

Under The Radar

While the media landscape is preoccupied by COVID-19, politics and business grinds on. 'Under the Radar' provides a concise overview and thoughtful analysis of critical stories currently being overlooked.



Saudis reboot MBS' 'modernisation'

What happened?

Saudi Arabia's General Commission for the Supreme Court announced it is ending flogging as a form of punishment. The move comes days after the regime took criticism over the death (in custody) of leading human rights activist Abdullah al-Hamid. Friends of al-Hamid cited medical neglect by authorities as a contributing factor in his death.

Flogging was previously recommended by Saudi judges for a range of offences, including public intoxication, harassment, and extra-marital sex. The reform was welcomed as a "momentous step forward in Saudi Arabia's human rights agenda" by the President of the, erm, state-backed Human Rights Commission of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis also announced they would be ending executions for crimes committed by minors. The latter move brings the Saudis into compliance with their signature on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A record 184 people were executed in the Kingdom in 2019.

What does it mean?

Not much, as Jamal Khashoggi would likely surmise had he not been butchered by Mohammed bin Salman's henchmen a few years back. But, hey, at least MBS allowed women to drive that same year.

The sentencing reforms are undoubtedly an attempted reboot of MBS' 'modernisation' push c.2018, i.e. before it was derailed by the international outcry over Khashoggi and the fallout of the grinding Saudi-backed proxy war in Yemen. With oil prices in freefall - producing a concomitant (and severe) knock to Saudi state finances - MBS clearly needs some good news to peddle at home and abroad.

"Bin Salman either needs to go all in with his modernisation reforms or neuter his rivals amongst the extended Saudi royal family"

The slump in the global economy easily outweighs any goodwill produced by these latest moves on penal reform. The Saudis need oil and money flowing to keep its young population employed and placid. MBS also has several palaces full of relatives watching his every move (many of whom he's previously jailed), and with more missteps than wins over the past several years, he needs to shape up or risk being shipped out.

But half-measures won't cut it. Bin Salman either needs to go all in with his modernisation reforms - risking severe instability in the process - or neuter his rivals amongst the extended Saudi royal family. Simply putting the whips away won't be enough.

The future of fighting fire in Australia

What happened?

Fire season in Australia is over and the government is already preparing for the next, which starts in a few short months, by looking at past mistakes and future tech.

'Black Summer' - as the 2019/20 season came to be known - was labelled the worst season ever recorded by the New South Wales rural fire chief. In NSW alone, 25 people died; 13.6 million acres burnt; and fires raged for 240 consecutive days.

On top of economic damage and social upheaval, the government estimates that bushfire related carbon dioxide emissions amounted to 830m tonnes for the year, which for a country facing an extinction crisis, is particularly bad news.

What does it mean?

Australia is uniquely exposed to bushfires. Its ecology means that they have an entire season marked in the calendar for the annual death and devastation. Climate change and other aggravating factors are making the fight even more difficult.

Technological progress, in the form of software such as Phoenix RapidFire, is helping the fight. That particular programme was designed to simulate potential outcomes, although some experts now doubt the validity of its findings. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization is currently working to build a more accurate assessment and prediction tool, to be named Spark.

With so much at stake, the Australian government is looking to every possible tech advancement for help. For instance, CSIRO, Australia's scientific agency, is working with Nasa on a programme which aims to deploy artificial intelligence for drones, satellites and rovers. Other ideas in the mix include using micro drones to track fires in real time and using infrared sensor to map terrain conditions such as vegetation density. Long-term prediction models such as the Fire Regime Operations Simulation Tool at the University of Melbourne are also in the making.

For all the technological advancements, some Aussie experts are unmoved. Simon Heemstra of the NSW Rural Fire Service told the NYT that he would back his manual analysts over the computer software "nine times out of 10" in their modelling. Although tech is being developed at pace, the question is whether it will come in time to counter the devastation to Australia's natural habitat before the damage is irreparable.

Can Boris get the Brexit ball rolling again?

What happened?

Following a bout on the side-lines as he battled with coronavirus, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has returned to No.10 today to an overflowing in-tray.

Pandemics and economic crises aside, another pressing issue on the Prime Minister's agenda is Brexit, and how to move talks forward after no progress was made in the second round of negotiations last week.

The Times is reporting that Johnson is today taking personal charge of talks, with a focus on finding ways to “inject energy” and to “short circuit” the rigid formal negotiations that appear to be stalling. He will also open lines of communications with the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, effectively telling her that the EU's mandate is “not a realistic solution”.

What does it mean?

Johnson may have *taken back control* of the negotiations, but they remain in a difficult spot. Virtual talks resumed last week, but progress was “disappointing” according to Barnier, as the same old “level playing field” sticking point continues to impede any breakthrough.

A lack of progress prompted the frustrated chief negotiator to claim that the UK was refusing “to engage seriously” and seeking to “slow down discussions”, in what was unusually direct language for an international negotiation. The atmosphere is likely to be tense going forward, with the continued use of video conferencing unlikely to aid the flow and conviviality of negotiations.

To make matters worse, things are not exactly harmonious on the British front, with sources claiming there are growing divisions in the negotiating team over whether the Prime Minister should request an extension to the end-of-year deadline.

“If talks stall and the extension is rebuffed, it looks like Britain and the EU could be hurtling towards another no-deal cliff edge”

Johnson now faces a momentous task if he wants to get a deal over the line in time. He has until June to make real progress before the deadline to request an extension expires. If talks stall and the extension is rebuffed, it looks like Britain and the EU could be hurtling towards another no-deal cliff edge. If Johnson is unwilling to make any significant concessions then he must at least seek to inject what No.10 is calling “fresh political impetus” into the process. He may have managed to secure a new Withdrawal Agreement last October, but can he really defy the odds again this time?

What Trafalgar Is Reading

Kim Jong Un's Sister Is in the Spotlight. But Could a Woman Ever Lead North Korea?

[TIME](#)

“North Korea is a highly patriarchal society. Since its establishment in 1948, the country has been run by three men, Kim Il Sung, his son Kim Jong Il, and his grandson, Kim Jong Un”

- Amy Gunia profiles Kim Yo Jang and analyses whether she could ever succeed her brother as leader of North Korea.

Biden's former Democratic rivals form a deep bench of potential Cabinet picks

[CNN](#)

“Many of the Democrats who ran for president in 2020 announced their bids as relative unknowns. And even as their campaigns fizzled, many of their profiles grew significantly during their time vying for the presidency.”

- Dan Mercia reports on how what the Cabinet in the Biden administration could look like.

But if you must read about Coronavirus

Coronavirus: the hidden health costs of the UK lockdown

[Financial Times](#)

“The blunt measures appear to have been successful in “flattening the curve” of coronavirus infections — ensuring that the health service was able to cope with thousands of additional seriously ill patients. But they are also having a deep impact on wider society, in terms of mental health, domestic violence and people failing to seek medical help for strokes, heart attacks or cancer symptoms, that experts say could take years to play out.”

- Sebastian Payne on the hidden health costs of the lockdown, which ministers must now consider as they plan when and how to ease restrictions.



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