime. She has wild, wonderful hair. It symbolizes her freedom. In fact, her autobiography is titled "[The Wind in My Hair.](#)"

Can I show you a quick picture I snapped?



^ Masih Alinejad

• "What's this panel about?" someone asks. One of the panelists answers, "Putin, bad." I love it – for it gives me a memory.

I worked at The Weekly Standard in the mid-1990s. Someone would ask Fred Barnes, "What's your piece about?" Fred would answer, "Clinton, bad."

• The title of the panel is "The Long Tentacles of Putin's Dictatorship." The Russian strongman oppresses

people at home, true. Not content with that, however, he makes all sorts of trouble abroad: from simple disinformation to outright murder.

I moderate three experts, one of whom is Maria Pevchikh. She is a Russian investigative journalist and anti-corruption activist. She has worked alongside Alexei Navalny, now in prison. Maria remarks on Navalny's bravery, which is truly stunning. But her own bravery is pretty stunning itself.

Another panelist? Molly McKew, who is an expert on Russian disinformation, "hybrid warfare," and all the rest of it. She has the Kremlin's number, in short. You can read her at [greatpower.us](#).

Our third panelist is Casey Michel – pronounced "Michelle," not "Michael," as in the late congressman from Peoria, Bob Michel. Casey's website is [here](#). He is an expert on things financial: how and where the oligarchs sprinkle and park their money, etc. Let me give you two biographical facts about him.

He was the northernmost male Peace Corps volunteer in the world – serving at the Russia-Kazakhstan

border. And he is married to the editor of Teen Vogue.

Beat that, as Bill Buckley would say.

- A friend of mine tells me about her mother, who is convinced – by what she reads, watches, and listens to – that Vladimir Putin is a great champion of the family, religion, and Western civilization. There is a lot of that going around. I'm afraid that this attitude – this misunderstanding, this illusion – is unshakeable.

- "I'm Fatou, from the Gambia," a lady tells me. Of course she is! I know her. I [wrote](#) about her in 2014. Let me quote:

Fatou Jaw Manneh is a lady both fiery and serene. I know it sounds contradictory – it is contradictory – but that is the impression she gives. She commands respect, certainly mine.

Yes. FJM is a journalist and foe of dictatorship. "Both fiery and serene" is right, I still maintain. Also, she is beautifully – splendidly – dressed. I wish I had a picture for you.

Furthermore, I love that she says "the Gambia." Once, as an editor at National Review, I received a manu-

script from Paul Johnson, the great English historian and journalist, who spoke of "the Lebanon."

- Hillel Neuer is here – the brainy, gutsy lawyer from Montreal who runs [UN Watch](#), in Geneva. One of the things he keeps an eye on is hypocrisy: hypocrisy regarding human rights (and you can imagine how busy he is).

Someone asks him, "Is it expensive in Geneva?" "No," he answers, "not if you don't buy anything."

- Speaking of money: Someday, I will get a handle on bitcoin. I will get up to speed on it. At the Oslo Freedom Forum, there is much enthusiasm for bitcoin – almost an evangelism – as a freedom tool, and a moral-good tool.

I bet my friends, the enthusiasts, are right.

- In the course of the Forum, I meet a young man who is a tech whiz and entrepreneur. His name is Matt Mullenweg. And he did no less than develop WordPress – which is what National Review Online uses every day.

Very affable, unassuming fellow. Naturally, I Google around. Matt is very smart, very rich, and very philanthropic. What a wonderful story. May a million Matt Mullenwegs bloom forever.

- Another guest here at the Forum seems rather shy. Her name is Hatice Cengiz, and she is a Turkish academic. She did not want to be an activist, but this vocation was thrust on her. She was the fiancée of Jamal Khashoggi – murdered by the Saudi state in October 2018. He had gone to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, to obtain documents he needed for his marriage. They killed him there.

To hear what Hatice Cengiz has to say is – affecting. She has gone through an experience that very few will.

- Félix Maradiaga is one of my favorite people. So is Edipcia Dubón. They are Nicaraguans and democrats. I wrote about them in 2019: "[Nicaragua in Hell: Ortega's crackdown and the people who resist it.](#)" After being in exile, Félix returned to Nicaragua and ran for

president. With the other candidates – Ortega's other opponents – he is in prison, in terrible, inhuman conditions. Edipcia is in exile, doing all she can for her fellow Nicaraguans. She is here at the Freedom Forum.

She wants to begin a campaign called "Be Human." Simply be human, she pleads with the regime. Give the prisoners food. Proper food. Give them medicine. Let them sleep, instead of keeping the lights on 24 hours and interrogating them constantly. For God's sake, just be human. If you can't – if you will not – release the prisoners, at least be human.

Berta Valle is Félix's wife. She is a well-known television journalist. She, too, is a guest here at the Forum. It is very moving to meet her – and to talk with her about Félix. Like Avital Sharansky and many others before her, she is campaigning for her husband's freedom. Indeed, for his very survival.

I love and admire these people, greatly.

# Human Rights Foundation Leaders Call for Justin Bieber to Cancel Performance in Saudi Arabia

The concert at the Formula One Saudi Arabian Grand Prix 2021 will also feature performances by A\$AP Rocky, Jason Derulo, Tiesto and David Guetta.

November 9, 2021

By [Katie Kilkenny](#)



The chairman and CEO of the Human Rights Foundation are calling for [Justin Bieber](#) to cancel a scheduled performance in Saudi Arabia “as a symbol of solidarity with the ongoing suffering of the Saudi people.”

In a letter dated Nov. 2 and shared with Bieber’s representatives, the nonprofit’s chairman, Garry Kasparov, and CEO, Thor Halvorssen, take issue with the “Stay” singer’s [re-ported performance](#) at the Formula One Saudi Arabian Grand Prix 2021 on Dec. 5. The Formula One event will also feature performances from A\$AP Rocky, Jason Derulo, Tiesto and David Guetta, and HRF [says that](#) it also sent letters to these performers as well as Egyptian singer Mohamed Hamaki about performing in the event. (*The Hollywood Reporter* has reached out to HRF for additional comment.)

“We are writing to urgently inform you of the human rights crisis in Saudi Arabia; to explain the role that the regime of MBS [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman] has played in violating the rights of tens of millions of Saudis; to ask that you consider the unfortunate implications of your engagement with the brutal dictatorship of MBS; and to

respectfully request that, in light of your status as a global personality, you take this opportunity to positively influence human rights policy in Saudi Arabia by canceling your appearance, as a symbol of solidarity with the ongoing suffering of the Saudi people,” Kasparov and Halvorssen write

*The Hollywood Reporter* reached out to Bieber’s representatives for comment, as well as the representatives for A\$AP Rocky, Derulo, Tiesto and Guetta.

In the letter, the HRF leaders criticize the current regime’s treatment of dissidents and members of the LGBTQ+ community, its track record on individual rights, its restriction of the media, and [imprisonment of](#) women’s rights activists, among other issues. They note that Reporters Without Borders ranked Saudi Arabia 170 out of 180 countries in its [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#).

The letter also mentions that Halvorssen and the Human Rights Foundation produced [The Dissident](#), Bryan Fogel’s 2020 documentary exploring the death of *Washington Post* writer Jamal Khashoggi, in which the Saudi royal family was infamously implicated.

A key argument of the letter is that Saudi Arabia's monarchy is currently using entertainment and sports ventures to distract from abuses of power, and that Bieber's statements in support of various social-justice causes are at odds with the planned performance. "The Saudi regime is happy to pay large sums to international celebrities to give the Kingdom a veneer of spectability, as long as the human rights violations occurring within Saudi Arabia are never mentioned," the authors write.

HRF calls for Bieber to cancel his performance, just as Nicki Minaj canceled a [planned performance](#) at Jeddah World Fest in the country in 2019 after outcry from various rights groups including HRF. "After better educating myself on the issues, I believe it is important for me to make clear my support for the rights of women, the LGBTQ community, and freedom of expression," Minaj said in a statement at the time. In 2019, South Korea's BTS also faced criticism for a planned concert in Riyadh but stood by their decision.

Formula One's decision even to hold a race in Saudi Arabia has [come under fire](#) from human rights

groups, with leaders from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty U.K. criticizing the decision. The promoter of the F1 event in Saudi Arabia [said earlier this year](#) that he had spoken to "a couple of drivers" to address concerns about the Saudi Arabia event.

*The Hollywood Reporter* [recently reported](#) that Disney's *Eternals* will not be released theatrically in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar because local censors made edit requests that the studio was not willing to comply with. Sources suggested the edit requests may have involved the film's portrayal of a same-gender couple and the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first gay superhero.

# Wall Street Returns to Riyadh

Is there a statute of limitations on attending “Davos in the Desert”?

January 25, 2021

By [Andrew Ross Sorkin](#), [Jason Karaian](#),  
[Michael J. de la Merced](#), [Lauren Hirsch](#) and [Ephrat Livni](#)



▲ Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 2018. Tasneem Alsultan for The New York Times

## ‘Davos in the Desert’ is back

It’s been more than two years since bankers kept their name badges [obscured behind ties](#) at a high-profile [investment conference in Riyadh](#), the capital of Saudi

Arabia, held weeks after [the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#) by Saudi agents at the country’s consulate in Istanbul. After a wave of cancellations at the 2018 event, the next year’s Future Investment Initiative, often called “Davos in the

Desert," [saw many business leaders](#) attend as the immediate furor over the killing subsided.

The next installment of the [conference begins in Riyadh](#) on Wednesday, and even more – and more senior – executives are [expected to appear](#), both virtually and in person. It raises the question: Is there a statute of limitations in associating with a country accused of human rights abuses?

**Who's going:** Some of Wall Street's biggest names are scheduled to attend, mostly virtually, according to the conference's itinerary. **David Rubenstein** of Carlyle is moderating a keynote panel that also includes **Ray Dalio** of Bridgewater Associates, **Larry Fink** of BlackRock, **David Solomon** of Goldman Sachs and **Thomas Gottstein** of Credit Suisse. **James Gorman** of Morgan Stanley will be interviewed by the CNN anchor **Erin Burnett**. Other executives set to appear are **Steve Schwarzman** of Blackstone, **Masa Son** of SoftBank, **Adena Friedman** of Nasdaq, **Tom Barrack** of Colony Capital and **Jeffrey Ubben** of Inclusive Capital.

• In 2019, Morgan Stanley and Goldman sent lower-ranking execs to the conference, not their C.E.O.s.

### **A possible morality test for business in a new administration.**

Joe Biden [called Saudi Arabia a "pariah"](#) on the campaign trail, and, while the new president may not drastically disrupt [relations with the country](#) – whose support he may need to [renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal](#) – “the atmospherics are going to change,” said Gregory Gause of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

• On Friday, the chairman of the House intelligence committee, Adam Schiff, [asked for declassification](#) of a U.S. government report on the Khashoggi killing.

### **What companies are saying.**

Companies contacted by DealBook pointed to the important business relationships they have with cash-rich Saudi Arabia and others in the region. Some of those ties are long established – Nasdaq has partnered with the Saudi stock exchange for two decades – while others are related to the kingdom's more recent efforts to diversify its economy [beyond oil](#).



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**Thor Halvorsen, the founder of the nonprofit Human Rights Foundation, which has funded 'The Dissident,' a documentary about Mr. Khashoggi's killing, said that those attending the event gave the crown prince valuable legitimacy. "The message is, 'Look, the world's money and the powerhouses of finance and industry are my puppets,'" he said.**

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• A representative for BlackRock said that Mr. Fink "has been very public about the need for continued reform in Saudi Arabia and believes that engagement and public dialogue by global leaders like himself can help encourage Saudi Arabia's path of reform."

• "We have long standing clients in the region and continue to serve them," a Goldman spokesman said.

• Representatives for Blackstone, Bridgewater, Carlyle, Nasdaq and Mr. Barrack declined to comment. Representatives for CNN, Credit Suisse, Morgan Stanley, SoftBank and Mr. Ubben did not return requests for a comment.

**Legitimacy by association?** "M.B.S. is going to be running Saudi Arabia no matter what David Solomon says or doesn't say," Mr. Gause of Texas A&M said, referring to the nickname of the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. He questioned the logic of withdrawing corporate ties from Saudi Arabia, but keeping them in, say, China, which faces its [own criticisms over human rights abuses](#).

• Thor Halvorsen, the founder of the nonprofit Human Rights Foundation, which has funded "The Dissident," a documentary about Mr. Khashoggi's killing, said that those attending the event gave the crown prince valuable legitimacy. "The message is, 'Look, the world's money and the powerhouses of finance and industry are my puppets,'" he said.

## A new movie about Jamal Khashoggi reveals a protégé who is alive and under assault

Omar Abdulaziz worked closely with the Saudi dissident. He's trying to continue the columnist's legacy while avoiding the same fate.

January 12, 2021

By [Steven Zeitchik](#)



^ Omar Abdulaziz, a close friend of the late Jamal Khashoggi, is facing death threats in Canada after fleeing his native Saudi Arabia. (The Dissident/Briarcliff Entertainment) (N/A)

Omar Abdulaziz remembers the phone call he received a few months ago. It was from an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and it came with a message of stern warning for the Saudi dissident.

"They said, don't ever post on social media where you'll be," he recalled. "We may not be able to protect you."

A close friend and partner-in-activism of the late [Washington Post columnist](#) Jamal Khashoggi, Abdulaziz has been continuing Khashoggi's reformist mission, issuing critical social media posts even as the Saudi authorities have threatened him and thrown his brothers in jail. Now the activist's story, little known in the United States, could become more widely publicized with the release of "The Dissident," a documentary that tells his and Khashoggi's story.

The film was released on video-on-demand over the weekend by Briarcliff Entertainment, an independent distributor, after big Silicon Valley streamers [Netflix, Amazon and Apple](#), as The Post reported, passed on the film,

possibly not to offend the Saudi government.

Briarcliff has released the movie in 175 theaters and on many digital rental platforms, including iTunes on Apple TV and Amazon Prime Video, which collectively reach more than 150 million U.S. homes. The movie won't, however, get the same marketing push had a streamer acquired it outright and also will require customers to pay separately, potentially reducing its audience. (Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos, who is featured in the film as an [alleged hacking victim](#) of the Saudi government, owns The Post.)

Briarcliff, run by film veteran Tom Ortenberg, conducts little business in the Middle East. Ortenberg says the company has received no threats to date. The firm's financial exposure is also limited: It spent less than \$500,000 for rights, according to a person familiar with the negotiations who was granted anonymity because he was not authorized to speak about them, far lower than the \$5 million to 10 million a streamer [can pay](#) for a documentary.

Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said that any targeting of a distributor would

probably come in the form of business restrictions in the kingdom. Abdulaziz should be more concerned, he said: The activist's family could be subject to further retribution.

Directed by Bryan Fogel, who made the [Oscar-winning Russian doping documentary "Icarus,"](#) "The Dissident" turned Khashoggi's killing at Istanbul's Saudi Consulate – an act the CIA thinks was ordered by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – into a cinematic event at last year's Sundance Film Festival. The movie, which is funded by the Human Rights Foundation, earned such fans as Hillary Clinton, while critics raved about its style and import.

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**The movie, which is funded by the Human Rights Foundation, earned such fans as Hillary Clinton, while critics raved about its style and import.**

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But the late journalist is only a piece of the narrative. "The Dissident" also tells of a less-expected

figure – Abdulaziz, who not only is seeking to continue the columnist's work but provides a kind of alternate history, reminding what Khashoggi might have kept doing had he not been killed.

In an interview over a secure video link, Abdulaziz described his current life.

"I have six phones on my desk because my phone was hacked [[by the Saudi government](#)] in 2018," he said. "I can go to a restaurant or movie theater, but I can never tell anyone where I'll be." In his mind, he says, play constant images of Khashoggi, who evidence indicates was [slowly asphyxiated](#) by a team of agents and dismembered with a bone saw.

Abdulaziz was speaking from an unidentified location in Montreal. Even on Canadian soil, he has watched as dangers lurk around every corner. He has been forced to resist numerous attempts to lure him back to his homeland, where he thinks he will be arrested and tortured, even fending off prominent Saudi figures who have come to retrieve him.

His friends and two of his brothers have been jailed in his home country to apply pressure on him to return.

Yet he is continuing Khashoggi's work under the constant threat of death, tweeting to more than half a million followers (Twitter is the rare source of independent information in the kingdom) and posting videos on YouTube that garnered more than 30 million views last year. Abdulaziz is part of a small but influential group of Saudi dissidents that also includes such figures as [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), the activist who last month was sentenced to nearly six more years in prison for her work on behalf of women's rights.

"I made this film for Omar and Loujain," Fogel said. "I made it for all the people who are suffering because they speak of freedom." He says he hopes Abdulaziz's unblinking stance will prompt other young people to take up activism. He also wants to show that Khashoggi's tale offers not just tragedy but a legacy.

Abdulaziz began his activism in his early 20s, attracting attention with his cogent video posts, in Arabic, criticizing Mohammed and the Saudi government; he

fled to Canada when he learned Saudi authorities were seeking him out. Abdulaziz would link up with Khashoggi in a kind of marriage of complements: The elder journalist guided him with his insider knowledge of the kingdom; the youthful activist contributed his knowledge of social media and reaching young people in a country where more than 40 percent of the population is younger than 25.

The two created "the bees," a savvy, low-budget social media initiative meant to combat Mohammed's "flies" (essentially troll farms aimed at keeping dissent out of trending sight).

In March 2018, with Abdulaziz's profile growing, the Saudi government dispatched a prominent lawyer and talk-show host to Montreal, coercing Abdulaziz's brother to come along for added leverage. The men tried to entice Abdulaziz to return to Saudi Arabia with promises of a talk show, Abdulaziz said, and then urged him to visit the Saudi Embassy in Ottawa to "renew his passport."

The activist consulted Khashoggi, who told him it was dangerous to do either of those things. He

counseled him to refuse. Abdulaziz stayed put, and the lawyer and host returned to the kingdom. Abdulaziz's brother Ahmed was subsequently arrested and jailed along with 23 of the dissident's friends. Another brother was later arrested. Abdulaziz has continued to tweet.

"I know they've been severely tortured, and that causes me pain," he said. "But I can't stop. Because if they use it as a card to stop me from posting today then tomorrow they'll use it as a card to kill me."

He paused. "All these threats are just motivating me."

Bill Browder, the [financier-turned-human-rights campaigner](#), says that he thinks Abdulaziz has taken his life in his hands by seeking to continue Khashoggi's work.

"It's a very precarious position he's in — he's very exposed," Browder said in an interview. "The Saudis have all the resources in the world. And we know how they go after their enemies."

Browder, who has worked pro bono to spread word of the film in Washington, is thought to be

under [significant threat himself](#) from Russian authorities for campaigning for sanction-based anti-corruption laws known as "Magnitsky laws," named for his lawyer allegedly killed by Russian authorities. Browder says that he thinks Abdulaziz is in a predicament he knows well.

"The human body doesn't have the capacity to live in fear full time; you become accustomed to risk and adrenaline levels go down," he said. "You almost have to train yourself to be vigilant."

While Mohammed has said he is a reformer, the nonprofit Freedom House [ranked](#) Saudi Arabia seventh-worst in political rights and civil liberties among the world's 49 countries considered "not free," noting "extensive surveillance" and "the criminalization of dissent."

Abdulaziz says the censorship situation has gotten worse, particularly with the flies that pervade the domestic Internet.

"You can see their work everywhere. You'll be on Twitter at 6 a.m. and see messages about Selena Gomez, and then at 8 a.m. about the Weeknd," he said. "And then at 10

a.m., suddenly it's 'MBS is the most beautiful person in the world' from so many places, just to make sure everything looks great and nobody hears any criticism."

Abdulaziz says he thinks a new administration in the White House might press the regime harder on these issues. Already there are signs that there will be a greater holding of Mohammed to account on Khashoggi, a [campaign promise](#) of President-elect Joe Biden. And Saudi Arabia last week [ended the long-running Qatar blockade](#) in an apparent gesture of conciliation.

Experts are only slightly optimistic.

"A lot of this depends on how much internal will the new administration has to confront Saudi Arabia, and I don't know that they do. They will have their hands full with a new Iran deal, and they don't want the Saudis to make their lives miserable on that," said Hamid, the Brookings expert. "For anyone expecting a significant shift, unless there is serious pressure on the U.S., I don't think it happens," he said.

One way to raise the heat globally, he noted, would be "The Dissident." That could be tricky internationally,

since without a major streaming deal the movie must be released through a cross-section of distributors and release dates in various countries, from Turkey to the United Kingdom (there are no current plans for Saudi Arabia). There is a strong possibility, Fogel says, the film will get a release window on Amazon in the United Kingdom after its theatrical release there this spring. An Amazon U.K. spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

In the meantime, Briarcliff is using outdoor and online advertising to drive people to rent the film on digital platforms.

"There's a lot of competition on-demand. But you can also keep your movie out there for a long period of time," Ortenberg said.

He said Abdulaziz's saga was a main reason he bought the film.

"Omar's story is virtually unknown in most of the world. That needs to change," he said.

The activist said he is not seeking attention, just a chance to do his work without worrying about his family. He received another warning from the RCMP only a few days

ago – he asked not to reveal its specifics – and his brothers remain in jail because of his tweets. He says he last communicated with his father in August, when messages to him began going unreturned.

Abdulaziz thinks that his father has been threatened with punishment if he speaks to his son.

“It’s better for all of them not to talk to me,” the activist said with a shrug, but a tear could be seen welling up on the screen.

He said thinking about Khashoggi is one of the few things that makes the pain bearable.

“I can hear Jamal’s voice. I can hear him saying, ‘We have a message to send. Let’s unleash the bees.’ ”



# US in delicate balancing act as Saudi prince spared sanctions

February 27, 2021

By AFP



^ (FILES) In this file photo taken on October 10, 2018, a demonstrator dressed as Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (C) with blood on his hands protests with others outside the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, demanding justice for missing Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. – The US director of national intelligence is expected to release a damning report on February 26, 2021, that fingers Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the brutal murder and dismemberment of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. The classified report is believed to say that, based on intelligence collected by the CIA and other spy bodies, the kingdom's de facto leader directed the assassination of the respected US-based writer in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. (Photo by Jim WATSON / AFP)

US President Joe Biden's decision not to sanction Saudi Arabia's crown prince over journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder has frustrated campaigners, underscoring Washington's delicate balancing act as it seeks to avoid a diplomatic rupture.

Washington on Friday released a long-delayed intelligence report that accused Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of approving Khashoggi's 2018 murder in Istanbul, drawing a rebuke from Riyadh, which strongly rejected the assessment.

The public censure of the prince and a slew of US sanctions on dozens of Saudi officials marks a sharp departure from the policy of former President Donald Trump, who sought to shield the kingdom's de facto ruler.

But Washington did not slap any direct sanctions on Prince Mohammed, known by his initials MBS, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken explaining that Biden wants to "recalibrate" but not "rupture" its relations with Riyadh, a longstanding Middle East partner.

"This is not the Saudi smack-down that many hoped for," said Varsha

Koduvayur, a research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative Washington think-tank.

It indicates "Biden's overall Saudi stance: put values at the heart of US foreign policy, emphasise human rights, and reverse the transactional approach of last four years (under Trump) – while preserving the relationship," Koduvayur added.

### **Call for sanctions**

The Washington-based campaign group Freedom House said it was "disappointing and frustrating that the US is yet unwilling to act on its own intelligence" and impose sanctions on the Saudi prince.

"We expect nothing less than justice for Jamal Khashoggi and all of Saudi Arabia's brave dissidents," said the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, which produced "The Dissident", a critically acclaimed documentary on the journalist's murder.

"The United States and the European Union must urgently place sanctions on MBS himself."

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## **'We expect nothing less than justice for Jamal Khashoggi and all of Saudi Arabia's brave dissidents,' said the New York-based Human Rights Foundation.**

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The intelligence report -- which had been withheld after being completed under Trump -- said it was "highly unlikely" that Khashoggi's murder could have taken place without his green light.

The killing of Khashoggi, a Washington Post columnist and critic of Prince Mohammed, also fits a pattern of "the crown prince's support for using violent measures to silence dissidents abroad", it added.

But Saudi observers dismissed the highly anticipated report, with Ali Shihabi, a government adviser close to the kingdom's royal court, saying the "thin" assessment lacked a "smoking gun".

Soon after the report was made public, the Arabic hashtag "We are all MBS" began trending on Twitter,

with pro-government cyber armies tweeting in support of the Saudi heir apparent.

### **Preserving ties**

Biden had pledged during his campaign to make the kingdom a "pariah" after it got a free pass under Trump, but observers say he is instead adopting a middle path.

While scrutinising human rights, his new administration is expected to work to preserve a valuable security partnership while it moves to reboot nuclear talks with Riyadh's arch-enemy Tehran.

Biden also needs to deal with the top crude producer on the highly fraught issues of energy, counter-terrorism, and efforts to end the conflict in Yemen.

"The Biden foreign policy team is comprised of seasoned experts who are not so naive as to think that they can achieve their goals in the Middle East without dealing with a Saudi state that still anchors, though in a less totalising way, both oil and security in the Gulf," said Kristin Diwan of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

“For this reason, they have ruled out the sanctioning of Mohammed bin Salman, preserving space to deal with the Saudi state and its top leadership.”

Still, Washington on Friday announced the “Khashoggi Act” that will ban entry into the US of foreigners who threaten dissidents and placed 76 Saudis on the blacklist, in what could serve as a strong deterrent.

Biden also appears to have steered away from his predecessor’s transactional relationship with the kingdom, an important buyer of US military hardware.

Recent official statements from Washington have called Saudi Arabia a “security partner”, instead of what the Trump administration highlighted as an “ally”.

In an apparent snub earlier this week, Biden insisted on making his first Saudi phone call to 85-year-old King Salman, even as Saudi pro-government supporters insisted that his son, Prince Mohammed, was the kingdom’s day-to-day ruler.

“Washington realises that MBS could go on to rule Saudi Arabia for

the next half-century, so it cannot afford to completely alienate him,” a Western diplomat told AFP.

“But it is also making clear that it will no longer give him a free pass.”

# 'Dissident' Producer Thor Halvorssen on Alleged Saudi Troll Campaign Against Film on Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb

February 5, 2021

By [Nick Vivarelli](#)



▲ *Courtesy Premier*

In his review of [Bryan Fogel's "The Dissident,"](#) about the murder of [Jamal Khashoggi](#), Variety critic Owen Gleiberman notes that the investigative doc "has the shadow intrigue of cyber-warfare" includ-

ing the hacking of Jeff Bezos' cell phone and the army of trolls it exposes, allegedly hired to crush voices against the Saudi kingdom on Twitter.

That same cyber-warfare now appears to be targeting the film itself with attempts to manipulate its review scores online.

According to "[The Dissident](#)" producer Thor Halvorssen, there are ongoing attempts by Saudi-backed trolls to muzzle the pic by lowering its approval ratings on film-rating site Rotten Tomatoes and on IMDb, which also gives ratings based on reviews.

Halvorssen, who is founder and chief executive of the nonprofit Human Rights Foundation, says he first came across the trolls roughly a year ago on the day "The Dissident" had its premiere at Sundance 2020, attended by around 300 people, including Alec Baldwin, Hilary Clinton and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings. No one else had access to the film, or could see the film at that time, he notes. "Yet that day on IMDb there were 400 negative reviews of the film," according to Halvorssen, who points out that "it is impossible there were more reviews of the film than people who watched it."

Cut to several months later. In the fall of 2020, after [struggling with distribution](#) (Netflix, which won its first feature Oscar for Fogel's film

"Icarus," would not touch it), "The Dissident" went to the Zurich Film Festival and the Aspen Film Festival. Those who saw it voted on Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb, giving the doc high scores across the board. Eventually, for a while, a balance was restored due to people actually watching the film.

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**Halvorssen, who is founder and chief executive of the nonprofit Human Rights Foundation, says he first came across the trolls roughly a year ago on the day 'The Dissident' had its premiere at Sundance 2020.**

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Fast forward a little more: on Dec. 25, "The Dissident" was distributed in the U.S. by Briarcliff Entertainment. On Rotten Tomatoes, it earned a 96% critics score, says Halvorssen. "Suddenly, there were hundreds and hundreds of [positive] reviews of the film, which reached

a 99% [audience] rating on Rotten Tomatoes," he adds.

Then in mid-January, in just one day, "The Dissident" dropped from a 99% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes to 67%, according to Halvorsen. He recounts that a board member of the Human Rights Foundation on Jan. 12 noticed that some 500 low-approval audience reviews of the doc had been uploaded to Rotten Tomatoes, causing its approval rating to suddenly plunge from above 95% to just 68%.

"The moment you drop under 70%, your film is essentially dead," Halvorsen claims. "I mean, people who follow individual critics will watch it; but the regular public will not."

"The Dissident" producer reached out to Rotten Tomatoes and their response at that point was that they were not able to "handle manipulation of this sort." However, following a Jan. 21 report in the Washington Post, Halvorsen believes that Rotten Tomatoes "must have have deleted" the reviews that were "obviously manipulated." The score is "now back to 70-something per cent," he says. The film's audience score on Rotten Tomatoes was 79% on Feb. 5.

A Rotten Tomatoes representative confirmed to Variety that there have been deliberate attempts to manipulate "The Dissident's" Rotten Tomatoes score and that the company has intervened to remove some attempts to manipulate the doc's approval ratings on their website.

It's not the first time Rotten Tomatoes has been subjected to an alleged troll campaign. "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" two years ago was reportedly targeted by negative rating trolling, which prompted Rotten Tomatoes owner Fandango, a Comcast unit, to force anyone who rates a movie to prove that they purchased a ticket to see it. However, that layer of security does not exist for "The Dissident" because it is available on demand on several outlets, including Amazon Prime.

Meanwhile, also in mid-January, "The Dissident" was inundated on IMDb by 1,175 one-star reviews over the course of a few days, according to Washington Post. Votes that, a breakdown on IMDb shows, are coming mostly from outside the U.S. "even though the film is currently only available within the U.S.," says Halvorsen. He alleges that the trolling is backed by the Saudi gov-

ernment in an effort "to sink the film as a viable commercial product," he says.

Despite the alleged attempt to manipulate its score, "The Dissident" on Feb. 4 had an 8.1 out of 10 rating on IMDb, which uses a 1-to-10-star system. That may be due to algorithms that automatically do not count sudden deluges of one-star reviews.

IMDb did not respond to Variety's request for comment.

*Disclosure: SRMG, a Saudi publishing and media company which is publicly traded, remains a minority investor in PMC, Variety's parent company.*



# Business-seeking singer Akon draws political fire in Uganda

April 13, 2021

By Rodney Muhumuza



KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) – The American rap artist and singer Akon is drawing criticism from rights activists over his meetings with Uganda’s president as he pursues the development of a futuristic city in the East African country.

Akon is helping to rehabilitate long-time President Yoweri Museveni’s

reputation after an election earlier this year marred by violence, an internet shutdown and allegations of vote rigging, the U.S. based groups Human Rights Foundation and Vanguard Africa said in a joint letter to Akon shared late Monday.

“Museveni has exploited your meeting with him for official propagan-

da, as his regime seeks to capitalize on your global prestige to white-wash its image and distract from its most recent wave of repression," the letter says, urging him to "explicitly make clear" that he is not endorsing Museveni.

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**Akon is helping to rehabilitate longtime President Yoweri Museveni's reputation after an election earlier this year marred by violence, an internet shutdown and allegations of vote rigging, the U.S.-based groups Human Rights Foundation and Vanguard Africa said in a joint letter to Akon shared late Monday.**

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Museveni's main opponent in January's election was the singer known as Bobi Wine, who has disputed the president's victory as fraudulent and seeks the international community's intervention

over what he regards as a brutal dictatorship. Museveni, a U.S. ally on regional security, has asserted that he won fairly.

There is also growing concern in Uganda over an unknown number of opposition supporters allegedly detained without trial by the security forces. A group of United Nations experts, who don't speak for the U.N. itself, on Tuesday urged Ugandan authorities to "immediately stop the brutal crackdown on its political opponents."

Akon's arrival in Uganda earlier this month generated excitement among government officials who saw his visit as a boon for efforts to attract tourists. The singer traveled in a military helicopter to meet Museveni at his rural home in western Uganda. A second meeting took place at Museveni's ranch in central Uganda.

Museveni has said of Akon's search for business opportunities that he is "happy to engage in such a discussion that will uplift our people and Africa at large."

But some say Akon's visit hurt pro-democracy efforts in Uganda, and others in the country say the

square mile of land Uganda is donating to the singer should instead be awarded to local investors desperate for such an opportunity.

Asked whether he was worried about being accused of collaborating with an African leader who has spent decades in power, Akon told the local NBS channel that "honestly, that just don't bother me. Clearly democracy just works differently in different places, and not every place in the world is made for democracy."

The singer added that a group of unnamed investors backing him considered "whatever the people needed. Then it's our job to support the government to make it happen."

Akon's Uganda plans include a music festival to promote local talent.

Akon has made headlines in recent years as a pan-African businessman interested in opportunities on the continent of 1.3 billion people.

His most ambitious goal is to build a \$6 billion utopian city in Senegal that he has described as a "real-life Wakanda," comparing it to the technologically advanced fictional African place in the blockbuster film "Black Panther."

Akon City is envisaged to have its own hospital, police station and cryptocurrency along with a seaside resort, a tech hub, recording studios and a zone dubbed "Senewood" that developers hope will help develop Senegal's film industry.

Senegalese authorities have allocated Akon land outside the capital, Dakar, but construction is yet to start.

Akon, whose real name is Aliaune Thiam, started a group in 2014 that backs solar energy projects in rural areas of African countries. The inspiration for Akon Lighting Africa came after he found his grandmother was still using candles to light her home in Senegal.

In December, a company associated with him reached a deal with a state miner to develop a copper and cobalt mine in resource-rich Congo.

# Akon's Romance with Dictatorship

May 11, 2021

By **Céline Assaf-Boustani**, HRF President  
and **Garry Kasparov**, HRF Chairman

Another chapter was recently written in the ongoing romance between celebrities and dictators. This time the dictator seeking to launder his reputation and distract from his crimes was Uganda's Yoweri Museveni. And the celebrity was American rap artist Akon. What made this instance particularly worthy of note is how the Grammy-nominated artist's disgrace went one step beyond selling his soul. He blatantly acknowledged how popular culture plays a role in enabling dictatorship and went so far as endorsing Museveni while articulating his disapproval of democracy.

Last month, Akon visited Museveni (the country's dictator since 1986) ostensibly [to explore](#) business and investment opportunities. President Museveni was quick to indulge in ceremony and appointed Akon,

whose real name is Aliaune Thiam, as a special envoy for tourism and culture. Beyond diplomatic pomp, the dictator personally granted Akon one square mile of land to "build a futuristic city" powered by Akon's own cryptocurrency Akoin. Some Ugandans [asked](#) why it was that local investors struggle to get similar opportunities from the same government. The answer is that Akon's visit wasn't about business or investment. It was a [propaganda](#) piece by the Ugandan government to purchase and exploit the prestige of the multi-platinum-selling music star.

Akon played his part to perfection. At the end of his visit, [he declared](#) that "not every place in the world is made for democracy." Akon's appalling comment is base and outrageous given that Akon himself enjoys the trappings of wealth in

a democracy and is engaging in predatory behavior in a dictatorship.

Akon made his heartless declaration as Ugandans are still reeling from the most violent spate of regime repression in decades. In recent months, Museveni's regime forces [have killed](#) dozens of demonstrators, abducted hundreds of opposition supporters and brutalized, beaten, jailed and tortured untold numbers of Ugandans. The violent repression forced Bobi Wine, the leader of Uganda's People Power Movement—a nonviolent political movement seeking democratic change—to suspend his campaign for fear of his personal safety.

Akon's comment was published as Wine spent Election Day and the following weeks [under house arrest](#), unable to contact the outside world because of a government internet shutdown while a subservient electoral commission handed Museveni a sixth presidential term. Today, [about 3,000 opposition activists](#), demonstrators and Wine supporters are still missing, reported to have been arrested or abducted by state security agents.

In Uganda, democracy has never had a chance to grow not because

it isn't "made for democracy," as Akon says, but instead due to a succession of repressive and brutal leaders, most notoriously [Idi Amin](#), who earned the nickname "Butcher of Uganda" for killing between 300,000 and 500,000 Ugandans during his bloody reign. And the butchery back then was enabled by a coterie of useful idiots much like Akon who sold their approval for Amin. Following Amin's fall, a succession of military coups, rigged elections and a civil war strife enabled Museveni to shoot his way into power.

Over his more than 35 years of rule, Museveni has clung to power through constitutional amendments, rigged elections marred by fraud, intimidation, censorship and violent repression.

Akon's hypocrisy is glaring for another reason. Beyond thriving in a democracy, Akon has frequently exercised his freedom of expression in the U.S. to speak up about injustices. In the wake of the police killing of [George Floyd](#), he released a music video, "Ain't No Peace," condemning police brutality, and signed an [open letter](#), along with 91 prominent African artists, media personalities, academics and

leaders, expressing solidarity with African Americans and the Black community globally. Ugandan victims of police brutality, apparently, matter far less to Akon than George Floyd.



Recording artist Akon speaks on stage at the 3rd Annual Global Goals World Cup at the SAP Leonardo Center on September 25, 2018, in New York City. MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES FOR UNDP

Celebrities like Akon play an outsized role in the public imagination. Their presence and media influence have the power to bring wider attention to important issues. But with the power of celebrity comes the responsibility to support just causes, or at the very least, avoid supporting evil and exploitative causes. Akon's comments are a gift to dictators such as Museveni, who relish the opportunity to pose alongside glamorous celebrities and lend their murderous regimes the appearance of stability, normalcy and calm.

Unfortunately, Akon isn't the first celebrity to perform propaganda for dictators in order to line his pockets, and nor was Uganda his first time. In 2018, he joined rappers Ludacris, Young Jeezy and Sean Kingston in performing for the 49th birthday of the spendthrift son (and vice president) of Equatorial Guinea's dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who [has been in power](#) since Akon was 6 years old. Akon is also part of a broader ecosystem of celebrities and companies that choose money over morals.

Jennifer Lopez has accepted [millions of dollars](#) to play private concerts for some of central Asia's most corrupt and brutal figures, including Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. In 2019, dozens of celebrities, including Janet Jackson, Liam Payne, 50 Cent, Future, Chris Brown and Tyga performed at a music festival in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which was funded and authorized by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), one of the world's worst human rights violators.

Purveyors of popular culture hold the power to spark change. And, at least while they are in America,

most celebrities take this responsibility seriously. Corporations, athletes and celebrities alike routinely condemn police brutality in the United States and use their voices to promote equality and social justice. But why is it that as soon as they are out of the country, so many of them are quick to embrace the world's most evil men?

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## Purveyors of popular culture hold the power to spark change.

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Akon seems to hold a profoundly prejudiced view of Ugandans, who he seems to think are not capable of living in human liberty, as he does. Akon's remarks are an affront to Ugandans' courageous struggle to live free of tyranny.

Holding Akon accountable for his comments is not an example of "cancel culture." His remark was not off the cuff. Akon's explicit praise and endorsement of Museveni is worthy of international condemnation. Ugandans have the same right to freedom and democracy as Americans, Norwegians, Chileans and South Africans.

Akon's clear disregard for democracy in Uganda and support of a murderous regime is an unbearable affront to human dignity.

*Garry Kasparov is a former world chess champion and chair of the Human Rights Foundation.*

*Celine Assaf-Boustani is chief program officer at the Human Rights Foundation.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.*

# Don't let dictators grandstand with world leaders in Tokyo. Reclaim Olympics values.

July 6, 2021

By Thor Halvorssen, HRF CEO  
and Katrina Lantos Swett

In a matter of months, China will host the Beijing Winter Olympics, already dubbed the "[Genocide Games](#)" by human rights groups and policymakers concerned with the ongoing [repression of Uyghurs in China](#). It's right to question the ethics of playing sports or doing business with a country with one of the world's worst human rights records, but this is not the only cause for concern.

Whether the Olympics are hosted by an authoritarian government like China or a democracy like Japan, host of the [2020 Summer Olympics](#) starting July 23, the Olympics too often provide dictators a unique opportunity to legitimize their rule and whitewash their image internationally.

The [smiling pictures](#) of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, sitting behind Vice President Mike Pence at the opening ceremonies in South Korea in 2018, are a recent example of this phenomenon. Her so-called charm offensive elicited a raft of positive attention. Unfortunate headlines such as "[Kim Jong Un's Sister is Stealing the Show at the Winter Olympics](#)" and "[Kim Jong-un's Sister Turns On the Charm, Taking Pence's Spotlight](#)" effectively eclipsed attention on the hundreds of thousands of people suffering in [North Korea's concentration camps](#).

In this and many other instances, viewers around the world are left with a powerful yet deceptive sense of moral equivalence between



leaders of democracies and rulers of authoritarian regimes, given that they are all seated together in the stadium, waving, smiling and cheering for their athletes.

This is unacceptable.

That's why we have called on the [International Olympic Committee \(IOC\)](#) to take a categorical stand against such a brazen misuse of the Olympic stage, and to not invite dictators to the opening ceremonies in Tokyo this summer, or to subsequent opening ceremonies. Instead, it should leave an "[Empty Box](#)" where the rulers of authoritarian regimes would have been seated or hosted virtually.

This would allow the IOC to remain true to [its charter](#) – "to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity."

Rather than allow dictators like Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman to grandstand with world leaders, the Empty Box would signal to the world that these rulers do not embody the spirit of the

Olympics. It would also enable the IOC to take a moral stand without harming the athletes who dedicate themselves to reaching the pinnacle of the Olympic Games.

Astoundingly, when we wrote to IOC President Thomas Bach to urge the IOC to implement the Empty Box restrictions, the response we received dodged the matter entirely, and claimed that invitations to national leaders are not the remit of the IOC. However, just in December, Mr. Bach publicly announced that [the IOC had barred Belarusian dictator](#) Alexander Lukashenko and his son from the 2020 Tokyo Games for failing to protect athletes from political repression.

The IOC often claims that it wants to keep [politics out of sports](#), but it has dodged its moral responsibility by refusing to take a principled stand in favor of the values enshrined in its own Olympic Charter, as we've seen with its response.

We have identified [15 countries](#) – Azerbaijan, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Myanmar, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Venezuela and Vietnam – whose rulers oversee genocides and arrest, torture and

kill dissidents and journalists, and are as notorious and aggressive rights violators as Lukashenko.

[These countries](#) are all under authoritarian rule, rank exceptionally low on indices of political rights and civil liberties and press freedoms, and typically send a large number of athletes to the Olympic Games. The dictators of each of these countries deserve an Empty Box for the upcoming Tokyo Games. By adopting the Empty Box approach, the IOC would show the world it is serious about regaining its moral ground.

Broadcasters and sponsors can also play a crucial role in pressing for the IOC to uphold its own values. Now is the time for major Olympic broadcasters around the world, such as NBC and Eurosport, to plan coverage of the opening ceremonies that either excludes these notorious dictators or, more appropriately, uses their presence at the Games as an opportunity to report on their human rights abuses.

If dictators get prime seating at the Olympics, then spectators deserve the truth about their brutal regimes. Major Olympic sponsors should use their enormous influence to urge

the IOC to take a stronger, more principled position on human rights. The longer sponsors stay silent, the more complicit they become in turning away from Olympic ideals for the sake of profits.

"The [Olympic Movement gives the world an ideal](#) which reckons with the reality of life," said Pierre De Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics.

Part of reckoning with reality means recognizing brutal dictators for what they are. Turning a blind eye to the genocide and torture overseen by some of the Games' official guests degrades the Olympics, its athletes and the enduring values it seeks to inspire.

*Thor Halvorsen (@ThorHalvorsen) is CEO and president of the Human Rights Foundation. Katrina Lantos Swett (@LantosSwettK) is president of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice.*

# The Olympics is no place to praise a tyrant

August 5, 2021

By **Badiucão**

2020 recipient of the Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent



^ Gold medallists Bao Shanju (L) and Zhong Tianshi pose with their medals on the podium after the women's track cycling team sprint finals during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, on 2 August 2021. (Photo by Greg Baker / AFP via Getty Images)

What happened on Monday at the Tokyo Olympic Games was shocking. Two Chinese athletes [wore badges of Mao Zedong](#) – China's Communist revolutionary leader and a dictator responsible for some

of the worst human rights abuses in history – looking very much at ease as they posed in front of dozens of cameras and reporters.

Bao Shanju and Zhong Tianshi, China's latest Olympic champions in women's team sprint, held their gold medals, their smiles unmistakable beneath their masks, seemingly confident that this violation of [Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter](#) (which prohibits any "kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda") would go unnoticed and unpunished.

When I saw the badges of Mao, I suddenly found it hard to breathe. I was not expecting this reminder of China's history and of the suffering endured by my family. To the athletes, the badges might represent little more than a cultural-revolution-themed style of devotion for Beijing; but to me, it rekindled the painful memory of my father's tragic childhood. For this badge, once worn by millions across the country, it is still a poignant icon of the brutality of China's ruling party, 45 years after the Chairman's death.

Between 1957 and 1959, Mao's [Anti-Rightist Campaign](#) purged at least 550,000 people – including most leading artists and intellectuals. My grandfather, one of the first film makers in China, was brutally persecuted and killed during this very campaign. His films were

labelled "poisonous grass" by those carrying out the purge. Eventually, he was sent to a labour camp in far west China to receive "re-education", where he was forced to do extremely heavy physical works in order to be "reformed" as a new person. He died there, far away from home, due to the lack of food and disease in less than a year.

Thousands of kilometres away, my family only learned about my grandfather's death months later. There were no remains of my grandfather; nothing to be retrieved – only a notice from the local government.

My father was only four-years-old at the time. He was called "the son of a dog", a humiliating name for children of "anti-revolutionary criminals", from the beginning of his dark childhood.

From 1959 to 1961, the Great Chinese Famine caused by Mao's radical planned economy policy – ["The Great Leap Forward"](#) and the ["People's Communes"](#) – killed tens of millions of people, with some [estimates](#) putting the death toll as high as thirty million.

In the last decade of Mao's life, from 1966 to 1976, he launched [the Cultural Revolution](#) which helped him to grasp absolute power successfully by means of a nationwide personality cult. But this decade of political catastrophe and persecution destroyed China's economy, wiped out traditional culture, and saw around two million more innocent Chinese civilians killed. Party officials, teachers, and intellectuals were among those targeted; they were publicly humiliated, beaten, and in some cases murdered or driven to suicide.

During the peak of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's badges were worn by almost every Chinese as a form of fealty. It was a key symbol of the Mao-cult, and the insignia of this brutal campaign. Young people even pinned the [badges directly to their chest muscles](#) and showed off the scars as evidence of loyalty to the Chairman. On the flip-side, a hint of disrespect toward Mao's image could get people persecuted or imprisoned during these ten years.

In 1966, [People's Daily](#) – the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – published a series of high-profile stories about how

Mao's badges were sent to remote border sentries. The obsession with badges helped Mao establish a god-like image among Chinese people. [Mao's mummified body](#) still lies entombed and on display in Tiananmen Square, embodying, if you like, the despotic stranglehold of the CCP over the nation's life.

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## **He [Badiuca] was named one of the recipients of the 2020 Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent by the Human Rights Foundation.**

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The revival of the use of Mao's badges has an undeniable political motivation. Chinese President Xi Jinping, regarded as the most powerful figure since Mao, has fully oriented China towards a kind of nationalist fervour and has praised communist ideology throughout the one-hundredth anniversary of the CCP. At the same time, egregious human rights crises, like Xinjiang's concentration camps and

the crackdown on the democratic movement in Hong Kong, have emerged under his watch.

As a China-born citizen who lost members of his family during Mao's reign of terror, it was traumatic to see those badges being worn during a medal ceremony. It also makes me angry to see young Chinese athletes fail to learn the brutal truth of China's history. To celebrate with this badge contributes to that ignorance and misleads others. In other words, their decision to wear the Mao badges is a form of political propaganda.

I don't entirely agree with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) implementation of [Rule 50 of its Olympic Charter](#), prohibiting political demonstrations by athletes. The Olympics are unavoidably political, as long as athletes are there representing their country rather than participating as individuals. And I do believe athletes should have the freedom to express their convictions and to protest against injustice, especially when these expressions of political conviction are in the name of recognising our common humanity. But when the IOC has decided to ban Black Lives Matter apparel, kneeling, the rais-

ing of fists, and the LGBTQ flag – all of which aim at greater inclusion and mutual recognition – how can the IOC fail to hold these Chinese athletes to the same standard, especially when the form of propaganda they brazenly displayed symbolises a regime that was committed to terror, intimidation, and death?

The two Chinese athletes, Bao Shanjue and Zhong Tianshi, have used the international stage afforded by the Olympics to engage in shameless political propaganda. They used the occasion of the awarding of their medals to commend the legacy of a tyrant. They used this celebration of the wonder of human diversity to honour the memory of a murderous regime. What they did runs counter to the spirit of the Olympics, to say nothing of a commitment to a common humanity. They should thus bear the full consequences of their deed and be disqualified from their gold medal winning event.

*Badiuca is a Chinese Australian political cartoonist, artist, and rights activist. He is regarded as one of China's most prolific and well-known political cartoonists. He was named one of the recipients of the [2020](#)*

Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent, by the Human Rights Foundation, and the 2019 Courage In Cartooning Award, by Cartoonists Rights Network International. He and his family have been harassed and threatened by Chinese authorities after his 2018 exhibition "Gongle" went on display in Hong Kong.

The Signal

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## Freedom Money

*Could Bitcoin become a global liberation technology? Alex Gladstein on the democratic promise of cryptocurrency.*

March 14, 2021

By [Michael Bluhm](#)





**As more people use less physical currency**—replacing bills and coins with cards and apps—governments and central banks worldwide are increasingly able to see into our economic lives. And in authoritarian countries especially, that means an ever-expanding ability to surveil and control citizens. Digitized money becomes another way to crush dissent, and governments can better monitor accounts and transactions to spot any economic activity that threatens or displeases the state. Will cryptocurrency change this game?

According to **Alex Gladstein**, the chief strategy officer at the Human Rights Foundation (HRF), pro-democracy figures and movements—such as Alexei Navalny in Russia or street protesters in Myanmar—can escape the financial panopticon by using Bitcoin, an encrypted, open-source digital currency. Moreover, pro-democracy organizations such as HRF—or even the U.S. State Department, or the World Bank—can now financially support pro-democracy activists by sending them bitcoins, which governments can't easily monitor or trace to any specific user. Gladstein also sees people buying Bitcoin in countries suffering from high infla-

tion, as it can function effectively as a savings account protected from the fluctuations in the value of national currencies. Still, creating new bitcoins requires massive amounts of energy, and the price of Bitcoin is, and will remain, highly volatile for some time—though for Gladstein, these complications are dwarfed by the cryptocurrency's globally transformative potential.

**Michael Bluhm:** You refer to Bitcoin as “freedom money” or a technology of liberation, as the move away from physical money creates the opportunity for more surveillance and control. What are the dangers of using cards and apps instead of paper money and coins?

**Alex Gladstein:** We're at the outset of great digital financial transformation, where the money we use on a daily basis is evolving from a bearer asset—one that doesn't reveal anything about us—into a mechanism of surveillance and control.

This is more urgent for some people in this world, and maybe less urgent for others, depending on the political regime they live under. When I'm looking at this new form of money that's not controlled by

governments or corporations, I'm thinking about the big picture of today's world, where we have 4.2 billion people living under authoritarianism and 1.2 billion people living under double- or triple-digit inflation. When we talk about the fact that money is broken, this isn't theoretical, and it isn't just about one country.

It's much bigger than that. This is a world where hundreds of millions of people deal with 15 percent, 20 percent, 25 percent inflation, where their time and energy, and the currency that they earn their wages in, is literally disappearing.

At the same time, you have billions of people whose bank accounts can potentially be frozen based on their opinions or ideas.

Regarding surveillance and control, the head of the Bank of International Settlements [BIS] explains very clearly on video that we have certain privacy and freedoms with cash. But with central-bank digital currencies, central banks will have, he literally says, absolute control. And then he pauses for dramatic effect.

It's kind of chilling, because this is not a mask slip. This is what they want—and they've been very clear about that. If you read any sort of central-bank research papers or monetary experts who talk about the direction of money in the future, it's fairly clear that they don't want to give you the rights you had with paper money. You're going to be controlled.



This isn't some tinfoil-hat conspiracy theory. This is, as a matter of fact, the head of the BIS saying, Banks are going to have absolute control over money, whereas they didn't before.

**Bluhm:** So how is Bitcoin or cryptocurrency different than state-issued fiat currencies like the U.S. dollar?

**Gladstein:** Bitcoin is a nongovernmental currency. Its monetary policy was set in stone by its creator, Satoshi Nakamoto [a pseudonym for the person or group who developed the idea]. And its issuance is publicly known and unchanging. There is a certain amount of Bitcoin that gets minted every 10 minutes, as a reward for the miners who secure and process the transactions. That's currently at 6.25 Bitcoin. Over the years, that will drop ultimately to zero Bitcoin by the year 2140.

Over the next 100 years, the amount of new Bitcoin coming into circulation will slowly decline in a way that we all know—it's completely transparent. That is a very different model from the fiat currency system.

In my opinion, other cryptocurrencies are similar to fiat currencies,

inasmuch as their creators can change the monetary policy. Even [Ethereum](#) has an Ethereum Foundation and a creator who's currently very involved in the decision making of what that currency is going to look like in the near future.

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**This is a world where you have billions of people whose bank accounts can potentially be frozen based on their opinions or ideas.**

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This is where Bitcoin is distinct: No one can decide how the mint will work. It has already been decided for us, and the community will uphold that over time out of self-interest.

With Bitcoin, we have a meme for the fact that governments and corporations cannot control the money supply. That's the separation of money and state.

It's quite historic. It gives individuals, ultimately, an escape from currency debasement, which is something

that hundreds of millions of people are suffering under today.

**Bluhm:** When you say currency debasement, what do you have in mind?

**Gladstein:** I'm talking about extreme inflation. For example, in an advanced democracy, we might have 1 percent, 2 percent, or 3 percent inflation per year. And this doesn't really hurt the ability of citizens to save. The dollar, the yen, and the euro preserve their purchasing power fairly well.

But if you live in Nigeria, Turkey, Venezuela, Syria, Lebanon, Argentina, or in Ethiopia, these are all countries that have very, very high inflation. The wages that you make as a worker in these countries disappears quickly—the value disappears quickly against things like real estate or the dollar, gold, etc. This is what I mean by currency debasement.

Honestly, in a lot of places, it's a way that the government steals from the people. It's a way for the government to print more money to buy other assets, at the expense of the people, whose savings get stolen from them.

**Bluhm:** How does Bitcoin let people avoid currency debasement?

**Gladstein:** Right now, Bitcoin is primarily used as a store of value. In money, we have three major utilities: store of value, medium of exchange, and unit of account. Bitcoin is first emerging as a store of value, so citizens are using it as like a savings account—a savings technology.

This is a better alternative for them than something like real estate, gold, or blue-chip stocks, because those things are not available to everybody. They might be available to many Americans, but not to many people in emerging markets.

But anybody—without asking any authority or without needing an ID for an account— can either earn Bitcoin or buy it through a peer-to-peer marketplace with cash. One bitcoin is worth about \$60,000 at the moment of our interview, but it can be subdivided into 100 million units called satoshis. So you can buy \$1 of Bitcoin or \$2 of Bitcoin.

What people around the world in emerging markets are doing is taking their income, or the remittance they receive from abroad, and

they're buying Bitcoin with it, and they're using that like a savings account.

When they need to spend—when they need to buy food, or perhaps equipment for their nonprofit, or they want to pay the salary of an employee—they sell off a piece of that Bitcoin back into fiat currency, using an exchange or peer-to-peer marketplace.

We're starting to see how Bitcoin will also become a medium of exchange, and that's through what we call scaling technology. Through other technologies, people are learning how to scale Bitcoin. And in doing so, they're laying the groundwork for it to become a medium of exchange.

**Bluhm:** How are people using Bitcoin to avoid or overcome attempts by authoritarian governments to surveil and control?

**Gladstein:** Bitcoin is censorship-resistant. These transactions that you make in Bitcoin, no government can stop.

It's also borderless, meaning the network doesn't care what country you're in or how far away you are

from the other party that you're transacting with.

And it's "permissionless"—it doesn't require ID to use the network. With these three powers, Bitcoin can be a very effective cross-border payment tool.

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**We're at the outset of great digital financial transformation, where the money we use on a daily basis is evolving from a bearer asset—one that doesn't reveal anything about us—into a mechanism of surveillance and control.**

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On the digital-cash side, you're seeing people use Bitcoin as a payment rail to deliver, for example, remittances or donations or paychecks from Nigerians who are in America back to their families in Lagos. Cubans who have family in Cuba are sending money like this back to Cuba. Venezuelans outside

of Venezuela are sending money back to their families in Venezuela.

**Bluhm:** Are there examples of dissidents or protesters using Bitcoin to finance pro- democracy work?

**Gladstein:** I'll give you two examples. In Russia and Belarus, you have democracy movements where the government is trying to attack their effectiveness by freezing their bank accounts.

HRF has been quite involved in trying to support the Belarusian opposition and supporting activists in Russia. The Belarusian dictatorship started to freeze large payments that came in that were obvious, like large chunks that would come into bank accounts associated with the opposition movement, they would just freeze those and steal the money.

What BY SOL has done so well—this is a grassroots organization outside of Belarus that has emerged in the last year to support the ongoing democracy movement in Belarus—is that they've started making the donations in Bitcoin directly, peer-to-peer, to striking workers all across Belarus in 1,500-euro increments in Bitcoin.

These people receive the Bitcoin on their smartphones. They keep it as long as they need. Then, when they want to make a payment or they want to buy something to feed their family, they use this wallet that sells the Bitcoin through a peer-to-peer marketplace into rubles, and they receive a small wire into their bank account.

On the back end, some Ukrainian or Russian is happily buying your Bitcoin and sending you these worthless Belorussian rubles, but you're happy to have the rubles because you can go buy stuff for your family.

Because this is happening completely outside of the banking system, the Belarusian government can't really stop it. That's been an amazingly effective way for BY SOL and others to get value into the hands of people who need it. They've sent in millions of dollars of Bitcoin. They've sent in more than 175 bitcoins since August.

From my interviews with them, no one found it too complicated to use. No one's been arrested for using it; it's been very effective.

In Russia, you have this situation with Alexei Navalny and his campaign. As he's been working over the last few years, his campaign manager has been outspoken about the fact that they've started to receive a lot of Bitcoin donations. Their bank accounts are controlled by Putin, and Putin can exert power over the Russian financial system.

The campaign manager has said that the fact that Bitcoin exists, and that they can raise money with it in a way the government can't control, has actually made an impact on the way the government controls their normal bank accounts.

The government knows that if they really crack down on Navalny's bank accounts completely, then they'll just all move to Bitcoin, where the government has no control at all. So it's actually had this interesting effect, where the government now is being a little less handsy and is allowing them to operate their traditional accounts, because there at least they can see what's going on.

The government is realizing that if they're too draconian, people will just move into these peer-to-peer

marketplaces and into pure Bitcoin usage, which they can't control.

To give you a third example, Femco, the feminist coalition in Nigeria— which was one of the larger groups organizing against state corruption and violence during last fall's anti-SARS protests: They also started to raise money in Bitcoin. They raised about seven Bitcoin, which was very significant at the time and even more so today.

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**If you read any sort of central-bank research papers or monetary experts who talk about the direction of money in the future, it's pretty clear that they don't want to give you the rights you had with paper money. You're going to be controlled.**

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Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter and Square, shared their fundraiser and helped get them set up with some-

thing called BTC pay server, which helps protect the privacy of donors and gives them more control over what they're doing. That allowed them to keep raising money and keep buying protest equipment, while the government is turning on and off their actual bank accounts.

This is important. What you're going to start seeing is more and more governments shutting down the ATMs, shutting down bank accounts, and targeting nonprofits. This has happened in Hong Kong. This is happening in Burma. Activist groups are getting their bank accounts shut down and frozen. Meanwhile, they can just continue to raise money in Bitcoin and use peer-to-peer marketplaces to sell whatever they need to into local currency to keep buying those gas masks, water, food, etc.

**Bluhm:** Are major donor organizations using Bitcoin to make donations in these countries?

**Gladstein:** I can assure you, essentially none of them have thought about Bitcoin, or at least are operationalizing it. It's too early.

The World Bank, for example, refused to send money directly into

Venezuela, because the illegitimate Maduro regime was forbidding it, and the World Bank could have actually saved many lives of people who starved to death, but they refused to send money in because the government was not permitting it—and they didn't want to use Bitcoin.

Burma is a great example right now. The Burmese financial system is completely paralyzed, the currency is collapsing, and it's really hard to get money to people. But if you go to local bitcoins in Myanmar, you can see that these markets are alive.

So if you're a charity in the United States, and you want to send in several thousand dollars to support journalists or activists in Burma, you can do it right now with Bitcoin. It'll settle in minutes, and then they can go and quickly sell it.

If you are a major philanthropy or the State Department, you really need to be considering Bitcoin as a payment rail for foreign aid or for pro-democracy work.

**Bluhm:** It's clear that this is getting money to people who need it to fight for liberal democracy and fight



against authoritarianism. I wonder about the term “liberation.” Is Bitcoin really doing anything to dislodge or weaken authoritarian rulers?

**Gladstein:** Great question. I think there’s a short-term answer and a long-term answer.

The short-term answer is: On the individual level, absolutely. You’re using Bitcoin as a shield to defend yourself against reckless, irresponsible, or simply malfunctioning monetary policy. You’re able to preserve your time and energy, which you deserve to be able to do. You’re able to liberate yourself and take that time and energy and savings that you’ve earned, and send it anywhere in the world within minutes.

Long-term, what I think happens geopolitically is that Bitcoin essentially erodes the power of authoritarian structures. A lot of these structures have no interest in and no need to consult their people on decision making, because they can control the economy completely. They control the currency; they control the economy. In a Bitcoin world, in many decades, there is a strong possibility that they don’t have that same control, that citizens actually

are in more control of their money and earnings and time and effort.

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**Activist groups are getting their bank accounts shut down and frozen. Meanwhile, they can just continue to raise money in Bitcoin and using peer-to-peer marketplaces to sell whatever they need to into local currency to keep buying those gas masks, water, food, etc.**

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The government won’t just be able to print a bunch of money to do whatever it wants, whether it’s to invade another country, or hire more soldiers, or genocide some Muslims. They won’t just be able to snap their fingers and do it. They’ll actually have to have a dialogue with the people who control a lot of the money.

The hopeful vision is that it acts as a check on arbitrary government

power and makes things more of a dialogue between citizens and governments, and makes things more efficient rather than wasteful.

**Bluhm:** For some people, when they hear the term “liberation technology,” one analogy that might leap to mind is the narrative of social media and the Arab Spring—the narrative that Facebook or social media brought down these longstanding Arab despots. The larger narrative would be that authoritarianism and autocrats worldwide are now inevitably doomed because of the power of network effects and social media. There was this techno-optimist theory, which has been shown to be wrong, that just the existence of the technology is going to work to bring down autocrats and authoritarians, to liberate the masses. How would you respond to people wondering whether Bitcoin-as-liberation is an analogous idea?

**Gladstein:** Two responses. One, I agree that the initial vision or interpretation of what social media was doing was an inadequate view. In fact, governments were able to use it to exploit and gain more power.

But I would say that, inarguably, social media has given activists

a much bigger voice and much bigger influence in the world. Just look at the Twitter accounts of some of these people who are now world-famous and who have massive influence—they didn’t before the age of Twitter. That has fundamentally changed.

Two, much more importantly, Twitter and Facebook are centralized technologies. They’re controlled by a company, a person, a group of people. They’re fundamentally different from Bitcoin, which is a decentralized technology. No one controls Bitcoin.

It would be a conflation to assume that the social impact of a corporation that allows people to use its platform would be the same as an open-source, decentralized, uncontrollable phenomenon.

I think a better comparison for Bitcoin would not be Twitter or Facebook but would be open-source encrypted messaging, which is used by many different projects like Telegram or Signal.

This has been tremendously liberating and, to me, inarguably positive, and has been a real check on the global surveillance state—and it’s

only possible because open-source code was not created and controlled by a company.

**Bluhm:** True, Facebook and Twitter are subject to the control of corporate managers. They're also subject to control by states, like when Syria cut off Facebook. But to take an extreme example, a country might cut its citizens off from the entire internet. Would Bitcoin then be impossible to use?

That's a hypothetical situation—but Bitcoin is already, in a sense, controlled by the marketplace. One bitcoin is now worth \$60,000, and its price has fluctuated wildly. Some people might argue that Bitcoin is simply subject to the whims of the marketplace. Isn't that also a mechanism of control?

**Gladstein:** There are ways to trade Bitcoin without the internet. There are currently satellites that broadcast to the Bitcoin network, which you can interact with. Long term, it's going to be extremely difficult for governments to keep people off Bitcoin, much more so than it is to keep them off the internet. At the end of the day, information is important, but money is much more

important. That's going to be a difficult thing for governments to stop.

As far as the price goes, Bitcoin is a free-market phenomenon, meaning that it trades 24/7, globally. There is no controlling force; there's no currency board; there's no bank that is backing it. Yes, you're going to watch the value of Bitcoin—in dollar or lira or yen—go up and down.

But generally speaking, it's going up. Fiat currencies over time lose their purchasing power against real estate, cattle, coffee, and things like that. Bitcoin is going to gain purchasing power over time—at least, this is what we've seen in these first 12 years. It has gained a remarkable amount of purchasing power against anything you want to measure.

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## which is a decentralized technology. No one controls Bitcoin.

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I don't see any reason why it won't continue to gain purchasing power in the future. Yes, I think it will be very volatile for a long time, as it goes up its adoption curve. Today, our best estimate is that about 130 million people have used Bitcoin in some way, mainly as a savings technology or speculative asset. That's like 1.7 percent of the world's population.

I believe that by 2030, more than a billion people will have used Bitcoin. We're going to start having a steeper adoption curve in the next three or four years. We're going to have a lot more usage. This is going to drive the value up against other currencies. It will be volatile, yes. But people can rest assured that governments and corporations cannot control that volatility.

They're just players in the game. They don't control the game.

**Bluhm:** There was an article recently in [Wired](#) about threats to the blockchain, the technology that Bitcoin

and other cryptocurrencies rely on. The arguments in the article are that governments could force breakups in the blockchain, or that corporations could sue for the shutdown of the blockchain over copyright infringement. How realistic is it that there could be a way to create splits in the blockchain and undermine Bitcoin?

**Gladstein:** This is a huge myth, and I'll quickly dispense with it. Bitcoin is an open-source project. You, right now, could create a different version of it. The thing is, nobody's going to use that.

Bitcoin has been attacked in this way in the past. In 2017, there was something called the [blocksize war](#). A lot of people wanted to make Bitcoin more amenable to millions of users with cheap fees. Those people ended up losing the blocksize war and creating their own versions of Bitcoin, called Bitcoin cash and later BSV. Those coins are now worth very little. They're less than 1 percent of the value of Bitcoin.

You can fork Bitcoin any which way you want. It's just not going to be very valuable. That's not an effective way to attack Bitcoin. Bitcoin has withstood these attacks in the

past. It's going to be a big waste of your time.

**Bluhm:** One of the traditional criticisms of Bitcoin is that it requires a tremendous amount of energy to produce. It takes an enormous amount of computing power to create and support Bitcoin, and those computers require an energy source. Today, that computing power requires [as much energy](#) as the whole of Argentina does. A large percentage of that energy comes from fossil-fuel sources. So is Bitcoin actually an environmentally destructive technology?

**Gladstein:** Bitcoin does use a lot of energy, and it will continue to eat a lot of energy. The only way to have a decentralized mint that nobody controls is to have the currency be produced as part of a competition. This is the only alternative that we humans have invented. Maybe somebody in the future will create a better one, and we'll switch to that.

Right now, that's done with Bitcoin mining, which uses a lot of energy. The thing is, that energy is not necessarily linked to CO2 output. A very large percentage of Bitcoin mining already is done with renewable energies. Estimates vary anywhere

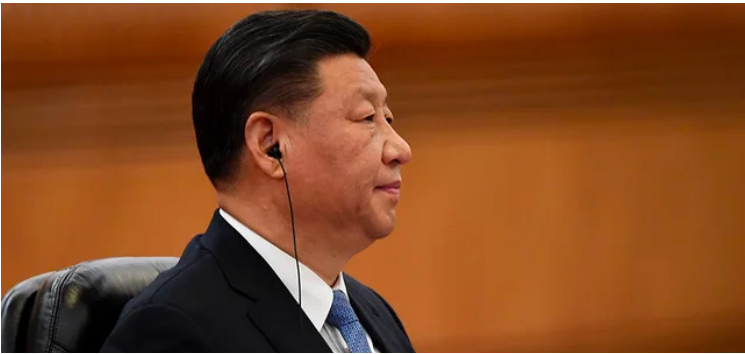
from 39 percent to 74 percent. That's a lot more than most legacy industries.

There's simply no reason why, in the future, Bitcoin couldn't move toward being developed almost entirely on renewables, because the only thing that animates Bitcoin miners is, What is the cheapest energy I can get? The price of solar energy over the last 30 years has been going down. So there's no reason why, in 20 years, the cheapest energy in the world won't be renewable. And that's what Bitcoin will run on. If there's one thing you can guarantee, it's that Bitcoin miners will use the cheapest possible energy. There could very well be a future of Bitcoin as a global reserve currency that runs entirely on renewable energy. People don't talk about it enough.

# Behind China's grand façade lies deep insecurity

July 1, 2021

By **Jenny Wang**, HRF Senior Strategy & Research Associate  
and **Joyce Ho**, HRF Legal and Policy Intern



July 1 marks the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) founding. Leading up to this centenary, the CCP hosted [lavish celebrations, shimmering firework displays, futuristic light shows and all-star performances](#). Sites such as the Museum of the Communist Party of China and Shuangqing Villa, where the late Mao Zedong once lived (locations and tour routes aptly referred to it as ["red tourism"](#)),

have seen a boost in visitors. Flags and banners adorning patriotic messages lined the streets as the country prepared for the highly-anticipated grand ceremony taking place today.

The pomp and circumstance is part of the CCP's well-orchestrated campaign to distract the world from its human rights atrocities and to rev up patriotism and loyalty

among the country's citizens. On the surface, the party seems fearlessly valiant. But in reality, underneath it all, lies [an insecure tyrant](#), desperately clinging to power by [rewriting history](#) and trying to [control the global narrative](#) about the country's actions.

2020 served as a rude awakening to Xi's dreams for paramount power and loyalty. When a mysterious virus emerged within the country, the CCP's lack of transparency led to massive spread of the disease. The Chinese government's early mishandling of the coronavirus revealed its incompetence in managing a public health crisis and failed attempts to cover up its mistakes. When [whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang died](#) from the virus, the Chinese public [took to the internet](#) in droves to mourn his death and express outrage over the government's suppression of information.

Dr. Li became a symbol of freedom of speech who courageously fought to bring the truth to light. The hashtag [#wewantfreedomofspeech](#) even trended for a few hours on Weibo, despite China's heavy internet censorship of the app. Dr. Li's legacy as a martyr for freedom of speech [continues](#) to live

on in people's hearts and minds. His story echoes the calls of millions living within China – as well as in Tibet, Xinjiang, Southern Mongolia and Hong Kong – who have courageously fought to advance freedoms for decades.

Today, there is growing global awareness and acknowledgement of the party's crimes – a trend that continues to deepen the party's insecurities. While the CCP continues to hide behind its massive propaganda machine, the world is slowly starting to sift through the fodder. According to a recent survey from the Pew Research Center, ["unfavorable views of China are...at or near historic highs."](#) The results cite the Chinese government's failure to respect freedoms, and the growing lack of confidence in Xi Jinping's international efforts.

In the United States, there are increasing efforts across the political aisle to unilaterally condemn the CCP's long history of human rights abuses. In advance of the CCP's 100-year anniversary, [Reps. Mike Gallagher](#) (R-Wis.) and [Ruben Gallego](#) (D-Ill.) co-sponsored a [bipartisan House resolution](#) to condemn the CCP's long list of human rights atrocities from as early as the

[Great Leap Forward](#) to the ongoing Uighur genocide.

Internationally, the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), a coalition dedicated to defending democracy against the CCP's bullying tactics, surpassed [100 legislators](#) from more than 13 countries. Since its advent in 2020, IPAC has continuously led efforts to expose CCP's aggression.

On a grassroots level, more than [180 organizations](#) – consisting mostly of diasporic Uighur, Tibetan, Hongkonger and Taiwanese organizations from around the world – have banded together to call for an international boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The coalition argues that such a large global event must not be hosted by a genocidal government that routinely cracks down on basic freedoms. It is heartening to see grassroots activists and policy-makers beginning to join hands to boldly advocate for freedoms in the face of the CCP's repression.

We hope that this global awakening is just the start of greater awareness regarding China's authoritarianism. The CCP and Xi are very well aware of the increas-

ing attention towards their crimes against humanity. Yet, they remain too scared to boldly own up to their actions and too timid to transparently address their flaws. As more global leaders slowly realize the threat of China's authoritarianism, the CCP continues to hide behind its grand façade, hoping that it will help buy more time to fully assert its global legitimacy.

As the CCP's centenary kicks off, the world must re-commit to continuing this burgeoning momentum. China's façade may be grand – but the CCP must remember that the world is starting to see through it.

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**China's façade may be grand – but the CCP must remember that the world is starting to see through it.**

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# The last blow to Hong Kong's faltering democracy

March 18, 2021

By **Joy Park**, HRF Legal Counsel



*Editor's Note: Joy Park is the legal counsel for Asia at the [Human Rights Foundation](#) and leads its [Hong Kong Desk](#) project. The views expressed in this commentary are her own. View [more opinion on CNN](#).*

(CNN) - Two Fridays ago, the annual National People's Congress convened in Beijing to rubber-stamp

the Chinese Communist Party's policies. Unfortunately for Hong Kong, restructuring the city's electoral process topped the agenda.

Clues had come in a recent [speech](#) by Xia Baolong, the head of the Chinese Communist Party's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. Xia stressed that all three branches

of the Hong Kong government -- executive, legislative, and judicial -- must be run by "patriots." He also called for implementing "patriotism" in Hong Kong's official requirement for public servants, so that it can be better enforced in the future.

Last week, China's rubber-stamp parliament [approved those changes](#), as expected. (The Hong Kong government is now debating them, though this process is expected to be a formality.)

The NPC didn't change rules surrounding Hong Kong's judiciary, but given that Xia [had also mentioned](#) applying a similar "patriotism" standard to Hong Kong's judges, we can probably expect Beijing will apply more pressure to Hong Kong's court system, in addition to the electoral changes it just enacted.

Patriotism has long been equated with loyalty to the party in China, where the Chinese Communist Party is propagandized as synonymous with China, the country. To be a patriot in China is to support the party's policy and direction without question; critique of the party is conversely portrayed as betraying the country.

While this idea of blind patriotism has been fundamentally incorporated into mainland China's society through decades of indoctrination, it is often rejected in Hong Kong, where freedom of speech and freedom of political participation were the norm until recently. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping's rule, the CCP increasingly sees Hong Kong's democratic foundation as a hindrance to its total control of the city. Two important pillars that support this foundation are Hong Kong's partially free elections and its much-lauded judiciary. To ensure complete control of Hong Kong, then, the CCP has now moved to dismantle these democratic mechanisms completely.

Since the 2019 pro-democracy protests, the CCP has sped up the undemocratic reforms in Hong Kong. In the electoral process, though Beijing loyalists have always dominated the Legislative Council, also known as LegCo, [there was still space](#) for pro-democracy legislators to influence government policies. At the local level, District Council elections were largely free and fair and [saw pro-democracy candidates succeed](#). However, perhaps surprised by the global success of the protest movement in the past

two years, the CCP set its sights on doing away with the entire pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong.

To set the stage, the CCP rolled out a national security law in record time last year, [without consulting the Hong Kong government](#) and [in contravention of Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law](#). (Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam has maintained that the Basic Law has not been violated.) Then, in January, the police conducted mass arrests of pro-democracy lawmakers, accusing them of violating the national security law. At the end of February, 47 of the arrested 53 people, many of them lawmakers or activists, [were detained](#) upon reporting to police stations and charged with "conspiracy to commit subversion" for their participation in an unofficial primary election last year. (Not all remain in detention, as some have been [granted bail](#).) Pro-democracy primaries have been lawfully carried out in Hong Kong in years prior. The bail hearings for the arrested lawmakers are ongoing.

Another pillar of Hong Kong's democratic foundation is its judicial system, put in place by the colonial British government before

the handover in 1997. The impartial nature of the judiciary was put on display during the 2019 protests, when a number of principled judges refused to entertain the trumped-up charges of rioting brought by the Hong Kong government against peaceful protesters, as the city saw a mix of orderly and destructive demonstrations. Long accustomed to "rule by law" as opposed to "rule of law," the CCP is predictably unimpressed with the independence of the judiciary and its incapability to act as an accomplice in imposing authoritarianism in the city.

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**EU leaders and the Biden administration must listen to these calls and respond strongly. They must not let Hong Kong's democracy be destroyed in silence.**

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To better control the judicial process, the CCP altered due process via the national security law. Now, those charged under the law are to be [tried by a judge](#) handpicked by

Hong Kong's Chief Executive, likely allowing the Beijing-loyal executive branch to influence trial outcomes. (In Hong Kong, not all judges are from the city; some are British or Australian.) In Xia's speech, the expectation for Hong Kong's judges is even more clearly outlined – Xia states that judicial personnel must all be “true patriots.”

As many of the 47 lawmakers sit in detention centers, the CCP has dealt the last blow to Hong Kong's democratic pillars. At this point, it may be inevitable for Hong Kong to suffer a total loss of democracy, but international response to the CCP's actions still matters. Young activists in exile, such as [Nathan Law](#), [Sunny Cheung](#), and [Glacier Kwong](#), have long called for continued attention toward Hong Kong's struggles, and for stronger sanctions from the United States and European Union governments.

EU leaders and the Biden administration must listen to these calls and respond strongly. They must not let Hong Kong's democracy be destroyed in silence.

# The Nobel Peace Prize winner who's presiding over a humanitarian catastrophe

May 25, 2021

By **Michelle Gulino**, HRF International Legal Associate  
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(CNN) - In 2018, after a two-year conflict, two historically warring nations – Ethiopia and Eritrea – at last [signed](#) a peace agreement. The following year, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who brokered the peace, was [awarded](#) the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the two years since, Abiy joins the ranks of controversial Peace Prize recipients and nominees, as his record now includes overseeing what may amount to war crimes. Myanmar's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, was [awarded](#) the prize in 1991 "for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights;" shortly thereafter, her government was accused of genocide against the Rohingya minority. Joseph Stalin, head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was twice [nominated](#) for the prize.

When Abiy received his Nobel Prize, he [faced](#) two clear paths: the path of democracy that could reconcile deep-rooted internal ethnic divisions and bring lasting peace to

Ethiopia, or that of authoritarianism and renewed ethnic grievances.

Sadly, he has failed to heal a persistent national rift. Ethiopia is in crisis, as an escalating armed [conflict](#) between Abiy's federal Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and forces of the previously dominant political party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has ballooned into a humanitarian catastrophe. This power struggle came to a boiling point last year during a constitutional dispute when the Tigray region held its own elections, [refusing](#) to recognize Abiy's administration.

Following an alleged [attack](#) by the TPLF on an Ethiopian military camp, Abiy then [deployed](#) troops into the Tigray region and, as some international observers believe, joined [forces](#) with Eritrean troops, who [slaughtered](#) Ethiopian citizens. This act of betrayal fueled the Tigrayans' long-simmering [sense](#) that Abiy had abandoned them. After months of denying the presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia, Abiy finally [admitted](#) to their involvement in perpetrating abuses against the Tigrayans, but couched their involvement in the conflict by stating

that Eritrea had [acted](#) in self-defense of its border.

Gruesome accounts of decapitated bodies, the use of [rape](#) and [starvation tactics](#) as weapons of war, and mass extrajudicial [executions](#) have surfaced since November. More than [500 cases](#) of rape – including rape by armed forces, gang rape, and forced rape of family members – have been reported in Tigray.

The ENDF, regional forces, and Eritrean soldiers have [destroyed](#) food supplies and targeted civilian areas with fire – bringing upon the Horn of Africa [probable famine](#) and incalculable death.

More than [2.2 million](#) Ethiopians have been displaced by the on-going conflict and violence. In one week alone last December, [at least 315,553](#) Ethiopians were displaced. International pleas for a ceasefire by [aid agencies](#), the [African Union](#), and the [United States](#) have been rejected. This crisis could destabilize not only Africa's second-most populous country, but the entire Horn of Africa.

After assuming power, Abiy made steps toward democratic reform, but in the face of renewed conflict,

these have given way to increasingly repressive rule. In an effort to stifle dissent, for example, Abiy [shut down](#) phone and internet communication, and [detained](#) journalists and dissidents on politically motivated charges. His government also began a state-sponsored [propaganda](#) campaign to conceal abuses in the Tigray region.

Allowing Abiy to continue this repressive course sends a signal to other countries that authoritarian regimes can operate with impunity, perpetuating mass killings, rape, famine, and displacement – all of which we have a collective interest to end. But what can the international community do to avert further authoritarian ascendance and deescalate the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia?

First, democratic leaders should refuse to engage formally with Abiy, and bar him from participating in global events such as the World Economic Forum while mass killings in Ethiopia continue. Democratic governments should boycott events – like World Press Freedom Day and the African Union Summit – hosted or sponsored by Ethiopia's regime. Doing so will let authoritarian rulers like Abiy know

that the international community will not tolerate their abuses. Notably, the US State Department [imposed](#) travel restrictions on Ethiopian officials on Sunday.

Second, business leaders and institutions can refuse to trade with or provide financial [bailouts](#) to Abiy's government, which would only grant Abiy undeserved legitimacy in global markets. As Africa's second-most populous nation, Ethiopia is an important trade and investment partner. Refraining from further trade would represent a blow to Abiy's propaganda campaign and increase pressure on him to end rights abuses in his own country.

Many business leaders consistently cite their commitment to human rights standards, while doing the bare minimum to enforce these standards. They need to ensure tangible actions by governments to address abuses before moving forward with partnerships with the likes of Abiy. They should follow the example of a number of companies that have called out China's oppressive regime and refused to support the exploitation of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, whose [forced](#) labor supplies dozens of international brands.

Third, international journalists must continue to report on the humanitarian disaster Abiy's agenda has wrought, as Abiy attempts to portray an image of democratic reform abroad. Abiy helped create an information [blackout](#) in Ethiopia by jailing domestic journalists and restricting foreign reporting. The global media has a responsibility to expose human rights abuses and hold authoritarian rulers accountable.

Abiy has, of course, capitalized on the authority that the Nobel Peace Prize confers, to enhance his standing in the global community. Petitions [asking](#) the Nobel Committee to rescind the prize have garnered tens of thousands of signatures. But the Nobel Committee says the Prize, which is awarded for past accomplishments, cannot be revoked. It is essential, however, that anyone who prizes peace push to stop the displacement and killing of Ethiopian civilians immediately.



# Human Rights Abuses in Laos Are Rampant. International Businesses Should Take Action

February 21, 2021

By **Malaak Jamal**, HRF Senior Policy Officer  
and **Jenny Wang**, HRF Strategic Advisor



Authoritarianism in Laos is at the root of illegal land grabs, land grievances, and ongoing human rights violations. The upcoming elections in Laos are unlikely to change this. International business

stakeholders, however, can do more to support local communities and uphold fundamental human rights.

The Lao government will hold National Assembly elections on Febru-

ary 21. Parliamentary elections take place every five years, but are neither free nor fair. The government has boasted of voter turnouts [close to 100%](#) in previous elections.

Laos, or the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), is ruled by a fully authoritarian regime, according to the [Human Rights Foundation's](#) political regime analysis. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) is the only political party recognized in the Lao Constitution.

The upcoming rubber-stamp elections in Laos will not make a difference in the lives of Lao citizens. Under authoritarian rule, Lao people are [unable to meaningfully participate](#) in politics.

With its people silenced, the Lao government often puts forward policies without thinking about the consequences. Eager to boost the economy, the government decided to [open doors to foreign investment](#), but local communities, most affected by new development projects, are left to their own devices to [deal with the external costs](#).

As international businessmen rake it in, hunger and food insecurity are a threat to millions in Laos. But when

Lao people protest against these projects, they risk being harshly punished, [arbitrarily detained](#), or [disappeared](#) by the government.

In 2019, Lao environmentalist Houayheuang "Muay" Xayabouly [was sentenced to five years in prison](#) for speaking up for flood victims and criticizing the government's response to the crisis on Facebook. In the same year, seven activists [were detained](#) for planning a pro-democracy rally in Vientiane.



▲ Parents carry their children as they leave their home during the flood after the Xepian-Xe Nam Noy hydropower dam collapsed in Attapeu province, Laos, July 26, 2018.

Under LPRP rule, human rights violations are rampant, but they receive little attention around the world. As activists work to raise awareness, international businesses in Laos – in accordance with international law – must actively

ensure they are not being complicit in abetting the LPRP's authoritarian regime.

According to the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), business enterprises are obliged to “to respect, protect, and fulfill fundamental human rights” throughout their business practices. They must first familiarize themselves with international standards on human rights, including the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), before clinching business deals with the Lao government.

Corporate stakeholders must engage in thorough risk analyses and robust social impact assessments of their investments in Laos. Moreover, international businesses based in a member state of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and [Development should also refer to the Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises](#), which emphasizes the importance of human rights due diligence and remedying adverse human rights impacts.

To prevent potential negative impact on the local communities,

business stakeholders should orchestrate efforts to increase public knowledge of rights and legal resources at a grassroots level. They should help create a publicly available database to document land concessions and monitor illegal land grabs in Laos.

These initiatives will help build transparency and raise awareness about how foreign investment sustains human rights abuses in Laos. International business stakeholders and their global platforms have the potential to galvanize positive change in Laos if they commit to proper due diligence and respect the concerns of local communities.

As polls open for the National Assembly elections, keep in mind that these elections are neither free nor fair. The world must remember the human rights defenders and dissidents who have been silenced and disappeared for speaking up. At a time of rapid infrastructure development in Laos, business leaders must recognize that more can and should be done to protect the lives of those most affected by their investments.

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The Human Rights Foundation's Center for Law and Democracy recently published a [report](#) on the impact of foreign investments on human rights in Laos.

