

# The struggle for power

Who controls whom? Where does power lie? In today's fast-changing world, the traditional answers don't necessarily still apply, as our contributors demonstrate

## Digital activism can catch authoritarian governments off guard

Cellphone-wielding activists used to inspire a lot of hope. It seems like only yesterday that people believed a well-intentioned activist with a laptop, Facebook account and a decent data plan could bring any urban center to a standstill, or toss out even the most recalcitrant dictator. Yet these days, some are more sceptical.

Many dictators have figured out how to use digital media for social control. Regimes in Iran, Bahrain and Syria use Facebook to expose opposition networks and entrap activists. China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia make big investments in surveillance infrastructure. Even the advanced democracies such as the United States and the UK go to surprising lengths to surveil global internet traffic.

But none of this seems to have slowed down the pace or dulled the impact of digital activism. The latest social science research from the Digital Activism Research Project has compared thousands of cases from around the world. We define a digital activism campaign as an organised public effort, making collective claim on a target

authority, in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media. People in countries where ruling elites control the media do their own investigative reporting and publish findings online. People use digital maps to track corrupt police. Indeed, it has become hard to run a successful social movement without taking advantage of digital tools.

Traditionally, powerful political elites could tax newsprint, shut off the power to broadcasters, and censor the news. While digital can make surveillance easier for some governments, it is much harder for most governments to exercise the same degree of control over digital networks. Creative, tech-savvy campaigns repeatedly show they can get protesters into the street, achieve policy goals, and catch authoritarian governments off guard.

*Philip N Howard is director of the Digital Activism Research Project*

## Aid agencies empower local communities during times of crisis

In the midst of a conflict or natural disaster aid agencies respond quickly and provide lifesaving care to thousands. We do what

governments sometimes cannot or will not: work directly with those in need; empower local people to rebuild their lives; and stand up for basic human rights.

In a large-scale or long-term crisis we may quickly become the major provider of basic services, not to mention the biggest employer, in the area. Budget and global reach depending, we can also begin to influence national and international policies affecting the lives of the people we serve. Aid agencies are able to help governments support their own populations or large influxes of refugees; we bring money into the country; and we generate regional and international pressure through diplomatic contacts, the media and advocacy campaigns for even more assistance.

There are, of course, limits to this power. Although international law provides a strong foundation for humanitarian aid, in the end we are present only with the consent of whatever authority is in place, whether a government or an armed group, and will have to negotiate access to people in need. For example, some governments and opposition groups have little need for us, and may be actively opposed to our



Aid finally reaches its intended beneficiaries near Aleppo, Syria after the truck was captured by rebels

presence. In Syria, where millions endure conditions bordering on the medieval, the IRC has consistently urged all parties to ensure aid can reach all people in need, but with limited success. Without a commitment to safe passage of aid, helping those in need is incredibly complex and dangerous.

In an interconnected world international aid agencies are increasingly seeking to tackle both the causes and effects of humanitarian crises. This may well be where our future lies: not necessarily in responding ourselves to crises but in supporting local groups to respond to needs and in focusing our efforts on addressing root causes at a global level.

*Luke Browne is policy and advocacy officer at the International Rescue Committee*

#### **Films are a tool for catalysing change**

When people ask why I work with documentaries, I tell them it's because you can't make this stuff up. Around the globe, concentrated wealth and power is degrading democracy and destroying the environment, and threatening the future in a way we have never seen before. Drastic inequality is increasing, as our world's

natural resources are being diminished. Film has the unique power, as a visual medium, to convey the magnitude of the situation, expose issues, champion stories of resilience and point to solutions. In doing so, it has the potential to gain the empathy, energy, and involvement of the viewer, even if the story on screen does not reflect their own life experience.

Stories lead to action. Our charge at Working Films is to position films to advance social and environmental justice. We act as a matchmaker between social issue filmmakers and social issue leaders, using film as an opportunity to build community and as a vehicle for grass-roots organisers and advocates to drive forward progress on some of the biggest issues of our time – climate change, education, the economy, the aging population, and reproductive justice.

In the 21st century – with our shortened attention spans and virtual habits – it takes more than one good film, short and long form, online and off to build the awareness, forge connections, and move the dial for a more sustainable and just future.

*Molly Murphy is the interim co-director of Working Films*

#### **International criminal law is a bulwark against the abuse of power**

International criminal law (ICL) was made in direct response to the human suffering that was caused by the flagrant abuse of power during World War II. The international tribunals in Nuremberg and Tokyo laid the cornerstone of ICL and its legal principles were further elaborated by ad hoc mechanisms such as the tribunals established by the UN Security Council for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s.

The International Criminal Court represents a permanent institutional anchor for the principles of ICL. In situations where the Court is able to operate, it confronts contemporary manifestations of abuse of armed force and power. International criminal justice is nevertheless still entangled with realpolitik. In a world of dynamic geopolitical realities, ICL must not end up being treated as a phenomenon owned by western lawyers, academics, diplomats and NGOs. The efficacy and robustness of this framework of justice depends on a global sense of ownership.

I have met brilliant legal professionals who in their daily work, in materially ►

► less resourceful states, lack regular access to international legal sources – not to mention current developments and debates in academic publications and international courts.

Empowering them by providing access to legal information (through, for instance, open-access publishing and online services) strengthens their ability to use ICL as a domestic bulwark against abuse of armed force against civilians. It also facilitates an exchange of views on equal terms, which may enhance our common understanding of the political, economical and practical realities of enforcing ICL in modern-day situations.

*Alf Butenschøn Skre is executive officer at the Centre for International Law Research and Policy*

#### Women are the bellwether of society

Power and control is at the heart of gender inequality. My experience has taught me two things about that power: it can be abused and misused, creating harm and suffering; but circumstances can be created where women can empower themselves and change their lives and the lives of others.

Power, as a negative force, is used to create and maintain inequality. Gender stereotypes infer power to men who abuse it in various ways that are specifically humiliating to women. There is no worse example than utilising rape as a weapon in war. Not only is the individual woman physically and psychologically scarred as a result, she is also being used as a tool to bring shame to her community and ethnic group.

#### Female well-being directly correlates to how society fares overall

Women for Women International provides female survivors of war or conflict with the resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency. We work with socially excluded women across the globe: Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Sudan.

We start by providing financial aid and emotional support, and help move them towards economic independence and stability. Women become confident, self-re-



Education brings empowerment in Rwanda

liant and productive, and recognise that they play an important role in rebuilding families, communities and nations.

Women are the bellwether of society. Female well-being directly correlates to how society fares overall. When women earn an income, they reinvest a much higher portion in their families and communities compared with men. When women have more independence and confidence this translates into respect from men and a reduction in domestic and sexual violence.

*Brita Fernandez Schmidt is the UK executive director of Women for Women International*

#### Nations with “the better story” hold the power

In today’s world, the traditional instruments of national power, brute military force and economic exploitation, have limited acceptability. Global standing today is based far more on the soft-power elements a nation projects, either deliberately, through the export of cultural products, or unwittingly, through the ways in which it is perceived as a result of news stories and other modes of perception in global consciousness.

For long America was the leading exponent of soft power, with its world-famous brands and the American lifestyle they epitomised buttressing its dominance. Today, India is one nation that, despite its very different geopolitical standing, finds itself in the same space. With its attractive culture embracing ancient practices like yoga and wildly popular Bollywood films, its proliferating cuisine, technological prowess, and an unthreatening nationalism anchored in an ancient civilisation and sustained by pluralist democracy, India is the template of 21st century soft power.

In the Information Age, it is not the side with the bigger army, but the one with the better story, that prevails. Societies which, like India, offer democratic political values and breathtaking diversity, a free press and thriving mass media, and a vibrant people who have and still are making an impact around the world, have an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of their rivals. *Dr Shashi Tharoor is Minister of State for Human Resources Development in the Indian Parliament*