

## Analysis

**Kuwait Times**  
Established 1961  
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

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## Years of activism and giving help Bloomberg raise army of backers

Any national election campaign in the vast United States needs an army of volunteer workers if it is to have much hope of success. The billionaire Michael Bloomberg, a Democratic hopeful in this year's presidential race, went about recruiting his own "army" in an unusual way, relying on goodwill generated over the years by his own activism and his millions of dollars of charitable donations.

Healthcare, education, the environment, gun control... the former New York mayor - one of the richest people in the world - has long put his fortune in the service of those and other causes, financing organizations whose members are now more than willing to repay their benefactor through their own time and effort. Among them are the many militant members of the group Moms Demand Action (MDA), an anti-gun violence campaign founded after the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

They provide much of the energy behind the Everytown for Gun Safety lobbying group, which was founded - and largely financed - by Bloomberg. The group claims six million members nationwide. "There's a lot of Moms Demand Action volunteers that are out canvassing for Mayor Bloomberg" because of his longtime support for gun control efforts, said Ruth Hoffman, a member of the group who had come to hear Bloomberg speak at a rally Saturday in McLean, Virginia. "He saw it was an issue since 2005 and has been committed to the issue," she said. "I think that that says a lot about a person."

### On-the-ground experience

Bloomberg's official entry into the Democratic nominating contest will take place on Tuesday, when voters in Virginia and 13 other states cast ballots for the person they hope can unseat President Donald Trump in November. Because he skipped the first four voting states due to his late entrance into the race, Bloomberg is under heavy pressure to perform well on "Super Tuesday". The former mayor has poured enormous sums of money into a slick and professionally run campaign - his TV and social media ads have inundated the airwaves in some markets - but he is also relying on a national network of contacts built up over more than a decade. Bloomberg has spent some \$10 billion on charitable works and political campaigns to advance the causes dearest to his heart, according to a New York Times investigation. (Even after that spending, he is estimated to be worth more than \$60 billion.) Beneficiaries have included the ecology-minded Sierra Club and family planning groups like Planned Parenthood. "When you help someone, like anything in life, they're going to help you back," said Abby Spangler, founder of the Protest Easy Guns group and a co-chair of Bloomberg's campaign in Virginia. "He has always been there for us, fighting for better gun laws in America. And so, when he decided that he was going to run for president, I said, 'I'm all in!'"

If Moms Demand Action has not officially thrown its support behind Bloomberg, many of its members have done so individually - and spontaneously. "We see the type of work that he's done," said Asieh Kehwari, an MDA member who attended Saturday's rally, "so I'm sure that we will definitely assist him." Red T-shirts bearing the "Moms" emblem were seen throughout the crowd at the event, and Bloomberg made sure to salute their contribution in his speech. The 78-year-old businessman, co-founder of the big Bloomberg News group, sees the role of such highly motivated backers as essential to his campaign. The "Moms" actively campaign for their chosen candidates, crisscrossing neighborhoods to drum up support among voters. "We have the ground experience, and we know how important it is," Kehwari said. After the rally, she and other women spent the afternoon going door-to-door on Bloomberg's behalf.

### Return on investment

Virginia plays an important role in the Super Tuesday primaries. It will be awarding the fourth largest number of delegates to the party's national nominating convention in July (99 of the 1,991 needed to win the Democratic nomination). Bloomberg has a staff of 80 deployed in seven offices across the mid-Atlantic state - the biggest team in Virginia compared to other candidates, according to his campaign. In this historically conservative state, which in recent years has leaned Democratic as its urban and suburban populations have grown, the support of groups like the "Moms" can make a difference.

In the 2018 midterm elections, they helped three Democratic candidates take seats in the US House of Representatives previously held by Republicans, all three with "A" ratings from the pro-gun National Rifle Association. And in 2019 came a political thunderbolt when Democrats, boosted by Bloomberg's liberal spending, wrested control of both houses of the state's General Assembly from Republicans for the first time in 25 years.

The fight for tougher gun-control laws had become a top issue among voters, coming only months after 12 people died in a mass shooting in the city of Virginia Beach. Today, as the Super Tuesday primaries approach, Bloomberg is hoping for the same sort of outcome: A good return on his investment. —AFP

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Visitors look at one of the artificial lagoons built near Ayacucho, Peru on Jan 30, 2020. —Reuters

## As glaciers shrink, Peru sisters build reservoirs

About 40 years ago, the snow that once covered the Andes mountains near the Peruvian city of Ayacucho started to disappear. Water became scarce for more than 200,000 people in the south-central region, most of them from the Quechua indigenous community. "We had to ration water. Some years, we had water for only two hours a day," said Dersi Zevallos, a coordinator with Peru's water and sanitation regulator, SUNASS.

Then, Quechua sisters Magdalena and Marcela Machaca - both agricultural engineers - found a solution by looking to the past. They built reservoirs high in the mountains to harvest and "cultivate" rainwater, the same way their ancestors did. Climate change has led to increasingly dry conditions for communities in the Peruvian Andes, data shows. In 1984, around 130 cm of rainwater fell in Ayacucho, according to SUNASS. Now the city gets only half that much rain every year.

Glaciers, another source of water for the Quechua, have also been affected by warming temperatures. Across Peru, glaciers lost nearly 30 percent of their area between 2000 and 2016, according to a study published last September in geosciences journal The Cryosphere. "Climate is a living being to us," Marcela told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "And lately it's been acting a little crazy."

To help cope with the situation, manmade mountain-top reservoirs - which locals call lagoons - capture and store water during the rainy season from November to February, she explained on a tour of one she and her sister

built. In the dry season, the water filters through the ground to recharge the rivers and aquifers used by local authorities to provide water to residents and farms. "The lagoons play the role that the frozen mountain-tops used to play," Marcela said.

The Quechua people consider the reservoirs sacred, she noted, believing they "nurture" water at the start of its life. "Our communities are the protectors of water and we are proud of that," she added. The sisters built their first reservoir back in 1995 through their organization, the Bartolome Aripaylla Association, which uses traditional knowledge to help indigenous communities improve their economic activities. Since then, they have built more than 120, which together provide Ayacucho with more than 130 million cu m of water for human and agricultural use.

Sally Bunnings, a water management expert at the UN. Food and Agriculture Organization, said the impact of climate change on mountain glaciers, which are melting as global temperatures rise, poses a threat to high-altitude communities. They should follow the Quechua example of trying to use water resources as efficiently as possible, she added. "From an early age they should learn to (recognize) and prevent the effects of abrupt change in temperature and make good use of water," she said.

### 'Nurturing water'

Almost a quarter of Peru's population identifies itself as Quechua, making up the country's largest ethnic group, according to the latest census in 2017. Marcela said she and her sister

first heard about the ancient spiritual practice of "nurturing water" through their grandfather when they were children in the 1970s. By that time, it was no longer practiced, she added. Then, just as the snow in Ayacucho's mountains started to dwindle, conflict came to the area.

Ayacucho became the base for the Maoist rebel group Shining Path, or Sendero Luminoso in Spanish, which launched a bid to overthrow the state in 1980. Some 70,000 people were killed before the conflict ended nearly 20 years later. "People were just trying to escape with their lives. They disregarded the spiritual practices," Marcela explained. "People forgot to treat nature like a living being."

The El Nino weather phenomenon hit Peru in 1992, making water even more scarce. That was when the sisters were motivated to build their first artificial lagoons, said Magdalena. They choose natural landscapes already shaped like reservoirs, to reduce the amount of digging, she explained. With agreement from local communities and authorities, they seal any leaks with soil and plant native ferns that keep the soil firm, naturally filter the water and shelter birds.

Each reservoir - some up to 600 m in diameter - usually takes just a couple of months to build, Magdalena said, and fills up fast in the rainy season. The sisters create small canals to let water escape and prevent the reservoir overflowing in heavy rains, and those take water to the mountain communities. At the same time, the reservoirs recharge the aquifers and groundwater used for the city's water supply.

According to SUNASS data, in 2010, the

Cachi river basin was estimated to provide around 80 million cu m of water before any reservoirs were built in the area. By the end of the year, 15 million additional cu m of water were flowing from the lagoons. That water was given to farmers who would not otherwise have had enough, Magdalena said. The pair's brother, Nemesio, a farmer lower down the mountain, said the area previously had no water in the dry season. "Our cattle had nothing to drink, so they were very thin. We couldn't extract milk. Now we can," he said.

The city government cannot fund the construction of the reservoirs, which cost about \$1 million each, Magdalena noted. That often leaves the Machaca sisters struggling to find money for new projects, which are almost entirely paid for by their association, she added. But the government does give the sisters technical advice to ensure the reservoirs properly charge local water sources. "If we didn't have these lagoons now, we could not guarantee water for the whole population. They're completely vital," said Zevallos of SUNASS.

### Adapting to drought

Other parts of Latin America could learn from Ayacucho's experience with water conservation, said Gustavo Solano, project coordinator at the Association for Investigation and Integral Development, a Peru-based organization that promotes nature-based solutions to climate change. With supervision from the Machaca sisters, it has started replicating the reservoirs in Guanacaste, a region in northern Costa Rica that is regularly hit by drought. —Reuters

### Job losses

Manufacturers of textiles, Haiti's top export, have cut around 5 percent of 58,000 jobs due to the lockdown, he said. Three years ago, he had estimated the sector could on the contrary add 300,000 by 2020/2021, granted political stability. According to Haitian economist Elzer Emile, the worst hit are those who do not have the resources to protect themselves in a country where more than half the population lives under the poverty line of \$2.41 per day. "We are seeing an acceleration of poverty," he said, as international organizations warn of a growing hunger crisis.

While the protests have abated somewhat, there is no sign of a resolution to the political malaise and its root causes any time soon. President Moise has been ruling by decree since January after the country failed to hold legislative elections. The opposition has rebuffed his calls for a power-sharing agreement. The political crisis has cut the country of 11.2 million people off from some international funding, further hindering its ability to respond to the worsening economic woes.

"Every time in Haiti you have some plan to succeed, there is a political crisis that destroys everything," said Elie Jean, 27, director of what he called the sole dairy in northwest Haiti, just outside the town of Jean Rabel. The shiny new facility was financed with European Union development funds, he said, but it has struggled to re-open following the lockdown because many farmers sold their cows when the situation got tough. —Reuters

## Scarred by unrest, Haiti sinks deeper into poverty

Jacquelin Joseph is struggling to re-open his small food and beverage store in the northern Haitian town of Port-de-Paix, months after the country returned to a semblance of normality following violent anti-government protests. The 45-year-old was forced to shut up shop in December when he ran out of stock after the protests against economic mismanagement and corruption under President Jovenel Moise disrupted transport nationwide. The unrest stoked already high inflation and Joseph quickly used up what little savings he had.

Now, with eight children to feed and bills piling up, he is desperate to get back to business. But rebuilding is no easy task for Haitians like him, who were only scraping by before the crisis. "I have no money left to restart my business," Joseph said, warily watching for those he owes money for rent or deliveries. "I asked the bank for a microcredit but one requirement was for me to have some stock, and I didn't have any."

The economic repercussions of Haiti's three-month country-wide lockdown are still unfolding in what was already the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation, where around two-thirds

of adults are estimated to be unemployed or underemployed. Haitians were decapitalized: Many businesses had to close, others had to slash jobs. In a country where agriculture accounts for half of all jobs, several farmers told Reuters they do not know how they will acquire seeds and fertilizer to plant anew.

The unrest has spooked would-be investors and tourists, causing some hotels to fold and torpedoing attempts to revive the Caribbean nation's beleaguered tourism industry. Violence still flares sporadically. Last weekend, the government cancelled Carnival celebrations in the capital after a police protest spiralled into street clashes and deadly gunfire on the first day, another blow to the \$9.7 billion economy already on its knees.

Junior Ceme, 34, who has a stand selling trinkets on the Champ de Mars public square in Port au Prince where the festivities take place, said he had borrowed around \$150 from a friend to buy more goods for what is usually his busiest time of year. "But I haven't sold anything since this morning," he said. "I don't know how I am going to return the money."

The World Bank estimates Haiti's economy shrank 0.9 percent last year. This year it expects a further 1.4 percent contraction, followed by 0.5 percent in 2021: the first three-year recession since Haiti was crippled by US sanctions imposed on the country after a military coup in the early 1990s. "The consequences of the current crisis are even worse than the embargo, an earthquake or several hurricanes, because we are talking about a breakdown of the state," said Georges Sassine, president of Haiti's Industrial Association. "And the full consequences have yet to be felt."

## How one woman is taking on Vietnam's 'big coal'

As a child, Nguy Thi Khanh used to lie in the grass in her Vietnamese village and watch toxic emissions from nearby coal plants float past like clouds. Today she is one of the few voices in Vietnam taking on the industry - a rare female climate crusader pushing for renewables in a country where dirty energy is on the rise. At 43, she has already founded Green ID, Vietnam's best-known environmental NGO, convinced the government to reduce some of its coal targets, helped spark a national conversation about rising air and water pollution, and won international plaudits for her work.

But it is not without risks: Dissent is not tolerated by the Vietnamese government and many activists have wound up in jail for speaking up against authorities. "When we got global recognition, vested interest groups recognized who their enemy is and they are very powerful," she says, adding that she has learnt to safely work within the bounds of civil society laws to try and shift the government's policies on green energy.

Khanh admires Greta Thunberg, who has

brought civil disobedience in the name of the environment to the world's stage for a new generation, but concedes that particular brand of activism is not possible in Vietnam. Even as 2020 is being hailed the year of climate action worldwide, she must walk a tightrope - driving change without falling foul of authorities or well-connected big energy firms in the one-party state.

Khanh has watched with dread as the communist country of 95 million struggled to balance breakneck economic growth with environmental sustainability. "I have three kids, I always remind them that your future will not be like my current life. Our generation has more resources than you will," she says of her motivation to drive change, despite the risks.

### Communities destroyed

The nation's annual GDP has risen by six percent annually since 2015 but it has come at a heavy cost. Rapid industrialization has contributed to a steady rise in air and water pollution across the country, while mountains of plastic waste choke landfills and waterways. In a bid to meet its soaring energy demands, the government is racing to build dozens more coal plants over the next decade, even in the face of climate change and its commitments in the Paris Agreement to reduce emissions by 2030.

Electricity generated from coal, which already makes up a third of Vietnam's energy

mix, is expected to increase five-fold in the next decade, according to official figures. But her non-profit has had some success reigning in the nation's love affair with fossil fuels. After four years of tireless research and lobbying, it persuaded the government to strip 20,000 megawatts of coal power from the national energy plan by 2030.

Her team of 20 is also publishing some of the country's only air pollution studies, piling pressure on officials to address the growing threat. And she remains committed to her grassroots work, rolling out clean energy programs in schools and homes across the country. Her goal for the next five years is to scale back Vietnam's ambitious coal plans in favor of more renewable energy options. There is no shortage of wind or sunshine in Vietnam, but energy derived from such sources makes up a fraction of the total.

### Smear campaigns, harassment

Khanh didn't set out to work in the field she is leading today. After studying international relations at Vietnam's diplomatic academy she pivoted into development work, mostly with the country's ethnic minorities. Soon she saw how mining activity was ravaging Vietnam's most vulnerable from deadly mining accidents to coal-dust coating villages. "It really encouraged me to really focus on energy," she explains of her decision to set up Green ID in 2011.



Nguy Thi Khanh

It was a nascent industry then, she says, and the few firms that did exist were run by men. When she went to register the organization, an official derided her for being a woman, but determined not to let discrimination hamper her ambitions, she pushed back. "I don't feel like a minority because I'm confident," she insists, but she is one of only a few women in her field even now.

In 2018, her work earned her the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2018, which honors grassroots activists around the world. "It surprised me, I never thought that I could get that level of award," she concedes. Khanh is well aware of the fact that three of the award's previous winners were killed - two in Central America and one in Nigeria - reportedly for their work, highlighting the risks people like her face. —AFP