The Panama Papers around the World: John Doe and the Expendables

Far from rocking the world to its foundations, the Panama Papers have so far been unable to create a popular movement that would bring about real change, real change in the world of finance or in the world of politics. Instead, the story is now merely doing the round across various media outlets and allowing the status quo across the world to persist.

The other day, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (or ICIJ) made public a vast database containing "information on almost 320,000 offshore entities that are part of the Panama Papers and the Offshore Leaks investigations." This information dates back as long ago as 40 years and is up-to-date till the end of last year. And though the reach of the documents appears wide and far, the mainstream media focus so far has been primarily on the Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose name does not even feature in the Panama Papers, and on the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose name is also conspicuous only in its absence.

In all fairness, reading the account given by two German journalists Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier, responsible for the original publication and wider dissemination of the leak and now available in book form, one cannot but wonder about the motivations of the mainstream media. Reading the text, one is struck by the journalists' apparent bias, as they immediately set out to look for any kinds of clues that would demonstrate that either Putin or Assad are implicated in financial wrongdoing. Apparently, the mainstream narrative that the Russian President as well as his Syrian counterpart are at present the West's main foes has not just been able to sway public opinion in the Free World subject to NATO dominance, but also the minds and hearts of prominent journalist, in other words, the minds and hearts of those arguably responsible for creating public opinion around the globe. After all, a critical voice like Pepe Escobar calls Obermayer and Obermaier's employer the "NATO-friendly Suddeutsche Zeitung newspaper."

Leaks around the world: John Doe and his Intentions

There are those who see Washington's fingerprints all over the internet leak, with the already-quoted Escobar calling the revelation of "approximately 11.5 million documents" an "infowar operation by the NSA." But now, the anonymous leaker calling himself John (and not Jane) Doe, in an obvious hint at Hollywood and the make-believe usual suspects populating Tinseltown, has actually provided his co-operators with a manifesto of sorts: an 1800-word statement entitled The Revolution Will Be Digitized. If nothing else, John Doe is at pains to portray himself as a real do-gooder, a whistleblower who does not suffer in comparison to the idealistic and now-exiled Edward Snowden. John Doe's statement reveals that his intentions are pure and beyond doubt, as he pronounces that "[i]ncome inequality is one of the defining issues of our time. It affects all of us, the world over." Reading these words, an unsuspecting reader could expect the whistleblower to call for the overthrow of the Capitalist system at the root of today's woes. In truth, the anonymous do-gooder however does not appear to pursue such a revolutionary purpose. Rather than criticizing the system, he poses the question as to why this issue has become so urgent today, next providing the rather self-evident follow-up, namely that the "Panama Papers provide a compelling answer to [this] question: massive, pervasive corruption."

John Doe, Oxfam and Bernie Sanders

In effect, John Doe presents his leak as a salient item on the current news agenda, as an item reacting to other
relevant news stories. Stories such as the ones dealing with a report released earlier this year by Oxfam, the renowned NGO describing itself as a "world-wide development organization that mobilizes the power of people against poverty." Released about four months ago, the report, called An Economy For the 1%, presents a stark picture indeed: “[i]n 2015, just 62 individuals had the same wealth as 3.6 billion people - the bottom half of humanity. This figure is down from 388 individuals as recently as 2010”. In fact, John Doe and the people at Oxfam all but pursue the same goal, as the report’s introductory summary reveals: the "richest 1% now have more wealth than the rest of the world combined . . . A global network of tax havens further enables the richest individuals to hide $7.6 trillion.” As a result, John Doe is really doing the bidding of Oxfam now, or is he? After all, Oxfam is but a humble NGO merely paying its top executive less than $180,000 a year, as revealed a Daily Telegraph’s investigation. Other NGOs or charities are known to pay their bosses over $250,000 on an annual basis, the same analysis showed. But John Doe’s deeds do not just resonate with Oxfam reports, his manifesto also sounds a lot like many of the sound bites used by Democrat hopeful Bernie Sanders. For instance, more than two years ago now, using the hashtag #EnoughIsEnough, Bernie even tweeted that a "nation will not survive morally or economically when so few have so much, while so many have so little."

In fact, Bernie Sanders said a lot more than that . . . in early October 2011, he gave a speech on the Senate floor dealing with a proposed trade agreement with Panama, harking back to the days of George W. Bush (2001-9). Bernie told his colleagues that "Panama’s entire annual economic output is only $26.7 billion a year, or about two-tenths of one percent of the U.S. economy. No-one can legitimately make the claim that approving this free trade agreement will significantly increase American jobs . . . Well, it turns out that Panama is a world leader when it comes to allowing wealthy Americans and large corporations to evade U.S. taxes by stashing their cash in off-shore tax havens. And, the Panama Free Trade Agreement would make this bad situation much worse." In spite of Bernie’s words of warning, Obama went ahead and signed the agreement on 21 October 2011, together with trade deals with deals involving South Korea and Colombia. At the time the news agency Reuters noted significantly that the President “signed the agreements in the Oval Office outside the view of television cameras.” Just the other day, in fact at the beginning of last month as Panama Papers were breaking, the journalist Clark Mindock and David Sirota explained that "[s]oon after taking office in 2009, Obama and his secretary of state [the notorious Hilary Clinton, Bernie’s current nemesis] began pushing for the passage of stalled free trade agreements (FTAs) with Panama, Colombia and South Korea." After having pushed for nearly three years, Obama and Clinton were finally able to secure the deal, even if "[c]ritics," as noted by Mindock and Sirota “said the pact would make it easier for rich Americans and corporations to set up offshore corporations and bank accounts and avoid paying many taxes altogether.”

An Expendable Player: Turkey

But rather than focusing on Obama and his hidden hand in smoothing the way for establishing offshore corporations and bank accounts in Panama, the mainstream media, with Obermayer and Obermaier leading the pack, instead chose to focus on Putin and Assad, or rather on figures close to these two enemies of the West, namely on Boris and Arkady Rotenberg and Sergi Roldugin as well as Rami Makhlof and members of his extended family. And, even though had so forcefully asserted that “wealthy Americans and large corporations” would also readily employ the Panamanian route, U.S. billionaires and tax-dodgers are largely absent from John Doe’s leaks. In all fairness, the ICJ does indicate that “at least 36 Americans accused of serious financial wrongdoing, including fraud and racketeering.” In comparison, such an comparatively small fish like the country of Turkey now has, with the ICJ’s recent move, the distinction of being linked to a total of 500 businessmen and 21 intermediaries with offshore corporations based out of Panama. Turkey, but also such places like Azerbaijan or Argentina are basically what Escobar calls "disposable pawns," or expendable player on the world stage.

Those in Turkey hoping for some damning evidence linking the Prez, or the divisive figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to dodgy corporations and such-like enterprises used for tax evasion are disappointed of course. Particularly now that the German tabloid Bild has publicly raised "questions as to how Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s children amassed their vast wealth, including one fortune worth tens of millions, when their father only earns some €50 thousand a year as head of state." Alas, the Panama Papers do not appear to offer any answers in this respect. Instead, some very familiar names do make their appearance, such as Ömer Sabancı, and İnan Kıraç. Both men are members of the two business families competing for the top spot in Turkey’s wealth list, the Sabancı and the Koç families. At the same time, members of other rich families populating the Turkish tabloid press appear to figure prominently -- names such as of the Zorlu, the Čarmıklı, the Doğan, the Hattat, and the Altınbaş families.

Guilt by Association: Tayyip Erdogan
Still, Can Dündar's paper Cumhuriyet gleefully reports that the name of Remzi Gür also appears in the Panama Papers. This Turkish entrepreneur is the founder and owner of the Ramsey clothing manufacturing and retail company. But, more important than that, "Mr Gür is best known for a decade-long 'close friendship' with none other than the Prez himself, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as expressed by the FT's Alex Barker. In 2008, Gür was even convicted of corruption charges. At the time, the businessman stated the following: “If you’re genuine friends with someone, you support one another through good and bad days . . . We were there for him when times were tough. We stood by him as friends. I’m sure he will be there for us if, god forbid, our lives take a bad turn.” He was accused of attempting to bribe Mehmet Yıldırım, a member of the opposition People's Republican Party (or CHP). In 2010, his conviction of 6 months' imprisonment was changed to a fine of TL6,000, on the orders of Judge Oktay Saday. Whether this is but an example of the benefits that the close ties of friendship can bring, however, remains an open question. But as in the case of Putin and his best friend, the paper Cumhuriyet argues for a verdict of guilt by association for the figure of Turkey's President, calling Gür Erdoğan's Vault, asserting the he also provided Erdoğan's children with scholarships allowing them to pursue their studies abroad. And continuing in this vein, the journalist Pelin Ünker asserts that the appearance of Ahmet Çalık's name in the Papers is highly incriminating as well. As the founder of the company Çalık Enerji, he namely employed the services of the current Energy Minister Berat Albayrak -- a man who just happens to be the Prez's son-in-law.

In the end, it seems that the Panama Papers have only succeeded in incriminating the smaller players, arguably leaving the really big fish free to pursue their monetary gains in other waters. As I asserted earlier, the real message of the leak, whether or not it was Washington-inspired or even an NSA-conducted "infowar operation," appears to be a confirmation of the "fact that we are now really living in a post-democratic world order, that oligarchs all around the world dictate policy while busily hiding their ill-gotten gains and enjoying the high life."

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