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Letting the fox into the henhouse

Oil boss Al Jaber has been appointed president of the next climate conference. Still, we should not boycott the COP but redouble our climate efforts

An oil boss will be presiding over the climate conference – what sounds like the beginning of a bad joke is now a reality. Last week, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), was appointed president of the next climate conference (COP28), which will be hosted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Dubai at the end of 2023. ADNOC has what amounts, more or less, to a state monopoly over the country's energy supply. In terms of production volume, ADNOC is the twelfth-largest oil company in the world and will make the second-highest investments in fossil energy worldwide over the coming years. The fact that Al Jaber is also the chair of Masdar, a UAE-owned company which is the second-largest globally in the renewable energy sector, does not help here. ADNOC's investments in fossil fuels are far greater.

Al Jaber's appointment as COP President was to be expected. With his multiple and – for many – contradictory functions, the Minister for Industry and High Technology and Special Envoy on Climate Change perfectly embodies the UAE's approach to combatting climate change. Greenwashing is used to mask the intention to extend the fossil fuel-based economic model for as long as possible. Climate change is seen as a purely technological challenge, while renewable and nuclear energy are primarily used to meet the growing domestic energy demand to be able to export fossil fuels or hydrogen in greater quantities and for longer.

At the service of global climate?

The UAE is one of the world's 10 biggest oil and gas producers. It holds over 100 bn barrels of proven oil reserves and about 3.1 per cent of global gas reserves. Profits from exporting these assets make up the bulk of the UAE's national revenues. Notwithstanding all climate change targets and imperatives, the UAE plans to expand its oil and gas production capacity to a total of five bn barrels in 2030 and is investing more than 600 bn US dollars to this end. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), these investment plans run directly against the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees. This, according to the IEA's assessment, is only possible if there is no further new investment in fossil fuels from this point forward.

The president of the climate conference plays a key role both during and before the climate negotiations because they have to act as an 'honest broker' between the various national and specific interests and bring about a consensus that is compatible with the Paris Agreement. The president is also instrumental in deciding the priorities that will govern the negotiations. However, it is difficult to imagine that someone from within the tightly knit network of government and the fossil fuel industry can act independently and put themselves at the service of the global climate as the role requires.

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Al Jaber's appointment, therefore, triggered a veritable outcry from the international civil society, which fears a massive conflict of interest, hand in hand with a proliferation of poorly developed technological solutions to climate change, such as CO2storage, which distract from the immediate necessity of reducing emissions. According to Romain Ioualalen of the environmental organisation Oil Change International, appointing Al Jaber as COP president is like putting the head of a tobacco company in charge of an anti-smoking campaign. Tasneem Essop, director of the Climate Action Network, the world's largest civil society umbrella association representing climate protection organisations, demanded that Al Jaber resign from his role as CEO of ADNOC. Despite these demands, it was confirmed last week already that Al Jaber will retain his position at ADNOC throughout the COP presidency.

What does this mean in concrete terms for the efforts towards ambitious climate protection at the next climate conference? The challenges could not be greater, because reversing our current course in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius remains essential. To do this, all countries have to redouble their climate protection efforts. At COP28, the Global Stocktake (GST) will be central to this plan. It was launched in Glasgow in 2021 and is to be concluded at COP28 this year. The GST represents a first detailed global assessment of what has been achieved since 2015 to implement the Paris Agreement. Based on the findings of the GST, which will involve external experts and parties outside government in addition to the signatory states themselves, the Parties will be asked to update their national climate protection plans for the period 2024 to 2025. It therefore sets the course for further raising ambition, especially in the crucial area of mitigation targets.

Setting a good example

It is helpful to this process if the COP host country takes a leading role and sets a good example by announcing especially ambitious goals. However, this – unfortunately – did not happen in Egypt last year, and it also seems unlikely that the UAE will raise its climate targets in line with its capacities as a wealthy country with a per capita GDP comparable to that of the United Kingdom, New Zealand or Germany. These are the worst conceivable preconditions for the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, which, as things stand, is already a toothless tiger without any tough sanction mechanisms.

In addition, COP28 is also due to flesh out the ground-breaking Damage and Loss Fund agreed on at COP27, which is intended to support especially vulnerable countries in dealing with damage and losses already sustained as a result of climate change. Both the concrete sums involved and the question of which countries should now pay into the fund remain contentious. The main issue is whether China and the Gulf states, including the UAE, will have to pay into the fund, as they are listed in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as developing countries that have no historical responsibility for CO2 emissions.

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Against the backdrop of these pressing issues and the climate-induced urgent need for action, the nomination of Al Jaber as COP president seems like bad satire. What options for action now remain for progressive actors advocating for ambitious climate protection? Should they boycott the COP because a representative of the oil lobby has taken over the presidency? That would be the wrong path to take. Because the saying that applies here is, ‘if you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu’ —If you're not there, you have no say at all. This would be leaving the field open for the growing fossil fuel lobby. According to The Guardian, already 636 people attending the last COP27 in Egypt could be classified as members of this lobby – an increase of more than 25 per cent over the previous year.

The international climate conferences are and will remain the linchpin for the implementation of the Paris Agreement – the most important instrument for greater climate protection across the globe. This is precisely why, despite everything, the international civil society needs to have a powerful representation there to advocate for progressive climate policies and to draw attention to the dirty tricks and machinations of the fossil fuel lobby.

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