

Are There Prospects for Democracy in Burma, Iraq, and the USA?

Ties between Occupy and counterpart social movements.

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I may ask some questions during this talk. I don't want you to raise your hand in response, but to hum. You'll see why. Can you hum now? _____ Thank you.

Telling stories, especially the stories of those who are not often heard, can give us the deepest understanding of the human condition. We don't often read or see or hear nuance in mainstream media. We are given one side, or two sides, and expected to make decisions based on the information the media choose to give us. But that's hardly the whole story. As any student of history can tell you, there are **rarely** only two sides to any story, and **never** only one side. And never just the government's side.

That is even more true when reporting about places and people living under conflict, war, tyranny, and injustice.

In nearly two decades in international journalism, I came to realize that true journalism is a matter of finding the stories of real people and how they are affected by the political or economic or social actions that generally grab the headlines — the stories that are often neglected in mainstream, or corporate-run, media. It's giving voice to the voiceless, to the powerless and ignored who would not otherwise be acknowledged as even deserving a place on the planet.

It's also exposing government corruption and of not allowing liars to get away with their lies — whether the liars are elected officials, regulators, military officers, police officers, corporate tycoons, community leaders, religious figures, or anyone else who held a position of economic, political, social, or technological power.

As consumers of media, we cannot allow ourselves to buy into mainstream media's false idea of neutrality. We should be demanding the truth, not the company line or the state line. Nor one party's line or another party's line. Nor the Arabs over the Israelis, the Catholics over the Protestants. As the great Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk says, "It is the duty of the correspondent to be neutral and unbiased on the side of those who suffer, whoever they may be."

As you'll see just from this panel, we necessarily bring our own perspectives, even as scholars and reporters, to our scholarship and our reporting; hence it is important to follow many media, but ensuring that these media are truly independent from corporate-state or control or from other biases that are detrimental to the health and well-being of people and the environment on which we all depend for survival.

Earlier this week (April 10, 2012), in my role as the associate director of the Park Center for Independent Media, I had the great good fortune to cohost the Izzy Awards for

achievement in independent journalism. The Award is named after the great muckracking journalist I. F. “Izzy” Stone.

This year we had two honorees. Sharif Abdel Kouddous, former producer and now Middle East correspondent for *Democracy Now!*, received the Izzy Award for his courageous and insightful reporting from Egypt’s Tahrir Square during and since the 18-day popular uprising against Hosni Mubarak’s regime that began on January 25, 2011. I’m sure many of you watched and listened as he brought us those stories, even sometimes as bullets and Molotov cocktails whizzed by.

We also honored the Center for Media and Democracy for its in-depth analysis of hundreds of formerly secret documents of the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC. CMD exposed how lobbyists of huge corporations and right-wing special interest groups met and continue to meet in secret with primarily conservative legislators to craft pro-business legislation on the federal level and in virtually every state in the USA. If you have not visited the website ALECExposed.org, I urge you to do so and see how this shadowy group has crafted laws on everything from education to the environment to guns to voting rights to workers’ rights — not all things one would expect corporations to be involved in.

I begin with journalism because an independent media is an absolute necessity for any kind of democratic society. Without its illumination of corporate-state-judicial-military corruption, there is no chance for democracy, freedom, and equity. Journalism is the only profession specifically protected under the U.S. Constitution, in the First Amendment.

But that protection is being ignored and subverted, journalists are regularly harassed, intimidated, and arrested right here in the USA.

The folks at the nonprofit FreePress.org have been tracking journalist arrests at his site SaveTheNews.org. They have documented 76 journalist arrests in 12 cities since Occupy Wall Street began last September. <http://www.savethenews.org/tracking-journalist-arrests-occupy-events>

That is clearly police intimidation — again, the kind the U.S. decries when it happens in Egypt, Iraq, China, or Burma. But it’s happening here, and not just to independent and citizen journalists, but to mainstream reporters from the New York Times, PBS, the New York Daily News, the AP, and even international reporters. The public seems ignorant of or indifferent to these vicious attacks on the very lifeblood of democracy.

And it’s not just journalists. Those of you who have lived under a brutal regime, perhaps suffered torture and incarceration or seen loved ones abused or even killed, think of the United States as a safe haven, a bastion of right. It certainly was on the way, with increasing civil rights, relative tolerance of difference, and a seemingly prosperous middle class. But this is no longer our parents’ or even our own USA; in the last few years it has been sliding backward. Now we are under an increasing military-police crackdown. Many activists I know personally have been harassed with increasing

regularity in recent months by police/FBI/Homeland Security.

I said I'd talk about how populist movements and evolving political and social situations around the world, but especially in Burma, Iraq, and the United States, might play out, and to do that I need a bit of setup.

With my husband, George Sapio, I first visited **Iraq** in January and February 2003, weeks before the U.S. invasion. At the time I believed, as many of you probably did, that the unprecedented outpouring of popular antipathy toward an invasion would halt the Bush rush to punish Saddam Hussein for, well, who knows. In all, some 36 million people in 800 places around the world were in the streets — including Rome, where 3 million people demonstrated on February 15, and even Antarctica — as well as nearly every large city in the USA. Thirty-six million people. Demanding that the U.S. and its “coalition of the coerced” leave the people of Iraq alone.

But once again the media made a difference. A big difference. Most notably, and most heinously, the *New York Times* beat the war drums, publishing story after story echoing whatever the Bush-Cheney administration fed it, unquestioningly.

Those who watched, read, and listened to independent reporting knew that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction nor any way of making them. His country had sunk under 13 years of sanctions from a verge first world nation (as Iraqis told us) to “third world” status (also their term). But the mainstream media, in collusion with a corrupt government, fed the flames of war. On March 20 the 36 million licked their wounds and went home to sulk, many of them never again to engage in activism. This reminded me of how so many of the Boomer generation that had protested the war of aggression on Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s sold out and moved to Wall Street in the Reagan years.

But perhaps, with the inspiration from popular uprisings elsewhere — in Burma in 2007, Iran in 2009, and the 2011 Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Greece, etc. movements — that is changing now. Perhaps the U.S.A. has a fighting chance, as people begin to connect the dots.

In Iraq, despite what Dr. Farzanah said earlier in this session about Iraqis' harshness to one another over years, in my experience, that was primarily driven from the top down, and not in evidence on the grassroots level. The oppression was generally practiced by Saddam Hussein loyalists, the Ba'athists, who were deeply resented by the people — not for their religious practices but for their collusion in oppression and for their brutality and inhumanity to their fellow Iraqis. During our time in Iraq before the invasion and until August 2003, we saw no evidence of a Sunni-Shia-Kurdish divide. In fact, a good third of the many families we visited and interviewed were “mixed,” and Christians were tolerated.

In the early days after Saddam Hussein fled [April 9], the people were jubilant. Small independent presses sprang up everywhere, many publishing in both English and in Arabic. People felt real hope that things would change, despite the lack of electricity,

water, a reasonable currency, and especially jobs for Iraqis. But just a few months later, that had all fallen apart. Criticism, quite reasonably, grew of U.S. motives for the invasion, of the outrageous number of attacks on civilians, and bumbling and [corruption](#) during so-called reconstruction efforts by the Coalition Provisional Authority. The U.S. coalition and its minions sowed seeds of discord as a way to keep the public in check, but this tactic backfired. The divide became more dangerous and deadly. Fear took over, and the people stopped publishing their papers for fear the “other side” would exact revenge. Without a free press to keep people informed, rumors fueled the fears and hatreds.

Divide, conquer, and terrorize. That strategy has always been a mainstay of conquerors and of repressive regimes. Now in Iraq, as in many other places, the sectarian divide seems almost insurmountable. The other main reason the U.S. touted for the invasion, to “sow democracy,” is an abject failure.

The U.S. occupation is not really over, despite the mainstream reports — straight from White House press releases. There are still thousands of [mercenaries](#) — corporate soldiers, with little accountability to the taxpayers who employ them — and [four military bases](#).

So how can Iraqis overcome the corruption and uncertainty? I just took a look at a piece I wrote in various forms over the first two years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. I revised it a bit over the years, but for the most part it remained solid, and it’s still what I recommend today.

1. The United States and the United Nations must work seriously with Palestinians and Israelis, not just the leaders but with grassroots groups that are already working on the ground toward ending the occupation, building a lasting peace between their peoples, and forming an internationally recognized and supported Palestinian state. Other Arab states have to recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli state as well. Internationally recognized peace leaders like Desmond Tutu and Mary Robinson might be convinced to take a major role in this effort.
2. The United States must pledge to maintain no permanent military bases in Iraq and to stop supporting the private mercenary corporations still in business there.
3. The United States and its “coalition partners” must provide reconstruction money for Iraqi companies, hiring *Iraqi* workers to rebuild infrastructure. The big multinationals have to be sent home immediately. (*Hah! I know that is unlikely now, although in 2005, when I last wrote that, it might have been possible.*)
4. As individuals, Americans still have the opportunity to lobby with their wallets (those who have any money at all, that is). We have to stop patronizing corporations — as customers and as investors — that follow practices that strip people of their rights and sovereignty.

Since I wrote that, much has changed, but for the Iraqi people, things are as desperate as ever. Millions are still displaced. The infrastructure is still broken. The government is still

corrupt. And neighboring Syria is in turmoil, Iran threatened. It's time perhaps for a peaceful popular uprising in Iraq.

Now to **Burma**. As Kyi May Kaung has told us, Burma is opening up. Whether or not democracy ensues is another question. But it's a very critical time. Eighteen months ago many observers thought there wasn't a prayer that Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party, or other longtime regime-defying democracy groups, would be in the position they appear to be in today, with a chance of actually participating in the governance of their country.

One thing I know for certain about Burma: it is poised to be the next big resource colony for the big multinational corporations that are running rampant across the globe, despoiling lands, privatizing water and other commons resources, displacing communities, and abusing workers.

If Burma is ever to have a viable future, its democracy leaders, including the grassroots, need a solid plan to build an autonomous government unshackled to these corporations, with unbreakable economic and environmental protections codified in national law. They must engage in long-term strategic planning so that the Burmese people don't go from being abused by one corrupt military regime to being abused by a soulless conglomerate of capitalist marauders.

Those multinational conglomerates, in cahoots with corrupt governments worldwide, are in essence the root of all evil. In the United States, the entrenchment in law of this phony "corporate personhood" that gives corporations more rights than individuals has brought us to the brink of tyranny here.

Things are so bad in both Iraq and Burma that my friends there tell me they live in constant fear, despair, and depression. They say they're ready to rise up, they just don't have the energy. Well, maybe for once the USA can help them — at least the grassroots can help by serving as inspiration.

Occupy Wall Street and related social justice movements get it. They see that these things are all related [*NOW I NEED TO TAKE A BIG BREATH, here goes an incomplete list*]: the offshoring of jobs; chronic unemployment; rampant foreclosures; rising homelessness; the assaults on education, workers, women, immigrants, voting rights, health care rights, and every aspect of environmental sustainability; the drain on the country's coffers into military contractors' pockets from the ongoing war on Afghanistan and from the prolonged military occupation and subsequent privatization of the war on Iraq. Threatened war on Iran. The so-called war on terror. Food insecurity. Water shortages. The government's self-imposed paralysis in the face of catastrophic global climate change. And the greed, corruption, and shortsightedness of a ruling class embedded with Big Banks, Big Gas, Big Oil, Big Coal, Big Pharma, Big Chemicals, Big Insurance, Big Military — Big Business in general.

Occupy is active in scores of U.S. cities and states and in numerous cities worldwide.

Now I'm going to ask you a question, and remember to HUM if you would otherwise raise your hand.

How many of you think you understand what the Occupy movement is all about? ____

How many of you have participated in an Occupy action or General Assembly? ____

Hmmmm, not so many. I'm a little surprised, because this university is full of people who care about inclusivity, social justice, and human rights.

If you don't understand Occupy, if you still think it needs a unifying message, that's because we've been so colonized that we'd hardly recognize democracy if it bit us on the ankle. That's understandable, given our systems and how they are set up to keep us in check, to support them even as they suppress us. Witness the nearly 50 percent of the population who voted for George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, and the large numbers who turned out to elect Barack Obama in 2008, only to discover that he, too, is friendly with the very corporations that are colluding with corrupt legislators in ALEC to squelch our civil rights and liberties. It's hard to recognize that our country is on such a swift decline.

I spent years in U.S. schools that assured me I lived in a democracy, and years of working for democracy and freedom in several countries. But except for small groups, I had never really experienced truly democratic process until I began participating in Occupy General Assemblies. It's poetry. It's not perfect, because it's made up of people, but the General Assemblies and working group meetings I've attended have been truly respectful, inclusive, yet effective in meeting consensus.

Occupy may not be *the* answer to democracy in the USA, but, *if* it can keep its purity and not be co-opted by a political party or special-interest group for its own ends, it is the most hopeful development I can remember in nearly 40 years as an activist on various fronts.

There has never been a more dangerous or less democratic time. There have never been more compelling reasons to take to the streets here than hastening climate change and the worldwide corporate-state malfeasance that is responsible for so much usurpation of people's rights. If the revolution does not now happen in the USA, if people do not join in numbers far greater than the 35 million of us who took to the streets in 2003 to try to block the invasion of Iraq, I guess all I can say is that we'll get what's coming to us.

We all have the chance to begin taking part in this burgeoning movement and being heroes in our own salvation. A national coalition of Occupy assemblies is calling for a nationwide "Day without the 99%" on May 1, or May Day. (Do not confuse this with the "99% Spring," which is not approved by General Assemblies of the Occupy movements and which has been largely [co-opted by the Democratic Party.](#))

This is your chance to get involved and learn more about how democracy can work and how peaceful uprisings can take shape. Those who work and study at universities will

say that's too busy a time for you to participate. But I challenge all faculty, staff, students, and administrators to engage on May Day. Worldwide, May Day is traditionally a public holiday, a Labor Day with marches and celebrations of workers — and of immigrants' and migrants' rights. This year, the general strike is intended as a day away from school and the workplace, a day away from shopping and banking, to shine a light on the “the way the system has enslaved us and burdened us with unmanageable debt, incredibly long working weeks, unfeasibly expensive healthcare.”ⁱ

There are great educational benefits to engaging in something outside the workplace and classroom on that day. Administrators, deans, and chairs should give their blessing and encourage everyone to participate in May Day alternatives; this will only help the university in the long run, with the growing movement for more government funding for education.

Faculty might give students an assignment instead of requiring them to attend classes — perhaps an essay reflecting on how the Occupy movement, or the “Day without the 99%,” matters to their field of study, whether it be chemistry or accounting or music theory, as well as disciplines for which the connection may seem more obvious. Learn more about this important nationwide day of action at www.occupymay1st.org/

However you decide to mark that one day, your actions and commitment should not end at midnight on May 2. It's very easy to get caught up in our work and home pressures, but in truth we need to join with each other by the millions if we are ever going to change our unjust, inequitable, and unsustainable systems. And time is short.

If we don't work our hardest in concert to restore freedoms and build democracy in the USA, and if the trend of arresting and brutalizing peaceful protesters continues, in a few years we may well be looking to the Burmese, Egyptians, Tunisians, and Iraqis to help us out. And who knows if they'll feel any compunction to help those who left them out to dry when they needed food, water, medicine, electricity, and compassion — not tanks, bombs, abuse, indifference, and abandonment.

ⁱ <http://www.occupymay1st.org/>, retrieved April 7, 2012

Resources:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline>

[The First Amendment](#) of the United States: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*