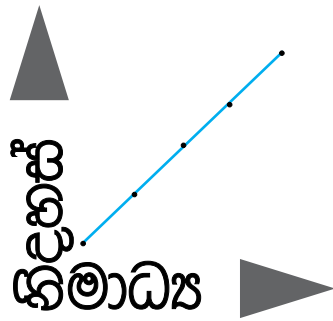




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Media Freedom Activists and Democracy Vendors

Every year when the United Nations mark the World Press (Media) Freedom Day the focus is usually on overcoming barriers to media freedom imposed by authoritarian governments usually in the non-Western countries. Many of the speakers they invite to official events are so-called “free media advocates” from non-governments organizations (NGO). However, recent developments in the Global South, particularly in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America raises many questions about these NGO activists who are suppose to be fighting for media freedom.

The year 2011 was marked by the birth of the ‘Arab Spring’ where the long - repressed Arab masses, and youth in particular, rose up against aging dictators. At last it seems that freedom and democracy will dawn in the Arab world, but, when these uprisings moved to Libya and now to Syria, big question marks have come up whether these are really peoples’ movements or are they manipulated from outside with sinister motives?

The same questions could be asked about such free media activists in Asia - in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, China and Myanmar. In the later two cases mainly operating from outside the country. On the other hand, why is Julian Assange, the Australian founder of Wikileaks who exposed corruption and media censorship in the West hounded as a traitor or worse a “terrorist”, while Chinese free media activist Liu Xiaobo is given a Nobel Peace Prize (in 2010). Liu was the head of two organization, Independent Chinese Pen Centre and Democratic China magazine, both of which are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, a US Congress sanctioned organization.

The Anglo-American media – such as the BBC, CNN and a host of others including Al Jazeera (the English channel mainly staffed by Anglo-American journalists anyway) – have manipulated news feeds to cheerlead some “uprisings” such as in Libya and Syria, while quickly forgetting others such as in Bahrain and ramblings in Saudi Arabia. Thus, one wonders whether we are seeing a new era of colonialism through manipulated global newsfeeds instead of gunboats. In this new world information order, are local civil society groups becoming “democracy vendors” chasing the “donor” funds?

When youth uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt got rid of long-serving pro-western dictators it seemed as if the youth of the Arab world were finally rising against dictators who had served western capitalism well but not their own people. However, when the revolution spread to Libya and the haste at which the controversial 'Responsibility To Protect' (R2P) formula – for long espoused by the International Crisis Group led by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans – was adopted by the EU and the U.S. to create a no-fly zone in Libya under the pretext of protecting civilians in Benghazi from a possible assault by pro-Gaddafi forces, the western powers' manipulation of the Arab Spring uprisings soon became blatantly clear. Once China and Russia were pressured into abstaining from vetoing the 'no-fly zone' resolution at the UN Security Council the path was paved for regime change.

The NATO bombing campaign in Libya against civilian population centres under Gaddafi rule, made a mockery of the R2P formula. As many critics inside and outside the West have pointed out these NATO bombing campaigns and the way Gaddafi and his son were killed amounted to war

crimes. However, such claims were not transmitted by the major Anglo-American media – and if they did, these were usually ridiculed.

On November 1, 2011 Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor, told the United Nations that NATO troops would be investigated alongside rebel soldiers and regime forces for alleged breaches of the laws of war during the battle to overthrow Col Muammar Gaddafi. But, compared to the hounding of the Sri Lanka government after it crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the 30-year old civil war in the island, the western media and the human rights organisations, which consistently accuse developing country governments of war crimes, have been silent on this one.

Now a new battleground seems to be Syria, where the western media, and BBC in particular, has been exposed for spreading propaganda against the Assad regime in Syria as news.

Rape and Torture Calims – Weapons of Democracy Peddlers

Eric Draitser, a geopolitical analyst at Stopimperialism.com observed that rape and torture have become standard issue in the propaganda arsenal of Western media. “Reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that claim to document the systematic use of rape and torture by the ‘enemies’ of the West have become usual fair in the soft war against whomever the imperialists have chosen to attack” he noted. “We have seen these claims used to legitimize aggression against Libya, Iraq, and now Syria”.

As a typical example he points out an article in UK’s ‘The Telegraph’ under the heading ‘Syria using rape as weapon against opposition women and men’ published on 29 May last year. It quotes New York based HRW Deputy Director for the Middle East, Nadim Houry at the beginning of the article as saying: “In detention facilities rape is clearly used as a form of torture to humiliate and degrade people, and to bring back the wall of fear.” There is no reference to Syria in this quote, but the rest of the article is a series of quotes by “refugees”, who have fled across the border from Syria and “activists”. They are all anonymous, because only a common first name is used.

Draiter points out that there is no mention of actual Syrian forces engaging in these actions. Instead, it is all chalked up to 'militias loyal to the Assad regime', without explanation of who they are.

In the run-up to the attacks against Libya in 2011, the lie that Gaddafi forces were using rape as a weapon was planted in the public mind, providing NATO the human rights cover they so desperately needed for their "intervention". Of course, as is so often the case, the fact that these claims were later proven untrue went conveniently missing from the standard narrative. "But, by the time the myth was debunked, the PR damage was done: Gaddafi was a monster, the Benghazi 'rebels' and NTC (National Transition Council) were heroic freedom fighters, and Libya was in dire need of the benevolent bombs of NATO" argues Draiter.

Who makes these claims are also important in the propaganda war. The UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and countless other organizations, which are dependent on funding from sources mainly within the US (or are controlled by the West), lent credence to such charges. The fact that they are often quoted by the western media and in turn relayed without criticism or questioning by the mainstream media around the world, gives legitimacy to western interventions and 'regime change' campaigns such as in Libya.

Manipulation of Imagery

In May 2012, the Russian TV channel RT exposed a BBC news scam where they have posted on their website a picture of a small child jumping over dozens of white body bags under the heading "Syria massacre in Houla condemned as outrage grows". The caption stated that the photograph was provided by an activist and cannot be independently verified, but said it is "believed to show the bodies of children in Houla awaiting burial". The actual photograph was taken in March 2003 in Iraq by photographer Marco di Lauro, who works for the picture agency Getty Images. When he came forward and claimed its copyright the BBC quickly took it off their website.

A very useful tool the western media has used, especially the BBC, CNN and Channel Four in Britain is the video clip provided by activists taken

on mobile phones. Often they broadcast these without authentication and international human rights agencies including some UN agencies lap onto these to attack governments for human rights violations. Syria, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Libya, Iran, Russia and a host of other countries whose leaders are not subservient to western interests have faced the wrath of this news manipulation in recent years.

Referring to a campaign by the British media led by Channel Four in 2010 to mount a war crimes investigation against the Sri Lankan government in the conduct of the final phase of the civil war in 2009, Presidential media advisor Lucien Rajakarunanayake, describes the modus operandi of what he calls an “ugly pattern of distortion” in the way Channel 4 used unidentified video clips claiming human rights violations, thus: “You get one side of the pro-LTTE operators abroad, especially in the West, to produce the fake and highly sinister material. You then get a western media outlet that is known for lack of attention to veracity and an open agenda against Sri Lanka and pro-LTTE to air it, you get a so-called independent news organization such as the BBC to spread the story wider, and then comes HRW or any such others, pontificating how the unverified news item in question, underscores the need for an international commission of inquiry into possible war crimes committed (of course by both sides, but one side not available in Sri Lanka anymore), during the armed conflict in Sri Lanka”.

Even after the authenticity of their first attempt was challenged, Channel Four did it again just prior to the UNHRC meeting in Geneva in April 2012. They screened a documentary just two days before the UNHRC's vote (on a resolution against Sri Lanka tabled by the US, UK and Norway), which alleged Sri Lankan war crimes using video footage whose origins are dubious. Yet, interestingly some influential mainstream media and political parties from Tamil Nadu aligned with the ruling Congress Party in India cited this program uncritically to call for India to support the US resolution. India was the only Asian country to vote for this resolution.

An irate Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Professor G.L Peiris speaking to the media, from Geneva where he was leading the Sri Lankan delegation to the UNHRC meeting said "there is a limit to selectivity" in news reporting and claimed that human rights organisations using such material have done

irreversible damage to the UNHRC process. He said that the Sri Lankan delegation had raised the issue of double-standards on human rights practiced by the very nations who are trying to mount war crimes investigations against Sri Lanka.

The New Face of Colonialism

How Gaddafi was overthrown and a new government was set up is a very important lesson for countries of the South who are either rich in resources or is strategically important for western powers.

While demonizing Gaddafi with trivial stories, the western media ignored facts, which would have shown that Gaddafi did look after his people well, even though they were not allowed to criticize him like the dictators in most pro-western Arab regimes do.

For example, in Gaddafi's Libya education was free to everyone from elementary school right up to university and post-graduate study, at home or abroad; Libyans enjoyed free health care, with a ratio of one doctor per 673 citizens. Libyans were given interest free housing loans, free land for farmers. In 2010, Libya had no external debt and its reserves amount to US\$150 billion.

It is interesting to note the background of people who were imposed on Libya after the so-called democracy uprising. Abdurrahim Abdulhafiz El-Keib, who served as Libya's Interim Prime Minister from 24 November 2011 to 11 November 2012 has spent decades in the United States teaching at Alabama University. He is also a former employee of the Petroleum Institute, based in Abu Dhabi, and sponsored by British Petroleum (BP), Shell and France's Total. He was replaced by as Prime Minister by Ali Zeidan, who was a Geneva-based human rights lawyer, who is believed to have played a crucial role in persuading the French President Nicolas Sarkozy to support the anti-Gaddafi forces.

It is interesting how the new form of colonialism works. First you get the so-called civil society groups who are funded and trained by the western powers to provide a pro-democracy movement from within (or among exile

groups). One of the major planks of these pro-democracy movements is media freedom. Such freedoms they would argue will come only when private media is allowed to function freely. But, who funds this private media and the question of private media monopolies and their perceived right-wing and pro-business political slants are usually (or never) part of this debate.

When these movements attract violent reprisals from security forces (who are often provoked) it creates the excuse for “humanitarian intervention” the so-called ‘R2P’ gospel. Three hundred years ago it were the Christian missionaries who followed the gunboats, today international human rights groups like HRW and International Crisis Group have taken over that role to civilize the natives. They would help to provide the cover of a new dawn of democracy with a sham election – which will be praised by the western media as a reflection of new found freedom for the long repressed people – and this will pave the way for their choice, usually a technocrat who has been based in the West and a “native” just by name to take over the helms.

NGO Funding Under Scrutiny

No wonder that recently, governments around the world have begun to look at such democracy movements with a high degree of suspicion. With the rapid escalation of “democracy movements” across the world, governments, local researchers and media, along with a number of independent websites modeled on ‘wikileaks’ have been uncovering mounting evidence of western funded local NGOs acting as “content providers” to western media outlets to discredit their own governments. Lately these pro-democracy movements have even taken a new face as corruption campaigners and environmental activists.

Two of the biggest funders of such “pro-democracy” campaigners are the US-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Open Society Foundation run by financial speculator George Soros.

The list of projects funded by the NED across the world in 2011 is available on their website and it makes interesting reading. In Myanmar 56 projects have been funded to the tune of USD 3.4 million, in China 23 projects have received a sum of USD 5.16 million, while in Egypt 40 projects

were funded for a sum of USD 2.5 million, Iraq had 51 projects at USD 3.4 million, while 4 projects in Syria were funded for a sum of USD 649,000 and Libya received USD 473,000 for 5 projects. No projects were funded in Bahrain (where the US's 7th Fleet is based and pro-democracy uprisings by pro-Iranian Shia groups have been crushed) while only 1 project each in Saudi Arabia and Gulf states were funded.

Most of the projects generally cover areas such as human rights, pro-democracy and alternative media, labour rights and good governance. The Saudi project was for women's voices in community affairs, in China most of the money were allocated for human rights groups, while in Myanmar most of the funding was for projects to strengthen civil society and promote human rights.

There are hardly any projects that address issues such as international trade justice, human rights of migrant workers, promotion of public funding for social welfare or promotion of the millennium development goals as a human rights issue. There are however, many projects that promote development of private enterprise. The fact that most of the projects are geared towards confronting governments on human rights issues such as freedom of expression and right to demonstrate should raise the question whether those NGOs are peddling democracy for dollars.

In the past year or so, a number of governments such as India, Russia, Sri Lanka, Venezuela, Bolivia, Egypt and Malaysia have taken action by legislating to monitor foreign funding to NGOs and make them accountable.

In February last year, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh blamed US-funded activists for the protests against a Russian-built nuclear plant in Kundankulam in Tamil Nadu state, and de-registered 3 local NGOs involved in the protest. India has also moved to tighten regulations on foreign funding of NGOs.

In February 2012, Egypt also began a crack-down on foreign-funded NGOs with 43 NGO workers including 19 Americans, charged in an Egyptian criminal court over illegally using foreign funds to encourage unrest in the

country. Egypt's ruling military council vowed to investigate how pro-democracy and human rights organisations are funded, and has repeatedly said it will not tolerate foreign interference in the country's affairs.

In July 2012, Russia passed new laws that require NGOs receiving foreign funds to register as "foreign agents". President Putin accused Hillary Clinton of "sending signals" to the opposition to rise up in revolt and called Russians working for foreign-funded NGOs "jackals". The new law would force many NGOs to register as "foreign agents" and submit to stringent monitoring, facing crippling fines for failure to do so.

Recently, the Malaysian government has been concerned about foreign funded NGOs creating social unrest in the country. Many of these NGOs are campaigning for free media, anti-corruption and democratic rights, but, are believed to be closely aligned with the election campaign of the pro-Western opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Prof. Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim, Malaysia's well-known historian, who also sits on the board of Integrity Institute of Malaysia said foreign funding for NGOs makes the public very uncomfortable and suspicious of the recipients. "It also makes one to question whether the NGOs are in it for the money or for a cause," he noted. "They claim to fight for justice and human rights, but foreign funding raises so many questions. It's not morally right to receive such funding, but if you have to get it, please declare it publicly".