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This newsletter aims to chronicle the major events and developments in the societies of the emerging nations with the potential of impacting their future. This publication offers snippets of news analysis that might be advantageous to the academics, policymakers, social and political workers, students and various organisations.

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Muslims around the world celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr amidst challenge and hope

Almost 2 billion Muslims worldwide celebrated the three-day Eid-ul-Fitr holiday on and after Friday, April 21, marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Eid-ul-Fitr, or “the festival of breaking the fast,” begins with the first sighting of the new moon and varies from country to country. The festivities begin with a special early morning prayer at mosques and open-air venues, followed by feasts and festivals. This year’s Eid al-Fitr continued to coincide with high global food prices impacted by the continuing Ukraine conflict. Despite this, many Muslims strove to enjoy the holiday, free from the restrictive memories of coronavirus prohibitions from a couple of years ago. This year, authorities in Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Turkiye, and Qatar designated Friday, April 21, to be the first day of the Islamic month of Shawwal. In other Muslim countries, such as Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and the countries of South East Asia, Eid began on the next day, Saturday, April 22.

For Muslims in other places, however, the celebrations are overshadowed by war and economic misery. In Sudan, battles between the national army and the paramilitary RSF, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, were temporarily halted on Friday to observe the Eid under a fragile 72-hour ceasefire. Furthermore, Muslims in Syria and Turkiye are still reeling from the February earthquake that killed more than 50,000 people. In the aftermath of decades of conflict, for millions of Afghans, Eid was yet another day of struggle to bring food to the table, as the UN reports that more than 90 per cent of Afghans have been facing a shortage of food this year. Thousands remain homeless in Pakistan after extreme flooding hit the South Asian country last year, while in Yemen, scores were killed in a stampede at the end of Ramadan as people gathered to collect charitable donations ahead of the holiday. In India, where Muslims live in perpetual fear of Hindutva violence, police reported more than 2,000 persons were booked in three FIRs in the state of UP on Eid for offering Eid prayers on the road outside the Eid prayer place without authorisation.

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In photos: Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr around the globe. (2023, April 21). The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/21/eid-al-fitr-ramadan-celebration/>

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China brokers resumption of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran

According to a joint statement signed on April 6, Iran and Saudi Arabia have agreed to resume flights and bilateral visits of official and private sector delegations, in addition to issuing visas for citizens after a high-level foreign ministerial meeting between the two countries in Beijing. As per the statement, both sides are also slated to reopen diplomatic representations within the two-month period stipulated in an agreement brokered by China last month. The breakthrough comes after a hiatus of seven years, wherein Iran and Saudi Arabia had severed ties in 2016 after the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was stormed by an angry mob following the execution of a Saudi Shia cleric. Although talks for resumption of ties had started in April 2021, facilitated by Iraq and Oman, it was Chinese intervention that resulted in a breakthrough, bringing into prospect a solution to the war in Yemen and the possibility of easing of crippling economic measures against Iran, as advocated by the US and its regional ally Israel.

The reconciliatory process highlights the emergence of China as an effective powerbroker in a changed global order, potentially setting the stage for Beijing to deepen economic ties in the region while challenging the traditional American role as the primary mediator of negotiations worldwide. Experts have identified this as part of a broader vision that challenges the idea of a West-dominated global order that narrowly defines the world into democracies vs autocracies. On the other hand, the Chinese strategy rests on an appeal to the non-Western world's general preference for optionality and non-alignment and a definition of democracy that emphasises a country's ability to emancipate itself from Western dominance. Although the contest between the two visions is still rather asymmetrical, more and more experts have called on the US and its allies to recognise and adapt to changing times and attitudes – the West needs to stop asking others to defend the existing one and start recruiting partners to build on a new vision.

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Arrest of Tunisian democratic leader Ghannouchi draws condemnation worldwide

In the latest escalation of a crackdown against opponents of the regime, Tunisian democracy icon Rached Ghannouchi was detained and imprisoned in mid-April ahead of his trial on charges of plotting against state security after a judge ordered his detention. 81-year-old Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's main opposition party, the Ennahda party, was the speaker of the elected parliament, which had been shut down in 2021 by President Kais Saied when he seized all powers and started ruling by decree, in what Saied's opponents have called a coup. According to local news, Ghannouchi was arrested on a warrant by counterterrorism prosecutors as part of an investigation into recent "provocative" comments. The party and its supporters say the charges are politically motivated and unjust. Just a day after his arrest, authorities closed the headquarters of the Ennahda party. Since early February, Tunisian authorities have arrested more than 20 political opposition figures – including politicians, businessmen, and former ministers.

Ghannouchi's arrest was condemned by various international governments, who expressed their concern at the escalating crackdown on political opposition to President Kais Saied. In a statement, the US government labelled Ghannouchi's arrest and the closure of the Ennahdha party headquarters as being "fundamentally at odds with the principles Tunisians adopted in a constitution." The European Union, the Malaysian government, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also expressed concerns. Notably, Ghannouchi's arrest came in lieu of his warning that Tunisia could face a civil war situation if any of the country's political forces – whether political Islamists or leftists – were excluded. He has appeared in court at least ten times in recent months on a variety of charges, including corruption, money laundering, and assisting armed fighters in travelling to Iraq and Syria.

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Sudan erupts in conflict and chaos

Deadly clashes have broken out in Khartoum and other cities in Sudan between the army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the powerful paramilitary organisation Rapid Support Forces (RSF), headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, raising the prospect of a nationwide civil war that threatens to tear the country apart. A power struggle is at the heart of the violence, as once allied factions who upended a fragile transition to civilian rule in a 2021 coup have clashed over control of the country and who will be the commander-in-chief of the military during an integration period wherein the RSF was proposed to be integrated into the regular military. The fighting has been mainly concentrated in the capital Khartoum, with both sides violating multiple ceasefires and using heavy artillery in densely populated civilian areas, resulting in a high number of casualties - more than 500 civilians were reported dead and several thousands were injured.

The picture is complicated by regional power politics, on the one hand, between Sudan and its neighbours, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Chad and South Sudan, and on the other by the influence of regional power brokers such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, all of which have complicated any successful transition. The paramilitary RSF led by General Dagalo has powerful allies, among them Libyan renegade general Khalifa Haftar and the Russian mercenary Wagner group, while also having close ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which employed thousands of RSF fighters in the Yemen war. Experts have pointed out that the power struggle between the two sides is an existential one, with any side unlikely to come to the negotiating table anytime soon without suffering heavy losses, raising fears that civilian death tolls could rise ever higher as the fighting drags on. This fear has forced many civilians to flee conflict-ridden zones and prompted the evacuation of foreign nationals by their governments.

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Upcoming May 14 elections in Turkiye – can Erdogan win another term?

Turkiye is slated to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14. About thirty-six political parties will contest the parliamentary elections, while four candidates will contest the presidential elections. Incumbent President Erdogan from the AK Party is seeking re-election, backed by the MHP, BBP, and YRP as part of the People's Alliance. On the other hand, the opposition Nation Alliance chose CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu as their presidential candidate. His party is part of the oppositional Table of Six, comprised of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Good Party (IYI), Felicity Party (Saadet), Democrat Party, Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Future Party (Gelecek). Other presidential candidates include 2018 presidential elections runner-up Muharrem Ince and Sinan Ogan, each of whom submitted the signatures of at least 100,000 voters to qualify for the election. While there had initially been calls for postponement of elections in lieu of the deadly 2023 February earthquakes, the Turkish government decided to continue ahead with the elections scheduled for May 14 after Erdogan signed a decree to the effect on March 10. If no candidate attains over half the votes the first time around, the runoffs for the presidency will be held on May 28.

In power since 2002, Erdogan and his AK party have accomplished a lot in their two decades in power, including but not limited to significant advances in communication, energy and the defence sectors of Turkiye. Moreover, Turkiye has also emerged as a key player in global diplomacy under Erdogan, thanks to an independent multilateral foreign policy combined with the employment of hard power in instances such as Libya, Syria, and parts of Africa. In the meantime, however, Turkiye has also been affected by many challenges, such as the PKK threat, a weakening economy in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, and the war in Syria, which has forced millions of refugees to take shelter in Turkiye. The opposition has capitalised on some of these issues to shore up voter support, promising to pursue a peace-focused diplomacy-based foreign policy that is closer in line with US and European interests, fix inflation and alleviate economic hardship, and return millions of Syrian refugees back to Syria. The Turkish opposition is also banking on the support of pro-Kurdish parties such as the HDP, the second largest opposition bloc in the Turkish parliament, who have backed CHP's Kemal Kilicdaroglu instead of fielding a candidate of their own.

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America's Fox News sued for election fraud claims; makes historic out-of-court settlement

A landmark \$1.6b defamation lawsuit filed by Dominion Voting Systems against Fox News was set to determine whether the American network would be held financially liable for publishing false claims that Dominion voting machines had rigged the 2020 election. However, before that could happen, Fox agreed to pay \$787.5 million (£634 million) in a last-minute settlement before trial, avoiding a lengthy and potentially embarrassing defamation trial and sparing Fox executives like Rupert Murdoch from having to testify. The network is now facing a second, similar lawsuit from another voting technology firm, Smartmatic, which is demanding an even bigger figure of \$2.7 billion, while Dominion still has litigation pending against two conservative news networks, One America Network (OAN) and Newsmax, and Trump allies Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell and Mike Lindell.

Dominion lawyers said that the groundbreaking settlement “represent[ed] vindication and accountability,” while the right-wing Fox News network claimed in a statement that it “acknowledge[s] the Court’s rulings finding certain claims about Dominion to be false.” Experts remarked that while Fox had avoided a public trial, it had already been harmed by court filings that disclosed the network’s inner workings. They revealed network officials were concerned about losing viewers enraged by Fox’s choice to correctly declare that Trump had lost to Biden in Arizona. Internal messages also revealed that the network was concerned about losing viewers to far-right rivals OAN and Newsmax. The documents also demonstrated that Trump’s claims did not convince the network’s top executives. In an email, the 92-year-old billionaire and Fox News owner Rupert Murdoch stated that the then-US president was becoming “increasingly insane” following election day, while Tucker Carlson, the network’s most popular host, said he despised Trump “passionately” and that his presidency has been a disaster.

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Nasa announces crew for Artemis-II moon mission

The US space agency Nasa has announced the names of four astronauts who will be part of the Artemis mission to take humanity back to the moon after a 50-year absence, in what is essentially a repeat of the 1968 mission carried out by Apollo 8, the first human spacecraft to reach the moon. Christina Koch will be the first female astronaut to be sent to a lunar mission, while Victor Glover will be the first black astronaut to achieve the same. The other team members will be Reid Wiseman and Jeremy Hansen, and the crew are expected to fly the Artemis-II mission capsule around the moon late next year or early in 2025 for ten days, paving the path for a subsequent crew to land on the moon.

NASA does not currently have a mechanism capable of transporting astronauts to the lunar surface. Elon Musk's SpaceX business is creating this, to which Nasa awarded a contract last year to further develop its Starship human landing system to fulfil Artemis' requirements for long-term human exploration of the moon. It will be a variation of Musk's Starship vehicle, which is being designed with the ambition to transport humans to Mars. It was initially flight-tested in mid-April when it exploded four minutes after liftoff and is under further development. Unlike NASA, which seeks to avoid risk, SpaceX has a track record of allowing test flights to explode, claiming they benefit from understanding what goes wrong in the process. The company is also working on ways to make several critical portions of the rocket reusable, which would dramatically reduce the cost of space travel compared to what Nasa could offer.

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ChatGPT banned in Italy over privacy concerns

Due to data privacy concerns, the Italian data-protection watchdog temporarily suspended ChatGPT in Italy at the end of March, becoming the first Western country to take action against the popular artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot. The watchdog had stated that the US corporation Open AI, which manufactures ChatGPT, lacked a legal basis to justify the widespread gathering and storage of personal data for the purpose of developing the algorithms that underpin the platform's operation. The authorities also cited a lack of clarification regarding who was collecting the data, putting customers at risk of harm from an unregulated technology. It further said that incorrect chatbot responses were not being handled correctly and accused the company of exposing children to "absolutely unsuitable answers."

The data protection authority also stated that it would also investigate whether ChatGPT adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation, which controls how we can use, process, and retain personal data. In handing out the suspension, Italy joins a number of nations, including China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, who have already blocked ChatGPT. Furthermore, the BBC reported that several European data-regulation agencies were keenly following the ban and that the EU is currently working on the world's first legislation on AI, although the process could still take years. When ChatGPT debuted in 2022, it took the globe by storm as it generated essays, songs, examinations, and even news pieces from simple prompts. The phenomenal success of ChatGPT earned OpenAI a multibillion-dollar partnership with Microsoft, which incorporated the technology into its Bing search engine and other programs and triggered a race where competitors such as Google announced their own AI projects such as Bard.

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