

## **The Nobel Peace Prize is Not a Freedom Prize**

### Why Oslo Does Not Always Honor the Right Ones

Where freedoms are denied, peace cannot be safe. This may seem obvious, but it has failed to determine political action throughout history. In politics, freedoms were frivolously denied time and again, with the result that peace within or between nations broke up or could be preserved only by threats and force.

The fact that politics ignores or neglects the importance of freedom for peace is hardly surprising, given the relevant history of consciousness. It would be all the more important, though, for an institution such as the Nobel Committee in Oslo to be fully aware of this interrelation, recognizing that only a consistently liberal spirit can inspire truly sustainable, lasting peace. Only individuals who consistently advocate political freedoms could then be regarded as worthy peace prize candidates. The history of the award shows that so far the Nobel Committee has not adopted such a maxim.

The Nobel Peace Prize, this is undisputed, has in most cases been awarded to activists and politicians of high moral integrity, who have made – or endeavored to make – substantial contributions to real or mental peace processes. In other cases, however, the laureates were organizations or individuals who had contributed to peace only in the short term and were later even involved in exacerbating old conflicts and conjuring up new ones. One of such cases is the Nobel award to Barak Obama in 2009. At that time, Obamas greatest merits in terms of peace policy referred to a number of speeches advocating worldwide

abolition of nuclear weapons. Thereafter, Obama has neither served this goal effectively, nor has he contributed significantly to the pacification of national and international conflicts. This is particularly true of the Middle East conflict.

Another questionable decision of the Nobel Committee was the award to the European Union in 2012. It is true, of course, that the EU was created with the best peacekeeping intentions and has therefore long been recognized as a symbol of the will for peace of its Member States. But the EU has also proved to be an increasingly divisive, conflict-prone and – so far culminating in Britain's exit – fragile institution. The Nobel Peace Prize for the EU was, therefore, a conservative signal without any visionary radiance.

A Nobel Peace Prize can, of course, hardly do more than honor past achievements in retrospect. But the Nobel Committee should also be aware that achievements for peace do not always coincide with moral integrity. Therefore, consideration should also be given to the question how the institutions and persons honored might affect peace processes in the future and whether they could serve as long-term role models for future peace policy. Only in this way could the Nobel Peace Prize fully exploit its awareness-raising potential. If, in contrast, prizewinners are evaluated only in the context of past achievements, there is always a risk that in later contexts they will emerge as illiberal minds, e.g. as advocates of repressive policies against minorities, thereby retroactively damaging the reputation of the Nobel Peace Prize. In such cases the Nobel Committee's decision can later be interpreted as assent to an underlying questionable attitude of the laureate. This, in turn, can raise doubts as to the Committee's competence and integrity.

There have been at least two serious incidences of this kind in recent times. The most recent case was the Nobel Peace Prize 2019 to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Abiy received the award for bringing the decades-old explosive border conflict with neighboring Eritrea to an end.

Like many others, this conflict had been caused by a state border arbitrarily or at least frivolously drawn by former colonial powers. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain and Italy had agreed with the then kingdom of Abyssinia, later Ethiopia, on a border with Eritrea that was contested from the beginning. This border conflict culminated in a two-year war in 1998 and thereafter continued to simmer until Abiy finally signed a formal peace treaty with Eritrea in July 2018. This deal briefly earned Abiy the repute of a Nobel-prize-worthy African peace hero.

Less than a year later, Abiy emerged in a very different, sinister role. In a domestic conflict over claims for self-determination, he had the province of Tigray in the north of his country besieged and bombed by his own army.

With this action, Abiy followed an almost global traditional pattern, suppressing claims for self-determination and thus denying elementary freedoms. This traditional pattern applies particularly to the attitude towards the so-called *freedom of political association*. This is the freedom of citizens to decide as freely as possible and in appropriate democratic procedures on national borders and nationalities.<sup>1</sup> The denial of this freedom is still very common in national and international politics, but of course this does nothing to alter the immorality of such policy.

The repressive and violent handling of claims to self-determination is the origin of a centuries-spanning series of conflict events which can be

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<sup>1</sup>The freedom of political association can also be described as a freedom of choice over who operates with whom a common state. For the initial concept see B. Wehner, *Nationalstaat, Solidarstaat, Effizienzstaat. Neue Staatsgrenzen für neue Staatstypen*, Darmstadt 1992. Democratic procedures for exercising this freedom are described in more detail in B. Wehner, *Freedom, Peace, and Secession. New Dimensions of Democracy*, Springer 2020, and B. Wehner, *Die politische Logik der Sezession, Zu einem neuen Paradigma der Friedenspolitik*, Springer 2018. Further articles on this topic in [www.reformforum-neopolis.de](http://www.reformforum-neopolis.de) (see the heading "Demokratie" → "Friedenspolitik" as well as the "Gesamtkatalog").

aptly described as *the creeping third world war*.<sup>2</sup> This ongoing war – which had such prominent predecessors as the American Civil War – includes a large number of violent conflicts in many parts of the world, ranging from wars and civil wars in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to latent or open civil wars in Europe and successor states of the Soviet Union. In Europe, the war in Yugoslavia has so far been the most tragic event in this global war.

Of course, the Nobel Peace Prize institution cannot be expected to break away entirely on its own from the traditional patterns of thought still progressing and vindicating the creeping third world war. One should nevertheless wish for this institution not to distinguish politicians who may later be willingly involved in episodes of this war. Otherwise, the institution could be blamed for indirectly legitimizing violent suppression of claims for self-determination.

Another case that shed some doubts on the moral guidance by the Nobel Peace Prize is the case of Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi, who was honored in 1991 for her "non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights" in her country, later became involved in the repression of the Rohingya ethnic minority and in their expulsion from Myanmar in the years 2016 to 2018. This act, widely considered a genocide, was at least tacitly approved by Suu Kyi as acting head of government and leader of the ruling party in Myanmar. Therefore, the crimes against humanity committed in this context are also to be attributed to Suu Kyi personally.

These crimes, too, originated in denying political freedom of association, and these crimes can therefore also be attributed to the creeping third world war. Thereby, Suu Kyi has been involved in this war and has been complicit in the war crimes committed in it. For this very reason, she was later stripped of numerous honors abroad,

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<sup>2</sup> On the phenomenon and notion of the creeping world war see e.g. [Der schleichende dritte Weltkrieg - ein Zwischenstand](#) in [www.reformforum-neopolis.de](http://www.reformforum-neopolis.de).  
[See also](#) B. Wehner, *Freedom, Peace, and Secession. New Dimensions of Democracy*, Springer 2020.

including the honorary citizenship of Canada. In contrast, the Nobel Committee in Oslo did not reclaim the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to her. This may seem justified in that Suu Kyi's award-worthy merits have not been undone by her subsequent failings. Nonetheless, the blemish of having honored a person of highly questionable ethos will stay with the Nobel institution.

Nothing threatens world peace as much as the denial of political freedoms, above all freedom of political association. The denial of this freedom, in turn, is the cause of the creeping third world war, i.e. the global war over enforced state borders and involuntary nationalities. Therefore, there could be no more important concern for the Nobel Peace Prize institution than advancing the understanding and the containment of this very war.

The creeping third world war cannot end unless a large part of the international community agrees on the principle of freedom of political association. The Nobel Committee could significantly contribute to this by rigorously checking all future prize candidates for their attitude towards this particular freedom. Beyond that, the Committee could award future Nobel Peace Prizes preferably to persons who have made concrete efforts in the spirit this freedom, thereby contributing to the containment of the creeping third world war. Once this policy were made public, worthy candidates would sooner or later emerge spontaneously.

Reconceived in this spirit, the Nobel Peace Prize could stand more consistently for sustainable peacekeeping and gain a stronger moral repute than ever before.

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Burkhard Wehner