

How the Western Media Promotes a Mistaken View of the World

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

I am not good at flying kites. But during a recent visit to the Olympic Village of Beijing, I felt compelled to do so. Despite the cold and late hour, there were many kite runners around me. A salesman insisted that I try my hand before committing to any purchase, and I did. Once I finalized the purchase of ten small kites, I shared the one I was already flying one with a most adorable boy. He thanked me, then asked me not to play with his hair.

Earlier, at Tiananmen Square, I had watched throngs of people giddily roam the vast expanse, snapping endless photos in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, in the Imperial City and around every monument in the Square.

A formation of about 10 soldiers was suddenly in tatters when I asked if I could take a photo with them. Their excitement seemed to surpass mine.

None of this should by any means take away from the seriousness of the violent crackdown at the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989. That date should be remembered and lessons must be gleaned. But why the reductionism? When one thinks of Tiananmen, why does one only conjure visions of hordes of protesters and gangs of soldiers? The bloody scene is used time and again to single out China as an anti-democratic regime, juxtaposed conveniently against Western 'democratic values'.

One hardly ever reads positive news from China, or any other 'non-Western' countries - unless an agenda exists for promoting selective positive news from those countries, for example, a supposedly successful election in Afghanistan conducted under the auspices of Western armies.

In Thailand last week I saw no signs of the Red Shirts, or the Yellow Shirts either. I did, however, see some shirtless Thais. Considering the heat and humidity, this was not surprising. The point remains that aside from a standoff at a major Bangkok shopping center, the rest of the metropolis seemed to operate as normal. A Thai man struggled to communicate his political views on to me in English. I had found him watching a video on some social network website. The video featured a dog and a cat, the cat representing the Red Shirts, and a dog, the current government. They barked, meowed and hissed, but they didn't physically engage. The man laughingly commented, "This is how things are in Thailand." Then, in a more somber tone, "It's all about power and control; no one cares about Thais who cannot afford a shirt - red, yellow, or otherwise."

True, but it also seems that Western media cares little about these countries, outside of a very narrow context. The story of China is only worthy if it involves government restriction

(e.g. of Google), or economics, i.e. how China's economic growth will affect Western economic recovery. Even if the story is related to art rather than politics, somehow it finds its way back to the same old theme, for example, the government censoring struggling artists.

Once the Red Shirts and the government sort out their problems, Thailand will certainly disappear off our radar. It would take an economic crisis, rigged elections, or even a tsunami to bring it back as a story worth telling. In the meantime, the country will return to its convenient role for the West - a cheap destination for adventure-seeking travellers with some money to spare, a topic in blogs advising ways to get more money for your buck, or baht, and clever ways to dodge Thai con artists.

China and Thailand are the norm, not the exception. In a recent discussion with a Reuters editor, I complained about the fact that every story on Malaysia had some kind of negative undertone. Example include: Muslim, Christian clashes over the use of the word "Allah"; the trial of Anwar Ibrahim; the ugly politicking. The news makes it easy to quickly imagine Malaysia as the most dysfunctional and unfortunate society on earth.

This was not the impression I got during my last visit to Malaysia. It is, in many respects, a thriving society. It has its internal politics, like anywhere else, but essentially Christians and Muslims seem to be getting along just fine, as they have been for many years.

Media channels - especially those dispatching their news from various Western capitals - focus not simply on sensational news, but they also intentionally sensationalize news, and purposely relay the news so as to be understood within Western contexts. Thus 'democracy', 'elections', 'government restrictions' and 'terrorism' are the usual buzzwords.

Sadly, the south is also stereotyped in the south itself. Newspapers in non-Western societies depend on coverage provided by Western news agencies for their international news. An Indonesian friend recently commended on my 'bravery' for going to South Africa. For him, South Africa is just 'Africa,' where 'primitive' people, along with lions and other wild animals prey on innocent white tourists. Thank you, Hollywood, for perfecting the art of stereotype.

Similarly, some people show utter disbelief when they discover that Iran is one of the world's busiest travel destinations - not necessarily for Americans or Israelis, but for people across the globe. Yes, Iran has much to offer in terms of culture, history, scenery and societal achievements. There is far more to the country than clashing soldiers and youth, or fiery statements pertaining to nuclear weapons, Israel and the Holocaust.

A few years ago, in Stockholm, I asked a group of officials to tell me the images that popped in their heads when they thought of Palestinians. I asked them to be honest, assuring them that nothing they said would offend me. But when I heard back from them, I was indeed very offended. The images were unfailingly gory. Even the 'positive' images amongst them were disturbing and stereotypical.

The western media will continue to reduce non-Westerners, for they have a vested interest in doing so, and it has become habitual. A first step in overcoming this would be to empower our own local and regional media, and to create rapports amongst them. We can only challenge the abhorrent narratives about us when we start to present our own truth and experience, and support others to do the same.

Ramzy Baroud (www.ramzybaroud.net) is an internationally-syndicated columnist and Chief Editor of the Brunei Times. His latest book is "My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story" (Pluto Press, London), now available on Amazon.com.

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