

Fair Observer

Monthly



August 2026

Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



August 2026

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA

www.fairobsERVER.com | info@fairobsERVER.com

The views expressed in this publication are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect Fair Observer's editorial policy.

Copyright © 2026 Fair Observer

Photo Credit: PradeepGaurs / shutterstock.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other — except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

CONTENTS

ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER	6
SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE	7
The Conservative Divide and Logistical Barriers in Alberta's Separation Movement Aliyah A. Omar	8
Wangchuk, Sharmila and a Tale of Two Hunger Strikes in India Swapnarka Arnan	13
The Duty to Mock: How India's CJP is Reviving Accountability Through Satire Ira Tanwani	16
Riyadh's Sudan Contradiction: Mediator by Day, Arms Broker by Night Hollie McKay	19
Vanishing Summer Jobs: Rebuilding America's First Step Into the Labor Market Masaaki Yoshimori	21
Ceuta Exposes Europe's Moral Blind Spot on Migration Rainer Ebert	26
Is Sudan's Bloody War Reaching a Tipping Point? Martin Plaut	28
The Syntax of Erasure: How Western Media Discredits the Gaza Death Toll Avichal	30
Abundance Has a Landlord: AI Is Shifting Scarcity From Software to Substance Usama Malik	38
Would Nixon Survive Watergate Today? Ellis Cashmore	45
The Procurator, the Petition and the People's Pride: Canada's Removal of Hoekstra Ranjani Iyer Mohanty	48

The Political Archeology of Viktor Orbán’s Legacy	51
Elliot Neaman	
Ceci N’Est Pas Une Amie, But Loneliness Is Real	56
Francesca Collu	
The Economy, Stupid? It’s Greek to Me.	58
Peter Isackson	
A Disgruntled South Carolinian’s Breakdown of South Carolina’s Republican Senate Runoff	62
Spencer Woodall	

ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 3,000 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Join our network of 3,000+ contributors to publish your perspective, share your story and shape the global conversation. Become a Fair Observer and help us make sense of the world.

Remember, we are a digital media platform and welcome content in all forms: articles, podcasts, videos, vlogs, photo essays, infographics and interactive features. We work closely with our contributors, provide feedback and enable them to achieve their potential. Think of us as a community that believes in diversity and debate.

We have a reputation for being thoughtful and insightful. The US Library of Congress recognizes us as a journal with ISSN 2372-9112, and publishing with us puts you in a select circle.

For further information, please visit www.fairobservers.com/publish or contact us at submissions@fairobservers.com

The Conservative Divide and Logistical Barriers in Alberta's Separation Movement

Aliyah A. Omar
August 01, 2026

Alberta's upcoming referendum on separation is more symbolic than practical, as legal, economic and political obstacles make independence nearly impossible. Online content-creation farms, divided opinions within the Conservative Party and existing legal precedents further complicate the debate. Polls already indicate that the province is unlikely to secede from Canada, but discussions on this topic often overlook the logistical complexities that make separation even less realistic.

Only a few months remain before residents of Alberta — a province in Western Canada — go to the polls to vote on whether its constituents wish to leave the Canadian federation. Well, not really. In truth, the logistics of a province separating from Canada are more complicated than even most Canadians understand. In reality, this referendum is a vote on whether they will vote on separation in the future, only possible after an arduous, bureaucratic process.

These logistical factors make for less sensational reporting than the imagery of rupture that gripped global news outlets in the first half of the year. Admittedly, it would be costly to many global stakeholders if a major world power dismembered itself, but months of minimal change reveal that no one can dissect the federation so abruptly. Nevertheless, Canadians consumed and

shared the dramatized content, which contributed to a climate of heightened concern.

Alongside international interest in Canada and Alberta's conflicting desires, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) investigated online narratives around Alberta's separation movement. In it, they point to foreign actors amplifying some pro-separation videos online.

In addition to this investigation, most commentary centers the story around split Conservative opinions, comparisons to Québec's 1995 referendum and federal legislation that validates secession. As polls suggest around 74% of Albertans will vote to stay, it is unlikely that Alberta will separate from Canada. Still, it may be beneficial for Canadians to recognize the logistical challenges that make separation even less realistic.

Content farming fuels our dystopian future

CBC News determined that content creation farms have had a large part in driving the wave of pro-secession videos on YouTube. Content farms are sites that mass-produce material to appear higher in search engine results. To generate profit, these channels often dramatize sensational political events, like the possible fragmentation of a major country, even if they do not hold an opinion on the topic. Each video garnered hundreds of thousands of views.

These channels likely intend to emotionally manipulate viewers in target regions. Popular topics accumulate views from both supporters and "hate watchers." Ironically, the hate watchers give the videos more views by commenting to refute false or deceptive claims.

In its article, the CBC researchers say that Dutch-based accounts solicited individuals on Fiverr and Upwork for footage, posted the auditions without the actors' "knowledge or

permission,” and have not paid them for the work. The researchers recounted the testimony of an American hired to read scripts, who said they “don’t know anything about Canadian politics” and will not continue making videos.

The investigators found that email addresses of writers based in Pakistan were used to share documents to solicit work from another actor. Most of these content farming accounts are no longer on YouTube, though new ones have likely taken their place. However, the situation in the province differs from the online picture, and a majority of Albertans consistently demonstrate through surveys that they will vote against separation.

Federal and provincial acts affirm pro-secession rights

Though there are a large number of people in Alberta who intend to remain Canadians, federal and provincial legislation are no barrier to the pro-separatists. In fact, legislators clearly highlight the roadmap to separation.

Canada is a federation in which all provincial governments are authorities within their jurisdictions, equal to the federal government. All provinces and the federal government must approve amendments to the Canadian Constitution before a province can separate. They must also meet certain requirements, such as fulfilling their duty to consult with Indigenous groups and upholding the law throughout the separation process.

The Clarity Act, passed into federal law in 1998, validates the right to secede. It also clarifies the conditions for separation, asserting that a province cannot separate from Canada unilaterally and that it must negotiate with the rest of the federation. The Act makes clear that constitutional compliance, as well as legally accepted

amendments to the Constitution, are necessary for all parties to reach an agreement.

In addition to these federal clarifications, provincial laws may also reduce impediments to pro-secession movements. Alberta’s government passed the Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act, which provides a legal framework for challenging federal laws. This law enables members of Alberta’s Legislative Assembly to recommend measurable actions to the Lieutenant Governor in Council for the suspension or modification of existing regulations. Although the Act cannot violate the Constitution of Canada, federal laws or treaty rights, many believe it can set a precedent that allows Alberta to challenge any federal decision it considers harmful.

Citizen initiative petition gains ground

Another example of areas where pro-separation advocates can gain credibility is through a citizen initiative petition. Civilian petitions for a province to separate normally have little legal standing, as it would start the secession process while bypassing the duty to consult First Nations groups. For the petition question to be legally acceptable, the wording should not violate treaty rights.

Anyone can file a civilian petition, but that does not mean the law empowers citizens to initiate a referendum. The responsibility is on the provincial government to account for judicial rulings on the wording of petitions, relevant legislation and the will of the people — that is, until Bill 14: Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2025 (JSAA). The bill passed in December 2025 and amended Alberta’s Citizen Initiative Act (which allows petitions to be proposed and defines which ones are legally valid). The amendments withdrew previous obligations for petition proposals to follow the Constitution. This allowed pro-secession groups to collect signatures for their petition directly.

This brings us to Mitch Sylvestre, Leader of Stayfree Alberta, who led the citizen petition with the question: “Do you agree that the Province of Alberta shall become a sovereign country and cease to be a province of Canada?” Sylvestre had previously co-created the 2025 Alberta Prosperity Project — a plan for the province to secede from Canada — and hoped to take the matter further by presenting a vote to Albertans himself. Despite divided views among others in the province, as in this speech by longstanding Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) David Shepard, the separatist leader persistently advocates for a referendum.

In May, Justice Shania Leonard ruled that Elections officials should not have approved Sylvestre’s petition to separate. After the judge’s ruling stalled the petition, the claim that Stayfree Alberta collected over 300,000 signatures remained unverified for months. As of July, officials began counting the ballots, and reports confirm at least 222,000 signatures were deemed valid by the non-partisan Elections office.

Alberta’s Lieutenant Governor in Council, who is also apolitical, appointed the chief electoral officer who first approved Sylvestre’s petition. There should be no doubt that the vote will remain impartial, yet historical precedent in Quebec’s high-federalist regions during the 1995 referendum shows higher rates of ballot rejections than pro-separation regions despite the vote taking place through non-partisan agencies.

Both federal and provincial acts have presented a basis for separatist groups to gather signatures for a petition. Danielle Smith, the Premier of Alberta and head of the United Conservative Party (UCP), said Justice Leonard’s ruling is anti-democratic and that she would file an appeal. She also announced that there will be a ten-question referendum, including a question on whether Albertans want a secession referendum.

What is in the referendum?

The referendum questions in October are about separation, immigration and the Constitution. The phrasing of the questions is confusing and “unconstitutional,” according to Naheed Nenshi, leader of the opposition in Alberta. One convoluted question asks whether the province should pass a law barring certain immigrants from using social services such as healthcare or education. The immigration questions posed by the UCP are particularly notable, as they parallel the Alberta Prosperity Project agendas led by separatists.

The second half of the questions proposes amending parts of the Canadian Constitution to abolish the Senate, change the appointment of court justices and protect the province from federal interference. These adjustments would require conferring with other provinces and the Canadian government to permit the directive.

The separation question the premier will put on the ballot asks, “Should Alberta remain a province in Canada, or should the Government of Alberta commence the legal process required under the Canadian Constitution to hold a binding provincial referendum on whether or not Alberta should separate from Canada?”

The questions are nonbinding, so many argue that the referendum is meaningless because the government will have no obligation to abide by the results. The UCP premier has promised to abide by the referendum results if the remain side wins, and that her party supports Alberta staying in Canada. Some argue that this statement shows the Premier is toeing the line to maintain support from both sides of the fragmented UCP.

An Angus Reid poll found that 64% of UCP voters would choose to leave Canada, revealing a split within the party. Many in Alberta are

expressing their distrust for the UCP and the premier, and the party dropped 2% in the polls since November 2025. Regardless of these factors, it may be valuable to inspect what it would actually take for Alberta to separate from Canada.

What Alberta might face if they separate

Canadian economics professor Trevor Tombe analyzed what fiscal consequences the province might face in a paper for the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI). He says the numbers crunched by the Alberta Prosperity Project are unrealistic. Their plan to cut taxes conveniently ignores the crater this puts in the budget, creating a disjointed monetary argument. Also, canceling social programs to fill the government's revenue shortfall will diminish Albertans' quality of life and will only reintroduce a fraction of the revenue from cutting taxes into the budget.

To realistically consider separation, the Alberta government announced it would pay experts at the University of Calgary to conduct an independent analysis of the economic costs of secession. The report is set to be released in late summer 2026. Investigating what Albertans will really face may cause a sobering examination of priorities from those considering secession, especially since polls show UCP voters' biggest concern is the rising cost of living.

Albertans have also expressed concern about the monetary expense of holding the referendum itself. It will cost an estimated 130 million Canadian dollars (~\$93 million). The previous general election cost the province 37 million Canadian dollars (~\$26 million) after hiring 16,000 workers. The October 2026 referendum will require 60,000 to 90,000 election workers because Elections Alberta must print up to ten separate ballots per person.

Additionally, separation will require the continuation of treaty rights. Without lengthy consultation and agreement with the 46 First Nations groups in Alberta, the referendum will face legal challenge, as the Crown has pledged treaty land to Indigenous groups.

Indigenous people are not a monolith, but an overwhelming majority seek to honor treaty rights in Alberta. Though unlikely, if the Albertan First Nations groups agree to the referendum after the provincial government abides by its duty to consult, the secession may face a vote.

If the separation abides by the law, gains support from a clear majority in the province and gains approval in parliament, Alberta would have to seek international recognition to resume trade. Post-separation reconstruction may require foreign assistance or trade, but this cannot begin during federal and provincial talks, which might take years. If negotiations with the Canadian government are ongoing, foreign nations may hold off on recognizing Albertan independence. Countries do not recognize regions that unilaterally secede, so Alberta's only option is to come to an agreement in federal negotiations.

Alberta's government would need to revise contracts with companies, develop its own currency, secure a military or police force, and protect itself from potential interference during such a vulnerable time. Businesses may choose to relocate during these destabilizing talks, a reflection of companies fleeing Québec during its 1995 referendum, as Tombe pointed out. Negotiations for new economic and political agreements between Canada and the province can not happen instantly, and there is no certainty that a new partnership will meet all their needs.

On that note, focusing on the provinces' structural needs is also significant. Canadian provinces are largely independent from federal

oversight in jurisdictions like regional economic development, taxes, hospitals, natural resources, public education, property and civil rights. They abide by broader interprovincial laws, such as immigration, healthcare policy, energy and human rights. Alberta's government must adopt federal jurisdictions into provincial services to meet the population's needs.

The federal government currently has jurisdiction over 28 areas of concern while provinces have jurisdiction over less than half that number. The province must continuously fund and sustain the areas of concern that were once federal responsibility. Alberta would require a reworking of its provincial infrastructure to meet these needs and expand its service capabilities.

Aside from volatile economic plans, the legislative and physical structures currently in place will take considerable time to reformat for a switch to a province-country model. Gaining consensus on remodeling these structures will be more difficult than many assume. Conservatives in power are deeply divided within the party, and other right-leaning groups, particularly those under separatist leaders, openly resent the premier. Canadian politics have long seen ideological discord, and the situation in Alberta — both past and present — is no different.

Ideological split in Canada

In August 2021, the Alberta UCP, under the previous party leader, Jason Kenny, chose to advertise in other provinces to encourage people to move to Alberta to meet corporate demand for workers. They did not put their billboards in rural areas or in places that often vote Conservative, but they did advertise in Liberal-voting cities. From 2021 to the end of 2025, approximately 630,000 people moved to Alberta, bringing the population to 5 million. Compelling people from Liberal majority cities to move to Alberta is just another

factor that makes the case for separation less likely. It was also a policy choice the current premier disagrees with.

Additionally, federal Conservative actors and party members from other provinces do not support the Alberta secession movement, as a large part of their support base will leave. Without Alberta, they will probably lose the chance for a majority Conservative federal government in Canada. These fragmented opinions prove a serious ideological disconnect is taking place within Conservative parties.

Alberta's popular party and Conservatives have, at times, been reactionary toward the federal government. Federal opposition Conservatives supported a protest on the CBC, for example, labeling them a government mouthpiece and pushing to defund the national news organization. Others argue that the CBC also has right-wing representation. Many believe the outlet is necessary to combat billionaire-funded multinational news conglomerates and reach rural areas.

This is just one example of contrarianism overtaking politics, and this is an interparty problem. It happens concurrently in the Liberal, New Democratic Party and Conservative caucuses. Ignoring the public's desire for the parties to work towards their respective policies, each party attacks one another, leading to stagnation in Parliament.

Conservatives had once pushed to wholly dismantle a publicly funded outlet rather than suggest reforms and a transformation to improve it, and the faction of Conservatives that began the secession movement in Alberta shared this sentiment. They believe starting all over will solve their problems, but research shows this can leave the government with an unstable financial and social foundation.

While many Canadians believe there is much to contest in the federal government's policies, the practice of arguing against an entity and engaging in contrarianism, without examining its ideas individually, leaves the population open to emotional manipulation by internal groups and foreign actors.

Regardless of party inclination, it is essential for all Albertans to understand their responsibility to engage in rigorous debate, seek out non-partisan analyses and determine the true cost of what they are voting for. In this, they require the Alberta government to disclose the constitutional and economic implications of the October 2026 referendum and to provide a prompt cost-benefit assessment of separation. Contrarianism and passivity are no longer viable, as the results of separation movements remain for generations.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Aliyah Omar is a Somali-Canadian Journalist and an Assistant Editor at *Fair Observer*. She was born in the Greater Toronto Area and has lived in Edmonton, on Treaty 6 territory, for a decade. With a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Alberta, she has published articles on sociopolitical, economic and humanitarian concerns. As an avid reader, she is drawn to researching broad topics that better her writing. Her work is also informed by her experience as a first-generation child of post-colonial African lineage. Aliyah spends her time practicing traditional art and has nearly 15 years of experience as an artist.

Wangchuk, Sharmila and a Tale of Two Hunger Strikes in India

Swapnarka Arnan
August 03, 2026

Scientist and activist Sonam Wangchuk ended his 26-day hunger strike after Delhi Police forcibly hospitalized him. Days later, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned over the exam paper leak that sparked the protest. Yet the response contrasts sharply with Wangchuk's earlier Ladakh protests and Irom Sharmila's 16-year fast in Manipur, exposing how India's attention still hinges on proximity to Delhi.

For weeks, a man starved himself in the middle of Delhi, in protest of exam irregularities that had already upended the lives of countless students in India. He was demanding the resignation of Indian Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. On day 20, the state moved. Not to sit across from him. Not to answer him. But to carry him away from his protest site and into a hospital.

It didn't work. Protests across the country only intensified. Many protestors alleged that police used brutal force against protestors, with at least 60 protestors wounded in central Delhi alone. Despite all of this, the protests continued and spread to other parts of the country.

Finally, six days after Delhi Police carried him out of his protest site and into a hospital bed, he ended his fast on his own terms, after government assurances that his demands would be taken seriously. Two days after that, on Saturday, July

25, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan finally resigned.

Put those two facts next to each other, and the lesson is almost too clean. The government tried force first. It didn't work. It tried talking second. That worked better. A minister is gone, and the tactic that came before the resignation, the one that carried a starving man off by force instead of sending someone to hear him out, didn't produce the resolution. It only delayed it.

So it's worth asking, now that this has an ending: Why did the government reach for hospitalization before it reached for dialogue? Doesn't carrying away hunger strikers ultimately undermine the very legitimacy the state is trying to protect? And is this tactic something new, or something much older that the country conveniently ignored while it played out in its own periphery?

The protests and the person leading them

The man leading the hunger strike was Sonam Wangchuk, a scientist from the Indian state of Ladakh, well known for building artificial glaciers to help farmers in his mountainous state and solar-heated tents for the Indian army stationed in the cold. Beginning June 28, he sat on an indefinite hunger strike at Jantar Mantar for 26 days, losing close to nine kilograms and reaching the point where his blood sugar and blood pressure were falling, and he needed round-the-clock monitoring — the kind usually reserved for people whose organs could start failing.

The fast was an act of solidarity with the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), a Generation Z-led protest movement demanding Pradhan's resignation over leaked papers in this year's medical entrance exam, along with compensation for the families of students who allegedly died by suicide after exam-related distress. Though it was

eventually held, the leak had initially forced the cancellation of a medical college entrance exam taken by 2.3 million candidates competing for spots that only 5–6% of them would win. A 60-year-old engineer turned activist chose to starve himself for teenagers he never met, whose deaths were made possible by a system that was supposed to decide their futures fairly and didn't.

The smear campaign against Wangchuk and protestors

Ex Education Minister Pradhan's early response to that pressure was to call the protesters, Wangchuk included, a "B-team of disruptive elements." The CJP's founder had said plainly that a government refusing even to sit down and talk isn't just unaccountable, it's cruel.

This wasn't Wangchuk's first fast, and it wasn't the first time his loyalty, rather than his argument, had been put on trial. During an earlier hunger strike over statehood and constitutional protections for Ladakh, unrelated violence broke out near his protest site while he was there. He didn't even know it was happening. And still, his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, would later say, he found himself branded as anti-national, accused of disloyalty to the very country he was starving himself to be heard by.

The carrying away of Wangchuk and intensification of protests

This time, on day 20, Delhi Police removed Wangchuk from Jantar Mantar and took him to Safdarjung Hospital, citing a Delhi High Court order for what officials called essential medical care. Police said protesters tried to stop them and that a "slight commotion" followed. Security forces then ringed both the protest site and the hospital with barricades and paramilitary personnel and asked the remaining demonstrators to leave.

Protests intensified in response, with police allegedly meeting them with force.

It's worth taking the government's account seriously before arguing with it, because on its face, it isn't unreasonable. Wangchuk's vitals had been falling for weeks. A court, not a press office, ordered the intervention, on medical advice. If part of the state's job is keeping a citizen alive, moving a starving man to a hospital is a defensible thing to have done. Framed that way, this wasn't a crackdown. It was a rescue.

That framing survived only until the people who'd actually been monitoring his health said otherwise. Angmo, told reporters at the hospital that she was grateful the government cared enough to bring him in, then said what she actually meant: Nothing should be administered to him — orally or intravenously — without her consent, the family's consent and the consent of the doctors who'd already been tracking his condition for three weeks. He was weak, she said, having lost muscle mass, as anyone fasting that long would. He was also alert. He was also strong. "We will handle the next steps ourselves," she said. "There is no need for government interference in this matter."

So was this move medical care or the dismantling of a peaceful protest, a government deciding it would rather physically remove a dissenting citizen than sit across a table from him?

A tactic from the past and the periphery

And what may further surprise many Indians watching this unfold is that none of it is new to India. In Manipur, a state in the country's northeast, an activist named Irom Sharmila fasted for 16 years against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, a law that lets soldiers shoot on suspicion and shields them from prosecution. She began her fast in 2000, days after paramilitary forces killed ten civilians at a bus stop near

Imphal, in what is remembered as the Malom massacre.

The state's answer resembled Delhi's response to Wangchuk. She was arrested, confined to a hospital room and force-fed through a nasal tube to keep her alive. Her protest continued for 16 years, until she ended the fast herself in 2016 and turned to electoral politics instead. The law she fasted against is still in effect.

That is the comparison that matters here, and it's not a flattering one for Delhi. Sharmila's tactic was met with the same hospital bed, the same insistence that keeping the body alive discharged the state's obligations, and it was sustained for 16 years precisely because there was no public pressure forcing the government to trade the hospital room for a negotiating table. Wangchuk's fast lasted 26 days and ended with a resignation.

What changed wasn't the tactic. The tactic was identical. What changed was that this time it happened in the capital, in front of national and international cameras, with a Gen Z movement organized enough to keep the pressure on after the police intervention rather than let it dissipate. Sharmila spent 16 years in obscurity because she was from the country's periphery. Wangchuk got 26 days and a resignation, because the country was finally watching.

A lesson on neglect, apathy and indifference

For most of those 26 days, Wangchuk's fast was met with something closer to silence than urgency, covered in fragments, largely ignored by the government, treated as an inconvenience that would presumably resolve itself if left alone long enough. This initial indifference and apathy shocked many Mainland Indians, but it isn't unfamiliar to everyone in this country.

It's the one the North-East region and its Indigenous inhabitants have lived with for decades: the sense that a crisis only becomes a national crisis once it happens somewhere the capital can actually see it. Ask what would have happened had Wangchuk been fasting in Imphal instead of Jantar Mantar. Not only did Sharmila's situation already answer that question, but so did Wangchuk's earlier protests. When he protested in Delhi, protests spread across the country, and eventually a minister resigned. When he protested for statehood for his home region of Ladakh on the northern periphery of India, not only were his demands not met, but the rest of the country mostly remained quiet.

That indifference hasn't gone anywhere. Manipur, at this writing, is still not at peace. Ethnic clashes between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities have continued well into 2026. In Assam, monsoon floods have killed dozens and displaced countless people. Both crises are unfolding right now, in the same northeast that once spent 16 years watching a woman fast through a feeding tube while the rest of the country simply didn't look.

Wangchuk's fast seems to have worked in the end, because Delhi is a place the country cannot look away from. That's worth something. But it's also worth sitting with what it reveals: that in this country, attention is still partly a function of geography, not just justice. The lesson of this fast shouldn't only be that dialogue works. It should be that the country's attention needs to learn to travel further than the Capital, Metro cities and larger states, and it shouldn't take a scientist starving himself in the capital to send it there.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Swapnarka Arnan is a freelance journalist and human rights activist of Assamese origin, currently based in France. His work examines

human rights, geopolitics and Indigenous issues across Asia and the wider Global South, with a particular focus on marginalized and conflict-affected communities. His work has been published by several renowned platforms such as The Diplomat, International Policy Digest and Madras Courier. Alongside journalism, he leads a youth branch of Amnesty International in France, where he works on human rights advocacy and awareness initiatives. He is currently a student of Politics and Government at the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po).

The Duty to Mock: How India's CJP is Reviving Accountability Through Satire

Ira Tanwani
August 04, 2026

As press freedom declines in India and questioning the government risks being labeled anti-national, the Cockroach Janata Party has mobilized tens of thousands of young Indians to protest. What started as an online joke, initially dismissed as farcical and unproductive, has turned into a youth movement that has successfully led to the resignation of a government minister. Like the court jester of old, satire now plays a role in strengthening a culture of accountability in a country prone to hero-worship.

India is proudly democratic but also prone to charismatic leaders who enchant the public into hero worship. Under the personality-centric leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to seem anti-regime in the slightest has become so taboo that it risks being labeled anti-national altogether. India's declining press freedom recently came under scrutiny during the prime minister's visit to Oslo in May, when a Norwegian journalist asked why he did not "take some questions from the freest press in the world." For many Indian viewers like me, his habitual silence reflected a reality we have become resigned to: Great leaders are not answerable to the commonfolk.

That same week, the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) had emerged — a viral online parody party created as a satirical response to comments made by Indian Chief Justice Surya Kant comparing some unemployed Indian youngsters to "cockroaches." Two months later, the CJP is now challenging the norm against questioning authority: It has mobilized tens of thousands to protest for public accountability in the national capital. What is more, the protesters have succeeded in their aim of getting a government minister to resign, an unprecedented outcome in all 12 years of the Modi government.

With its use of mockery, humor and mostly young "cockroach" supporters, the seemingly farcical movement has led to one of the largest and most consequential expressions of dissent in recent years. This dichotomy reminds me of the court jester, who, despite an outwardly silly facade, spoke truth to power. At a time of diminishing press freedom, the court-jester-like spirit of the CJP phenomenon can play an important role in reviving political accountability in India.

The court jester's license to criticize needs a comeback

I grew up fascinated by stories of sparkling, audacious wit: from legends of Tenali Rama, a jester for King Krishnadevaraya in South India, to North India's Birbal, a skilled advisor in the court of Mughal Emperor Akbar. Later, while studying the fool Feste in William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, I realized why such figures have long captured the public imagination: They are irreverent in the face of power.

Historically and globally, court-jester-like figures used humor to mock and convey uncomfortable truths about rulers, all while, crucially, enjoying immunity from offense. Their freedom to criticize was in the public interest, holding leaders to account in otherwise autocratic, monarchical regimes. The court jester was an embodiment of reason in motley garb.

As democracy has spread as a form of government, the importance of the court jester would appear redundant. Rather than being contained within a single figure, the ability to criticize has spread to the general public as a fundamental right. However, democratic institutions and the freedoms they protect are disturbingly fragile, especially with the turn towards cult-of-personality politics.

One of the clearest examples of this is the attack on comedian Kunal Kamra last year. He shared a video of himself parodying a song in which he called Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde a "traitor," referring to Shinde's rebellion within his own party to create a rival faction. In response, a mob of the Minister's political supporters stormed into The Habitat (the comedy club that Kamra had performed in) and vandalized the venue — throwing chairs, breaking light fixtures — all while recording and sharing the assault online as a threat intended for Kamra.

To attack a comedian for mocking those in power is to outright reject the spirit of the court

jester. Continuing the court jester's tradition, comedians joke and satirize (Kamra even sang), often holding a mirror up to society. The court jester finds his successor in the stand-up comedian. However, the attack on Kamra highlights that we cannot take this equivalence for granted.

Far from having the license to criticize, Kamra was told to apologize by the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, who asserted that insulting leaders in this way "cannot be tolerated at all." As legend goes, even Akbar, one of the most powerful emperors in Indian history, had the courage to be outwitted by Birbal. It is telling that India's current political culture increasingly sees elected representatives as above jokes.

This is precisely the danger of personality cults. They deliberately glorify leaders to legitimize their power, instilling a tendency to hero-worship and demonstrate unconditional loyalty. In such circumstances, the spirit of the court jester and the freedom to criticize that it symbolizes erodes.

In democratic societies that are susceptible to glorifying politicians in power, the right to mock might even be the duty to do so. For effective governance, criticism is constructive, and accountability is necessary. With India's deferential media ecosystem, however, that has become rare. The need for an alternative democratic watchdog thus becomes important.

The Cockroach Janata Party as a turning point

Studies have found that satire is uniquely qualified to cut through political rhetoric and expose its contradictions. Political critique voiced through satirical humor, with its entertaining use of irony and ridicule, is particularly effective at engaging the public. The virality of The CJP seems to support these findings: it immediately gained over 20 million followers on Instagram, far surpassing

even the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's account, which has nine million.

A metaphor for how many young Indians feel treated by the system, the CJP reclaimed the derogatory moniker of "cockroaches" to shed light on the need for reform of India's sociopolitical structures. While the CJP's eligibility requirements are deeply satirical, requiring aspiring members to be "overqualified," "politically frustrated" or "financially confused," its five-point manifesto touches on some of the most serious issues of the day, from voter deletions to women's representation in parliament.

To channel social media momentum into real-world impact, the CJP began organizing protests in Delhi focused on accountability. They called for the education minister to take responsibility and resign over the paper leaks and exam cancellations that have affected millions of students. These protests initially struggled to gain attendance and were easily ignored by the government. When the CJP announced plans for a march to Parliament on July 20, many speculated that online virality would not translate to actual numbers on the ground. But on the day of the march, tens of thousands showed up. Many of them were young Indians protesting for the first time.

India's Generation Z has driven the movement's irreverent spirit. Despite a brutal police crackdown during the march, protests continued with renewed vigor and spread to other cities like Mumbai. On Instagram (the key platform for the movement among young Indians), reels about the protests, imbued with internet humor and rousing rap music, have garnered millions of views. I have seen it all across my own feed: from "Get-ready-with me's" about wearing a "spine" to the protest to videos of outrunning baton-wielding police being like a real-life Subway Surfers game.

If the severity of the crackdown was intended to scare, India's youth seems to have laughed away the fear. Using irony and humor to express their democratic right to dissent, they are being celebrated online for being a generation of unseriously serious people. In this way, the movement captures the paradoxical essence of the court jester, who is at once both farcical and wise.

The education minister has now resigned. What started as an online joke has delivered an unprecedented tangible outcome. Yet this victory for the movement is greater than the changing of ministers: It is a sign of a shifting zeitgeist. The expectation of accountability has been renewed, and the appetite for daring, subversive humor in Indian political discourse is reviving.

Mockery is anathema to worship. Movements like the CJP can help remind the public that powerful leaders are neither above questions nor above ridicule, undermining the idolization that drives personality cults. At a time when mainstream media and political inner circles turn sycophantic, the humble court jester might be all we have to rely on. After all, "Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit."

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Ira Tanwani is a student with an education spanning Indian schools, homeschooling and British boarding schools. She writes about education systems, intellectual autonomy, and the structures shaping learning and behavior. Ira's interdisciplinary interests span linguistics, physics and philosophy. Her goal is to know ten languages and is currently on her fourth.

Riyadh's Sudan Contradiction: Mediator by Day, Arms Broker by Night

Hollie McKay
August 07, 2026

Saudi Arabia's role in Sudan's war reveals a stark contradiction: It positions itself as a neutral mediator, while also allegedly facilitating arms transfers to the Sudanese Armed Forces. Reports also link Saudi-backed support to the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, undermining Saudi claims of countering political Islam. This dual strategy reflects Sudan's strategic value in the Red Sea, where Riyadh prioritizes geopolitical influence over ideological consistency.

In May 2023, Saudi Arabia and the United States forced the Sudanese army and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into a room in Jeddah. The two sides signed a declaration promising to protect civilians and open up aid routes. After a few days, they were back to fighting. Whenever the topic arises, Riyadh still refers to the agreement. When strikes hit Port Sudan and Kassala last May, the Saudi foreign ministry's response ran through the same three beats it always does: condemn the attack, call for a ceasefire, insist on a "Sudanese-led" solution.

That posture — broker, not belligerent — has done a lot to bolster Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's image in the region. Underneath it, the facts reveal a messier picture.

A recent investigation reportedly traced an extensive support network linking Riyadh to the

Sudanese Armed Forces' (SAF) de facto capital in Port Sudan: private executive flights shuttling between the two cities, three batteries of M777 howitzers reportedly transferred with Saudi backing, and a procurement pipeline running through Jeddah's port that has carried explosives, chlorine gas cylinders and other materials to companies tied to Sudan's Defence Industries System.

One of those chlorine cylinders resurfaced months later. The report ties it to an alleged chemical attack near the Al-Jaili refinery. Whatever this arrangement is, it isn't mediation. Neutral countries don't move howitzers and chemical precursors through their own ports.

And the beneficiaries extend past the Sudanese army itself. On the ground, the SAF relies heavily on the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, an Islamist militia with roots in Omar al-Bashir's Popular Defense Forces that has grown, over the course of this war, into a force numbering in the tens of thousands.

Washington designated the Brigade a Foreign Terrorist Organization this year, citing violence against civilians, summary executions and its members' ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including reported training on drone and explosive-boat systems. So, the same Gulf kingdom that spent a decade positioning itself as the region's chief bulwark against Iranian-aligned Islamism is now, through its support for the SAF, indirectly propping up a militia that trains with the IRGC. Riyadh did not choose this outcome. But it has tolerated it, and arguably financed it, because the alternative — an SAF defeat — is judged the greater strategic risk.

That calculation only makes sense against the bigger map.

The Red Sea Axis: Sudan as a strategic battleground

A parallel piece of reporting from Horn Review describes what it calls a "Red Sea Axis," an informal but increasingly coordinated bloc of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia, built to counter the reach of regional rivals.

Somaliland port activations, Turkish basing rights at Port Sudan, Saudi money flowing into Eritrea. These aren't separate stories. Put together, they point to Sudan mattering less as a humanitarian file Riyadh wants closed and more as territory in a Red Sea contest, one where the RSF sits on the other side of the line. Keeping regional rivals away from a corridor that carries somewhere between 12–15% of global trade is worth the cost of backing the SAF, Islamist militias included.

That's where the usual narrative runs into trouble. Gulf states have spent years telling Washington they're the ones holding the line against political Islam — pointing to domestic crackdowns, to their opposition to Brotherhood-linked movements across the region. Sudan doesn't fit that story. According to reports, the same support network that reinforces the SAF is, by extension, strengthening the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade as well. Apparently, strategic convenience outweighs ideological consistency when the port matters enough.

The illusion of neutrality: Saudi Arabia's dual role

Saudi Arabia's role has drawn less scrutiny, and part of that is deliberate. Riyadh has spent three years cultivating the mediator label — hosting talks, issuing ceasefire calls, positioning itself as the responsible outside power, and that framing has largely held in Washington and European capitals, even as its own ports kept moving

howitzers, explosives and chlorine cylinders toward one side of the war.

Washington and European governments still treat Riyadh as central to ending this war. Fair enough; however, a state chairing negotiations while supplying one side's arsenal isn't playing a neutral role, whatever the press statements say. Sudanese civilians, three years into this, deserve a clearer answer than that about who is actually arming the war around them.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Hollie McKay is a war correspondent, investigative journalist and national security analyst with two decades of frontline

reporting across the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Her work spans conflict zones, terrorism, geopolitical intelligence, and human rights in some of the most underreported conflicts and territories. McKay is the author of *Only Cry for the Living: Memos from Inside the ISIS Battlefield, Afghanistan: The End of the U.S. Footprint and the Rise of the Taliban Rule* and *The Dictator's Wife*.

Vanishing Summer Jobs: Rebuilding America's First Step Into the Labor Market

Masaaki Yoshimori
August 12, 2026

The disappearance of teenage summer jobs is a structural transformation of the US labor

market rather than a temporary economic downturn. Technological change, educational incentives, demographic shifts and evolving labor market institutions have reduced youth employment opportunities, widening inequality and weakening one of America's most effective pathways for workforce development and economic mobility. Americans must work together to restore these critical opportunities and ensure no young person is left behind.

For generations, the summer job represented an important milestone in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Whether employed at grocery stores, restaurants, retail shops, amusement parks, swimming pools or local businesses, millions of American teenagers acquired not only income but also valuable workplace experience. Summer employment taught punctuality, teamwork, customer service, responsibility, financial literacy and independence while serving as one of America's most effective informal workforce development systems.

The structural decline of teen summer employment

Today, however, this institution is disappearing. News headlines often attribute the decline in teenage employment to AI, inflation, tariffs or slowing economic growth. Although these factors have undoubtedly weakened recent hiring, they explain only a small portion of the long-term trend. The decline in teenage employment began nearly half a century ago, long before AI, globalization or today's inflationary pressures dominated public debate.

Recent data illustrate the magnitude of the problem. Challenger, Gray & Christmas estimates that employers will create only 790,000 summer

jobs for teenagers in 2026, down from 801,000 in 2025 and 1.08 million in 2024. If realized, 2026 would mark the weakest summer hiring season since the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began collecting comparable data in 1948. Particularly striking is the collapse of traditional youth employers. Hiring announcements within the entertainment and leisure sector — historically a major source of teenage employment — have fallen approximately 70%, while camp counselor vacancies have declined nearly 30%.

Nevertheless, these disappointing statistics represent only the latest chapter of a much longer structural transformation. Teen labor-force participation reached its historical peak of 57.9% in 1979 before entering a persistent decline. Participation had fallen to approximately 52% by 2000, 34% following the Great Recession, and remains close to 34% today. During July, traditionally the peak month for teenage employment, labor-force participation has declined from 71.8% in 1978 to roughly 43% in recent years.

These figures demonstrate that today's weaker hiring environment is not primarily the consequence of current economic conditions. Rather, recent developments merely reinforce a structural trend that has fundamentally altered the relationship between education and work.

The distinction between cyclical and structural change is central to labor economics. Cyclical unemployment arises during recessions when aggregate demand temporarily weakens. Structural unemployment reflects permanent changes in technology, demographics, institutions and labor market incentives. Teen employment clearly belongs to the latter category. Misdiagnosing the problem risks producing policies that address short-term symptoms while ignoring long-term causes.

The economics behind the disappearance of summer jobs

The decline in teenage employment reflects simultaneous changes in both labor supply and labor demand.

From the supply side, human capital theory offers the most compelling explanation. Individuals allocate their time toward activities expected to generate the greatest lifetime return. During the past four decades, the economic premium associated with higher education has expanded substantially. As returns to college increased, parents and students increasingly viewed summer months as opportunities for educational investment rather than paid employment.

Today's teenagers devote summers to Advanced Placement courses, university research, coding academies, standardized test preparation, leadership programs, volunteer activities and unpaid internships designed to strengthen university applications. For many middle- and upper-income families, spending three months earning minimum wage carries a considerably higher opportunity cost than it did 40 years ago.

Supporting this interpretation, BLS data shows that school enrollment among teenagers has risen steadily. Summer school participation increased from approximately 10% during the mid-1980s to more than 42% in recent years, reflecting growing emphasis on educational attainment and college preparation.

However, changes in labor demand have been equally important.

Even traditional entry-level occupations now require greater technical competence than in previous generations. Restaurants rely on digital ordering systems and automated scheduling

software. Retailers employ sophisticated inventory management technologies, electronic payment systems and customer relationship platforms. Consequently, employers increasingly seek workers capable of becoming productive immediately rather than inexperienced teenagers requiring extensive training.

Artificial intelligence further accelerates this transformation. Self-checkout systems, AI-powered customer service, automated inventory management, digital scheduling platforms and online ordering technologies increasingly perform routine tasks historically assigned to first-time workers. While AI did not initiate the decades-long decline in teenage employment, it has significantly reduced the availability of precisely those entry-level positions that once introduced young people to the labor market.

Demographic developments reinforce these technological pressures. Americans remain employed longer than previous generations, with many older workers seeking part-time or seasonal employment after traditional retirement ages. Teenagers therefore compete directly with experienced adults for positions once regarded as stepping stones into the workforce.

Minimum wage policy also deserves careful consideration. Economic theory predicts that when statutory wage floors exceed the productivity of inexperienced workers, employers become more selective in hiring decisions. Although minimum wages play an important role in protecting the living standards of adult workers, teenagers occupy a fundamentally different position in the labor market. Their principal objective is often to acquire workplace experience rather than to maximize current earnings.

Accordingly, the policy debate should focus less on whether minimum wages are universally beneficial or harmful and more on designing

institutions that preserve opportunities for first-time workers while maintaining adequate labor protections.

The distributional consequences

Perhaps the most important consequence of declining summer employment is its unequal distribution across American society.

Affluent teenagers increasingly replace paid employment with internships, research opportunities, overseas educational experiences, entrepreneurship programs and professional networking activities. Although many of these experiences are unpaid, they generate substantial long-term returns by strengthening university applications and expanding future career opportunities.

Teenagers from lower-income households face a very different reality. Summer employment remains essential for financing education, supporting household income, developing workplace skills and establishing professional networks. Ironically, these are precisely the young workers encountering the greatest barriers to employment.

New York City's summer employment program illustrates this imbalance. Approximately 200,000 teenagers applied for only 100,000 available positions, forcing administrators to allocate jobs through lotteries. Economic evaluations found that winning one of these positions increased the probability of employment by more than 70%, demonstrating enormous unmet demand among disadvantaged youth.

The resulting inequality extends beyond current income. Wealthier students accumulate stronger résumés, valuable professional contacts and enhanced educational credentials, while disadvantaged teenagers lose access to one of the

few universally available pathways into the labor market.

Moreover, summer jobs generate important social benefits that extend beyond wages. Research consistently finds that structured youth employment reduces criminal activity, strengthens community engagement, improves workplace readiness and promotes long-term labor-force attachment. These positive externalities imply that society benefits from youth employment even when private employers may not fully capture its economic value.

Consequently, declining teenage employment represents far more than a labor market statistic. It reflects the gradual erosion of an institution that historically promoted human capital formation, economic mobility and social inclusion across generations.

Education, artificial intelligence and the future workforce

The disappearance of teenage summer employment coincides with another profound transformation — the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence throughout the economy. Much of the current public discussion portrays AI primarily as a threat to entry-level employment. Although automation undoubtedly reduces demand for routine tasks, its broader economic implications are considerably more nuanced.

Historically, technological revolutions have displaced specific occupations while simultaneously creating new industries and expanding productivity. The current wave of AI is unlikely to be different. However, the transition imposes substantial adjustment costs, particularly on inexperienced workers whose traditional entry points into the labor market are disappearing.

Paradoxically, the skills becoming most valuable in the AI economy are precisely those cultivated through workplace experience rather than classroom instruction. Communication, teamwork, leadership, emotional intelligence, creativity, judgment, adaptability and ethical decision-making remain difficult to automate. These competencies are developed through interactions with colleagues, customers, supervisors and organizational environments.

Consequently, education and employment should no longer be viewed as competing investments. Instead, they are complementary forms of human capital accumulation. Academic education provides technical knowledge and analytical ability, while employment develops practical judgment, interpersonal competence and professional identity. Individuals possessing both forms of human capital will likely outperform those relying exclusively on academic credentials.

Several advanced economies already recognize this complementarity. Germany and Switzerland have long integrated apprenticeships into secondary education, enabling students to combine classroom instruction with paid employment. These dual-track systems facilitate smoother school-to-work transitions while reducing youth unemployment. Japan similarly maintains strong institutional linkages between secondary schools and employers, contributing to relatively successful labor market integration for young workers.

The US has traditionally relied upon informal summer employment to perform a similar function. As this institution weakens, policymakers must develop alternative pathways connecting education with productive employment.

Investing in America's future workforce

The disappearance of teenage summer jobs represents one of the most significant yet underappreciated structural changes in the American labor market. For decades, these jobs functioned as an informal institution through which millions of young people acquired workplace skills, financial independence, professional confidence and early labor-market attachment. Their decline reflects not a temporary recession but the combined effects of educational incentives, technological innovation, demographic change and evolving labor market institutions.

While many middle- and upper-income students now substitute employment with educational enrichment, internships and professional networking, disadvantaged teenagers increasingly lose access to one of the few universally available pathways toward economic mobility. The result is widening inequality in human capital formation, delayed workforce readiness and diminished opportunities for social advancement.

Artificial intelligence further reinforces the urgency of this challenge. As routine tasks become increasingly automated, future labor markets will reward adaptability, communication, leadership, creativity and sound judgment — skills that emerge through practical experience as much as through formal education. Ironically, the first job has become more valuable precisely as it has become more difficult to obtain.

Economic policy should therefore move beyond viewing teenage employment solely through the lens of short-term labor market statistics. Instead, summer employment should be recognized as a strategic investment in national human capital. The economic returns extend far beyond seasonal earnings, influencing lifetime productivity, workforce participation, social stability and intergenerational mobility.

Rebuilding effective pathways from school to work will require cooperation among governments, educational institutions, employers and communities. Expanding apprenticeships, strengthening school-business partnerships, reducing hiring costs for first-time workers and modernizing youth employment policies can help restore opportunities that technological and institutional changes have gradually eroded.

Ultimately, the first job has never been simply about earning a paycheck. It is the beginning of an individual's economic journey — a formative experience that shapes professional identity, confidence, responsibility and aspirations. Investing in that first opportunity is therefore an investment not only in young workers but also in the long-term productivity, competitiveness and inclusive prosperity of the American economy.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Masaaki Yoshimori is an economist.

He was born in Ashiya and grew up in Kuwana, Japan. He belongs to the McCourt School of Public Policy, a

constituent school of Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He previously served as a fellow in International Economics at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Yoshimori's research spans a broad spectrum of critical issues in global economics, including monetary policy, exchange rate policy, financial regulation, macroeconomics and the intersections of climate change with economic systems. Additionally, his work delves into the political economy, exploring the impacts of globalization on the monetary system and the evolving challenges faced by global financial institutions.

Ceuta Exposes Europe's Moral Blind Spot on Migration

Rainer Ebert
August 16, 2026

Europe's response to the tragic deaths of 72 migrants attempting to reach Ceuta has fixated on border security and political rhetoric, ignoring the inequalities fueling migration. Stark disparities in safety, opportunity and dignity push people to risk deadly journeys, while legal pathways remain out of reach. Addressing the crisis demands tackling global injustice — not just reinforcing borders.

Two weeks ago, at least 72 people died while attempting to reach the Spanish exclave of Ceuta from Morocco. Around 60,000 people made it into Ceuta, many of them by sea, others by climbing over border fences. Within just a few days, however, most of them had already returned to Morocco.

Both Morocco and Ceuta are located in Africa. But politically, Ceuta, like Melilla, belongs to Spain and therefore to the EU. Europe's response to the unprecedented influx into the exclave has been almost unanimous. What happened has been described as a "threat to Europe's security." Some have even called it an "attack" or an "invasion." Europe's external borders, we are told, must be better protected.

Twenty-two of the EU's 27 member states have now signed an open letter initiated by Italy's far-right government under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, criticizing Spain's migration policy and calling for stricter security measures at Europe's borders. Italy has further suspended its

participation in the Schengen Agreement (which allows citizens of Schengen countries to cross the internal borders of all member states without passport checks) with Spain. That this is little more than political posturing is evident from the fact that Ceuta is not part of the Schengen Area in the first place.

While Europe appears quick to agree on yet more repression, the 72 lives irreversibly lost have become an afterthought. Most of those who died had most of their lives still ahead of them and hoped for a better future. Instead, they found death on what they believed was the path toward that future. As right-leaning governments across Europe compete with one another in increasingly alarmist security rhetoric, the fundamental question is largely ignored: Why does a young person take such enormous risks in order to reach Europe?

Why people risk everything for Europe

People flee war, violence, persecution, poverty and the hopelessness that arises when there is little prospect of a safe and dignified life. Border fences cannot deter those who see no viable future where they are, but merely make their journeys more dangerous and more deadly. One can debate at length the respective roles played by colonialism and other historical injustices, and current political failures, in creating global inequality. But this does not change the fact that a young person in Morocco, facing high youth unemployment and low wages, has every reason to perceive their situation as profoundly unjust when compared with life in much of Europe.

This inequality is not an abstract concept. In a world where everyone is connected to everyone else, and our planet, in many ways, has become a global village, it is experienced directly. People see how others live on their phone screens every day.

Nineteen-year-old Nok in Thailand can watch in real time as Moritz, a boy her age from Munich, spontaneously buys a flight ticket to Bangkok and spends six months traveling through Southeast Asia to “find himself.” A comparable journey to Europe is out of reach for Nok, given her limited financial means and the enormous difficulty of obtaining a Schengen visa, and it will remain an impossibility in the foreseeable future.

“Come through legal channels,” Europe tells migrants. Kwame in Ghana wants nothing more than to do exactly that. He successfully applies for a master’s program in Germany, spends months of his time and a considerable amount of money on language tests, certifications, translations and other documents he needs for his visa application, and saves the required funds for his living expenses in Germany. Yet when he requests an appointment at the German Embassy in Accra, he learns that the waiting time is six to 12 months. He will miss the start of his program. Whether his admission will still be valid the following year remains uncertain.

Amina is eight years old and lives in Sudan. For months, there has been little to no schooling in her region. The healthcare system has largely collapsed. While her parents struggle every day to find enough food and clean water, many children in Europe take education, healthcare and security for granted.

José is 24 years old and works 12 hours a day in a textile factory in Honduras for a wage that barely allows him to survive. The clothes he sews are later sold in Europe, often for more money than he earns in an entire week.

Nok, Kwame, Amina and José had no control over where they were born. Neither did Moritz. Yet the consequences of this accident of birth could hardly be more different. It may be easier to demand higher fences, but as long as such extreme inequalities in security, prosperity and future

opportunities exist between different regions of the world, people will continue trying to overcome those fences.

The path forward: beyond borders and barriers

The challenges of migration cannot be solved by sealing oneself off. They require an honest debate about how the global order can be made fairer. This is not simply a matter of extending humanitarian compassion as a voluntary gesture; it is a question of how much inequality can be morally justified when it is based largely on the accident of where someone happens to be born.

If Europe wants to prevent images like those from Ceuta in the future, it must address the root causes of migration more decisively — among other things through fairer trade relations, greater commitment to development cooperation and the expansion of legal migration pathways. Paradoxically, the opposite trend can often be observed today. Many European countries, for example, have significantly reduced their development aid budgets in recent years — a sign of the growing influence of populism, which prioritizes short-term political gains over long-term solutions. Ultimately, such policies harm not only people in countries of origin, but Europe itself as well.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Rainer Ebert is a Research Fellow in the Discipline of Philosophy at the University of South Africa and previously held academic

appointments at the University of Houston, the *Centre de Recherche en Éthique* in Montréal, the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Johannesburg. He graduated from Rice

University in Texas with a PhD in Philosophy in 2016 and has published and lectured widely on issues in moral theory, applied ethics and political philosophy. He is also a regular columnist for newspapers in the US and a number of countries in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Is Sudan's Bloody War Reaching a Tipping Point?

Martin Plaut
August 16, 2026

Sudan's civil war has grown well beyond national conflict — it threatens to explode into a greater war across the Horn of Africa and Red Sea. The SAF military and RSF rebels receive vital support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, respectively, enabling both groups to slaughter innocents. Regional powers desperately need to push Sudan's fighters toward a peaceful resolution.

The Sudan war, which has raged since April 2023, may be at a tipping point. Reports suggest the first steps towards a dialogue to end the conflict, which is now one of the bloodiest in the world. "Participants in the consultations have agreed on the need to select a preparatory committee for the dialogue conference, made up of independent, widely accepted figures with specialised expertise," al Jazeera reports.

"The committee would determine who takes part, the agenda, and the venue and date of the conference, as well as invite international and

regional parties to monitor it, according to the political sources."

Such reports have emerged regularly, but we have reasons to keep a flicker of optimism. For a start, the main rebel movement controlling western Sudan, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has suffered recent setbacks in fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces. The Armed Forces managed to hold off successive RSF attempts to take key locations in the Darfur region, the RSF's main area of occupation.

However, equally important have been the international developments. The Sudanese conflict involves so many foreign actors that it is hard to classify it as a civil war. The Armed Forces receive support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Eritrea. The RSF gets backing from allies in Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and — critically — the United Arab Emirates.

The International Crisis Group warns that the Sudanese war could drag the entire region into conflict. "Saudi officials have grown increasingly frustrated at the UAE's support for the RSF as well as its blanket denials. They worry that civil war will end in Sudan's disintegration or create a state of persistent conflict that would spill over into neighbouring states of strategic importance to Riyadh."

For this reason, the Saudis have sent senior envoys to Chad, Ethiopia and South Sudan to convince them to "stand back from the war and stop arms from flowing across their borders to the RSF," as the Crisis Group puts it. They urgently need this: Some 25 million people are desperately short of food and the death toll is estimated at between 150,000 and 400,000.

The UAE's critical role

We cannot overstate how important the UAE is to this conflict. The Financial Times reported that when the RSF seized the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, in April 2023, the rebels seized no less than 1.5 tons of gold from the state's gold refinery and flew to the UAE. This haul alone measured in at \$100 million in value, and was by no means the last. Describing this as part of an "Imperial push" into Africa, the FT concluded that, "The UAE is creating a complex system of commercial, industrial and military entanglements that sometimes reinforce but also undermine the sovereignty of fragile states — most notably in war-torn Sudan."

The RSF's relationship with the UAE has its leadership, from Mohammad Hamdan Dagalo Mousa (or "Hemedti") downwards, to establish a series of businesses to diversify and internationalize their interests through holdings in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi. Some say Hemedti sits at the apex of a "paramilitary-industrial complex," in charge of both the RSF and a multinational business network, according to an investigation by The Sentry.

The UAE's supply chain for the RSF involves a complex network of links which flow through Somaliland, Uganda, Chad and the Central African Republic. In recent months, Ethiopia has offered the RSF a base of operations in western Ethiopia.

Reports of the base came over months, but in January, Reuters described it in detail. "Ethiopia is hosting a secret camp to train thousands of fighters for the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group in neighbouring Sudan, Reuters reporting has found, in the latest sign that one of the world's deadliest conflicts is sucking in regional powers from Africa and the Middle East."

The threat of a regional conflict

With so many interests involved, we face a very real threat of Sudan's war sparking a conflict across the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. Tensions exist between many of these nations and it is difficult to predict how a war might spread.

For example, Eritrea now points daggers with Ethiopia. This is a complete reversal of the position that existed during the 2020–2022 war in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, which saw the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and the Eritrean capital of Asmara united to try to crush the Tigrayans. Some 600,000 died in the fighting. Yet today, the dominant party in Tigray allies itself with Eritrea, and has links with other Ethiopian and Sudanese rebel movements. In the past week, a conflict flared between Tigray and Ethiopia on the border with Sudan. It turned out to be a single clash, but it could have escalated into a regional conflagration.

While these tensions and maneuvers play out, the innocents of Sudan pay the price. Authorities have uncovered mass graves containing women, children and hospital staff that the RSF executed. This is just one of many mass murders; the Armed Forces are also responsible for similar atrocities. For this reason alone, the people desperately need the war to end.

Can the regional powers persuade the warring parties to bury the hatchet? This might be possible, but the Trump administration's obsession with its war with Iran and attempting to find a solution for Gaza is consuming much of Washington's attention. It is, of course, possible that Saudi Arabia, with so much at stake in the region, could use the absence of the Americans to take the lead. But this would put the Saudi capital of Riyadh in the spotlight and highlight its difficulties with the UAE. That is an uncomfortable position for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but perhaps one he is willing to embrace to be crowned a regional peacemaker.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Born in South Africa, **Martin Plaut** is currently senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth

Studies and holds the same post with

King's College London. He studied at the Universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Warwick before joining the Labour Party as secretary on Africa and the Middle East. In 1984 he joined the BBC, working primarily on Africa. He became Africa editor at World Service News, retiring in 2013. Plaut has advised the British and American governments, as well as the European Parliament. He has published widely on the Horn of Africa and southern Africa.

The Syntax of Erasure: How Western Media Discredits the Gaza Death Toll

Avichal
August 17, 2026

Western media outlets use framing, syntactical tricks, and double standards to cast doubt on Gaza casualty figures and mitigate military actions. Their narrative is informed by the history of Western imperialism and the continuing power of imperial philosophical ideas. Israel is not only a Western settler society but also the quintessence of the West, which is defined by its calamitous ideology of conquest.

Western media is engaging in a subtle syntactical trick to discredit Palestinian loss of life in Gaza. This trick came into effect from the beginning of the Israeli invasion of Gaza after the Hamas-led attacks on October 7, 2023. Western media uses certain phrases repeatedly to shape the narrative, which mitigates the genocidal military and policy actions of the Israeli state. In a nutshell, Western media discredits the loss of life of innocent Palestinians and insidiously produces an element of doubt on the veracity of death figures in Gaza.

Note that Israeli crimes in Gaza have a fanatical and rapturous approval of a vast majority of its citizens. After the attacks in 2023, Israel has acted with disproportionate violence. According to the UN, “as of October 11, 2025, approximately 81% of all structures in the Gaza Strip are damaged.” Note that the figure for Leipzig, the scene of some of the worst bombing in World War II, was 40–60%. Gaza compares unfavorably even to Dresden. The Allies bombed the city four times between February 13 and 15, 1945. Relentless firebombing killed over 20,000 people and destroyed Dresden’s historic city center.

Sir Arthur Travers Harris was the commander-in-chief of RAF Bomber Command who developed the saturation technique of mass bombing that destroyed German cities like Dresden and Leipzig. This meant sending lots of bombers on “a giant raid on a single city, with the object of completely demolishing its civilian quarters.” To this day, this British-Rhodesian is referred to as “Butcher” or “Butch” Harris. Note that the Israelis have proved more butcherous than Harris and, in the Western media, have gotten away with mass murder.

The tools of imperial misinformation

So, how do the purveyors of liberty, equality and human rights wash away the sins of Israel in Gaza?

They present Israeli numbers as fact while casting doubt on numbers of dead or injured people in Gaza. Invariably, Western media says that these numbers are “according to the Gaza Health Ministry” and some add that this is “a Hamas-run body.” By citing the source of these figures, which Western media hypocritically does not do in the case of Israel, reporters, commentators and analysts create underlying doubt about deaths and injuries. Implicit is the allusion that a Hamas-controlled body might be lying. Of course, this might be a subconscious practice but has the same effect as a concerted conscious strategy of mitigating Israeli war crimes and downplaying Palestinian suffering.

Even when the Gaza Health Ministry gives personal information of victims, sentence construction in Western media indirectly disowns the figures, subtly discrediting figures of deaths and injuries. Here are a few examples of articles in top Western publications to prove the point:

Gazans Release Names of 6,747 People They Say Were Killed in Israeli Strikes (The New York Times, October 26, 2023)

The detailed list from the Hamas-controlled health ministry — including ages, genders and ID numbers — followed President Biden’s comment that he had “no confidence” in its figures.

More than 10,000 killed in Gaza, Hamas-controlled health ministry says, as condemnation of Israel’s campaign grows (CNN, November 6, 2023)

More than 10,000 people have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched its military offensive nearly a month ago, the Hamas-controlled health ministry in the Palestinian enclave said Monday.

Israel declared war on Hamas after the Islamist militant group launched a brutal attack on October

7, killing 1,400 in Israel and kidnapping more than 240. Israel retaliated by launching an air and ground offensive on Gaza, vowing to eliminate the militant group.

Palestinians in Gaza search for missing family members (Deutsche Welle (DW), June 17, 2024)

Even the bodies that are retrieved and brought to Gaza’s morgues are not always easily identified. As of June 10, 9,839 bodies are lying in morgues unidentified, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, while 27,325 others have been identified.

More than 60,000 killed in Gaza war, local health officials say (The Washington Post, July 29, 2025)

The toll reported by the Gaza Health Ministry, which is run by Hamas and whose numbers are widely accepted by the United Nations and other international institutions, includes combatants as well as civilians.

In Gaza war, tens of thousands killed and widespread destruction (Reuters, October 7 2025)

Since October 7, 2023, more than 67,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, with nearly a third of the dead under the age of 18, according to Gaza health authorities.

The Health Ministry in Gaza does not distinguish between civilians and fighters in its tally. Israel has previously said at least 20,000 of the dead were fighters.

Gaza death toll tops 69,000 as Israel and militants again exchange remains (AP News, November 9, 2025)

More than 69,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Israel-Hamas war so far, Gaza health officials said Saturday.

It began with the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage.

Gaza death toll 40 percent higher than recorded, Lancet study estimates (France 24, November 29, 2025)

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza on Saturday said more than 70,000 people have been killed since the war between Israel and Hamas erupted more than two years ago.

“There’s no ceasefire”: Gaza paramedic and father of two killed as civilian death toll since October passes 650 (The Guardian, March 23, 2026)

Since the ceasefire was announced on 10 October last year, Israel has killed 677 and injured a further 1,800 Palestinians, according to Gaza’s health ministry.

Over 38,000 women and girls killed in Gaza war, UN Women report estimates (Euronews, April 24, 2026)

More than 38,000 women and girls were killed in Gaza between October 2023 and December 2025, UN Women estimated in its latest report.

The figure is based on data reported during this period by the Gaza Health Ministry, which stated 71,200 people were killed since the start of Israel’s military offensive in Gaza, launched in response to the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on 7 October 2023.

Fears of renewed Gaza war as Hamas disarmament talks stall (BBC, May 7, 2026)

At least 846 people – including many women and children – have been killed in Gaza since the ceasefire began, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

The examples above reveal Western bias clearly. Israeli figures are presented as fact. Palestinian figures come from a Hamas-run entity. Readers are well aware that Hamas is a terrorist organization responsible for the horrific attacks of October 7, 2023, and, therefore, cannot be trusted. This is not to say that the Gaza Health Ministry does not engage in fudging and finagling. The key point here is that so does Israel, but this Western power in the Middle East gets a pass. There are no saints in this conflict, and remember even saints lie.

So, what are the real numbers?

Given the utterly broken and rudimentary structure of governance in Gaza and constant strikes by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the figures of the Gaza Health Ministry might be understated. Researchers with great expertise who have studied the conflict are a much better guide to estimate the numbers.

“Accounting for uncertainty in conflict mortality estimation: an application to the Gaza War in 2023-2024” is an important paper. Published in Population Health Metrics, the paper was a result of a study carried out with Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. Ana C. Gómez-Ugarte, Irena Chen, Enrique Acosta, Ugofilippo Basellini and Diego Alburez-Gutierrez are the authors. This team of researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Germany and the Centre for Demographic Studies, Spain, has used an innovative statistical model that accounts for the large uncertainties caused by limited data availability. This is what the paper says:

Official death tolls have been contested due to damage to infrastructure and hospital buildings, limited resources, and challenges in verifying the true scale of fatalities. This has hindered both the accurate reporting of death counts and the

identification of the deceased. Some argue that official figures are underreported, as they do not account for indirect deaths or people reported missing under the rubble. Others have suggested that data from the Gaza Ministry of Health may be inflated for political reasons. However, recent studies have found no evidence of systematic over-reporting in GMoH data.

Our conflict-related death toll estimate of 78,318 (70,614-87,504) by the end of 2024 closely aligns with the independently conducted Gaza Mortality Survey's estimate of 75,200 (63,600-86,800) violent deaths between October 7, 2023, and January 5, 2025, providing robust mutual validation.

The paper also reveals that life expectancy in 2024 sharply decreased to less than half of the level that would be expected without the war. Furthermore, "Gaza's estimated age-sex pattern of conflict deaths since October 7, 2023 mirrors UN-IGME profiles from prior genocides."

Another paper in The Lancet Global Health is well worth a read. "Violent and non-violent death tolls for the Gaza conflict: new primary evidence from a population-representative field survey" was funded by the European Research Council, ANTICIPATE program under Horizon Europe, and the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disaster at Université Catholique de Louvain. Michael Spagat, Jon Pedersen, Khalil Shikaki, Michael Robbins, Eran Bendavid, Håvard Hegre and Debarati Guha-Sapir, an international team of researchers, were the authors, and this is what they had to say:

We estimated 75 200 violent deaths (95% CI 63 600–86 800) between Oct 7, 2023, and Jan 5, 2025, representing approximately 3·4% of the Gaza Strip's pre-conflict population. Women, children (ie, younger than 18 years), and older people (ie, older than 64 years) comprised 56·2%

(95% CI 50·4–61·9) of violent deaths, totalling 42 200 deaths (95% CI 33 100–51 300). We also estimated 16,300 non-violent deaths (12 300–20 200), of which 8,540 (4,540–12,500) represent excess deaths above pre-conflict projections. The MoH figure for this period (49,090 violent deaths) was 34·7% below our central estimate.

"Counting the dead in Gaza: difficult but essential" is a paper published in The Lancet that comes to a similar conclusion. Authors Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee and Salim Yusuf say:

Armed conflicts have indirect health implications beyond the direct harm from violence. Even if the conflict ends immediately, there will continue to be many indirect deaths in the coming months and years from causes such as reproductive, communicable, and non-communicable diseases. The total death toll is expected to be large given the intensity of this conflict; destroyed health-care infrastructure; severe shortages of food, water, and shelter; the population's inability to flee to safe places; and the loss of funding to UNRWA, one of the very few humanitarian organisations still active in the Gaza Strip.

In recent conflicts, such indirect deaths range from three to 15 times the number of direct deaths. Applying a conservative estimate of four indirect deaths per one direct death to the 37 396 deaths reported, it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186 000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza. Using the 2022 Gaza Strip population estimate of 2 375 259, this would translate to 7·9% of the total population in the Gaza Strip.

Despite such studies by accomplished researchers, the true extent of loss of life cannot be known in the midst of military aggression anyway and may never be known, even after peace returns.

The seductiveness of the Western narrative

As is clear above, the figures of the dead and injured in Gaza are credible. International researchers have published in peer-reviewed journals and corroborated these figures. Yet even respectable scholars in the West are trapped by the dominant media narrative. Israeli-American historian Omer Bartov is honest and courageous. Yet Bartov falls prey to the same bias as Western media. Note what he writes in his 2026 book, *Israel: What Went Wrong?*

Within four weeks, responding to the October 7, 2023, massacre by Hamas—itself a war crime and crime against humanity—Israel’s air and ground assault on Gaza had killed more than 10,500 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, a number that included thousands of children. That was nine times as many people as the 1,164 victims of Hamas (as we now know, rather than the 1,400 originally claimed)—a death toll that included 362 members of the security forces, police, and first responders as well as 91 foreign nationals and local Bedouin.

Not many have deconstructed Western media’s smart linguistic manipulation, which often infects even those sympathetic to Palestinians and hostile to Israel. Many are aware of this bias, though. Fair Observer’s Chief Strategy Officer Peter Isackson has pointed out the hypocrisy of Western media for over a decade. So has Didier Fassin, a French anthropologist and sociologist. In his hard-hitting and daring 2024 book-length essay, *Moral Abdication: How the World Failed to Stop the Destruction of Gaza*, Fassin flags this double standard in passing, with focus on the victims, not readership:

Every time statistics for Palestinian deaths are given by journalists, they are accompanied by the formula “according to the Gaza Health Ministry” or even “according to the Hamas-run Health

Ministry,” whereas no equivalent phrase qualifies the data presented by the Israeli authorities . . . This querying of the number of dead is a double punishment for the victims of war. Their life has been taken; their death is denied.

Fassin is not free from prejudice. In Chapter 7, he labels the Iranian regime as one of mullahs. There is an argument to be made that in a region dominated by monarchies and dictatorships, Iran is far more democratic than others. Mehdi Alavi has highlighted the lies the US and the media have told about Iran, which hold wide sway.

Passing propaganda as news has long been the way of the West. Three books examine this phenomenon in great detail. In 1986, Deborah Lipstadt published *Beyond Belief*, which was followed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky publishing *Manufacturing Consent* in 1988 and Michael Parenti’s *Dirty Truths* in 1996.

To revert to Fassin, he shines the light on persistent Western political, diplomatic, and journalistic justifications of vastly disproportionate, mindlessly indiscriminate and ruthlessly relentless Israeli violence to obliterate and depopulate Gaza.

An examination . . . of what led to a situation where, for political leaders and intellectual personalities in the principal Western countries – with rare exceptions such as Spain – the statistical reality that the lives of Palestinian civilians are worth several hundred times less than the lives of Israeli civilians, and the claim that the death of the former is less worthy of being honoured than that of the latter, have become acceptable; . . . where, without independent confirmation, most of the mainstream Western media quasi-automatically reproduce the version of events relayed by the camp of the occupiers, while incessantly casting doubt on that recounted by the occupied.

We were witnessing a major event in contemporary history whose moral consequences, political fallout and intellectual implications would be considerable. But the language to describe it seemed somehow dead. Or, rather, an attempt was underway to induce its death by imposing a vocabulary and grammar of the facts, by prescribing what must be said and condemning what must not be said

Such an inversion of the values proclaimed by Western societies, such a political dereliction, such an intellectual collapse demand examination.

Moral degeneration and self-deception

A question many ask is how the Jewish people, whose history and memory are deeply rooted in the Holocaust, proudly, passionately and self-righteously support genocide. Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, posits an interesting theory. He highlights “the paradox of violating one’s moral principles without loss of self-respect while doing so” by “selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions from harmful conduct.” He notes:

This selectivity of moral engagement was strikingly illustrated by Amon Goeth, the notorious Nazi commandant of a concentration camp. While dictating a letter replete with empathy and compassion for his ailing father, he saw a prisoner on the grounds who he thought was not working hard enough. He whipped out his revolver and callously shot the prisoner. The commandant was both overcome with compassion and savagely cruel at the same time.

Bandura also notes the several processes through which people avoid self-sanctions. In his words:

Self-sanctions can be disengaged by reconstruing detrimental conduct through moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and

advantageous contrast with other inhumanities; by obscuring personal agency in detrimental activities through diffusion and displacement of responsibility; by disregarding or misrepresenting the harmful consequences of inhumane conduct; and by blaming and dehumanizing the victims. These mechanisms of moral disengagement operate not only in the preparation of inhumanities under extraordinary circumstances, but in everyday situations where people routinely perform activities that bring personal benefits at injurious costs to others.

Besides euphemistic or derogatory labels, the unfeeling acronyms in military argot also dehumanize the victims. Both dehumanizing and selectively evoking, suppressing, or silencing personal morality help many Jews today to support what Israel is doing to Palestinians.

Hannah Arendt’s theory about social forces shaping individuals is also instructive today. In 1961, this US philosopher and political theorist attended Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. Two years later, she published *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. This was a highly provocative book at the time. Vehemently denounced by Jewish organizations, scholars and sympathizers, this classic explained how the unfeeling actions and moral numbness of many Nazi officials like Eichmann were not primarily driven by hatred for Jews but were a result of bureaucratization and routinization of individual actions. This caused a diffusion of individual responsibility in a hierarchical command structure of impersonal modern organizations.

In Arendt’s words, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.” She suggested that it is the system and situation that make “this new type of criminal, who . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that

make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.”

Stanley Milgram, then a young US psychologist, agreed with Arendt. He published *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* in 1974, which highlighted the pathological role of authority in making ordinary persons inflict unspeakable cruelties upon innocent strangers. As members of an organization, individuals are socialized and trained to obediently follow orders given by superiors with authority to command them and their actions. Milgram’s conclusions were drawn from experimental studies, designed and conducted by him around the time when Arendt was reporting from Jerusalem. These have since been reproduced many times over in cross-cultural settings, validating and firmly establishing Milgram’s theory.

Milgram set out to examine why ordinary people turn cruel. In his words, “Of all moral principles, the one that comes closest to being universally accepted is this: one should not inflict suffering on a helpless person who is neither harmful nor threatening to oneself. This principle is the counterforce we shall set in opposition to obedience.” The aim of Milgram’s “investigation was to find when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative.” In a nutshell, Milgram presented his findings as below.

We have now seen several hundred participants in the obedience experiment, and we have witnessed a level of obedience to orders that is disturbing. With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under to the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the

experimenter’s definition of the situation into performing harsh acts.

US historian Christopher Browning’s 1992 classic, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, proves Milgram’s point. Ordinary middle-aged men from Hamburg formed this battalion. They went on to shoot a minimum of 38,000 Jewish men, women, and children and deported a minimum of 45,000 of them to Treblinka extermination camp from July 1942 to November 1943. In his chilling conclusion, Browning summarises the insurmountable power of social forces over individuals.

The collective behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101 has deeply disturbing implications. There are many societies afflicted by traditions of racism and caught in the siege mentality of war or threat of war. Everywhere society conditions people to respect and defer to authority... Everywhere people seek career advancement. In every modern society, the complexity of life and the resulting bureaucratization and specialization attenuate the sense of personal responsibility of those implementing official policy. Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?

The hypocrisy and double standards of Western journalists can also be explained by the economic pressures they face to pander to their owners and readers. In the age of the internet, the media needs eyeballs to sell advertisements or subscribers willing to pay. Pandering to prejudice becomes essential in such a situation. This is an old story in a capitalist-controlled media. John Swinton’s 1880 speech in New York still rings true:

There is no such a thing in America as an independent press, unless it is out in country towns. You are all slaves. You know it, and I know it. There is not one of you who dares to express an honest opinion. If you expressed it, you would know beforehand that it would never appear in print. I am paid \$150 for keeping honest opinions out of the paper I am connected with. Others of you are paid similar salaries for doing similar things. If I should allow honest opinions to be printed in one issue of my paper, I would be like Othello before twenty-four hours: my occupation would be gone.

The man who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the street hunting for another job. The business of a New York journalist is to distort the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell his country and his race for his daily bread, or for what is about the same—his salary. You know this, and I know it; and what foolery to be toasting an “Independent Press”! We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are jumping-jacks. They pull the string and we dance. Our time, our talents, our lives, our possibilities, are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.

Why the West dehumanizes Palestinians

To understand why the West dehumanizes Palestinians, it is important to go back to Fassin. He points out that the West deliberately adopted a myopic, ahistorical view of the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023. Western leaders and thought leaders viewed this attack as a *casus belli* that set off righteous Israeli violence as an act of defense.

This ignores Israel’s long history of oppression and uprooting of Palestinians from their own land. Many intellectuals argue that the Hamas attack itself was a reaction to sustained Israeli oppression. It was an act of resistance and reassertion by a

dispossessed, subjugated, and incarcerated mass of people. Fassin suggests multiple reasons: historical (Holocaust guilt), geopolitical (oil security and Iran’s containment), economic (investments and markets), military (war economy, arms industry and military aid) and electoral (Jewish lobby with deep pockets) that influenced the West. Western leaders, intellectuals and journalists proffered unconditional and uncritical justifications for Israel’s actions. They also offered total support for Israel’s total obliteration of Gaza, at the expense of losing their own credibility in the world and democratic values at home. He adds:

Alongside these various logics – historical, geopolitical, economic, military and electoral – whose configurations vary with national contexts, one element is common to Western countries. It is ideological. It manifests itself in hostility towards Muslims and racism against Arab populations. Both form part of a colonial heritage, especially for the French and British empires, and even of a pre-colonial heritage, for what Maxime Rodinson dubbed the ‘Christian West’. But this rejection assumed a different meaning after 11 September 2001. Islam became associated with terrorism, Muslims with a danger to the security of Western countries, and Arab populations with a threat to European identity.

Hamid Dabashi of Columbia University offers another context-specific iconoclastic theory of dehumanization, taking a long view of history. He is an Iranian-American philosopher who published *After Savagery: Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of Western Civilization in 2025*. Dabashi contends that the European colonial history of violently conquering, crushing, eradicating, exterminating, dispossessing, displacing, subjugating, dominating, degrading and humiliating the people of color the world over resulted largely from their belief in Caucasian cultural, religious and racial superiority. However, their psyche of racial superiority has deeper roots in the underlying intellectual

traditions of Europe, which undergird the European conception of the world and provide Caucasians the lens through which they view the world even today. Dabashi writes:

Since its very inception, Israel is the summation of the West. . . . It is not just a settler colony that the West supports, but it is “the West” in its very quintessence. It is the highest manifestation of the calamitous ideology of conquest that calls itself “the West,” exposing its murderous roots and occasioning the groundwork for the very metaphysics of barbarism that has sold itself to the world as “Western civilization.” Today, Gaza and the rest of Palestine is where the false premise of Western moral authority is buried.

The political and military might of the entire “Western” world that thought and sold itself as the crowning achievement of our humanity did nothing and, in fact, aided and abetted the mass murder of tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians. The proudest achievement of “Western civilization,” which is “Western philosophy,” as it calls itself, the history it has colonized for itself, from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Heidegger, were all summed up in the miserable statement by the senior-most European philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

Palestine is neither the first nor the last homeland that the West has conquered and abused, but the history of the world has been summarized in Palestine. What Israel is doing in Palestine today is what the world has endured from Western colonialism and imperialism for centuries.

And, in this sense, Dabashi claims that Palestine is the world and the world is Palestine.



Avichal is a freethinker and a theorist. He has been associated with the world of special forces as a practitioner, instructor, designer, administrator, institution builder and adviser for over two decades and has operated and trained in many countries of the world. He specializes, among other things, in security and crisis analysis, anticipation, preparedness, administration, response and resolution. He published a book *Dignity of Life: Moral Philosophy, Organisational Theory, and Hostage Rescue* (New Delhi: IK International, 2023), which is the only scholarly and most comprehensive work in the field of mass hostage rescue to date. He lives in India.

Abundance Has a Landlord: AI Is Shifting Scarcity From Software to Substance

Usama Malik
August 18, 2026

People are asking the wrong questions about the growth of AI in the world. Right now, AI is dissolving the value of knowing things and instead is inflating the value of owning physical ground. The professional class is on the wrong side of that trade, and it doesn't know it yet.

In 2026, a company whose entire business was knowing things lost roughly 60% of its value over the past year.

Gartner sells research. For decades, executives paid subscription fees for access to analysts who had spent careers accumulating industry knowledge, and the arrangement worked because that knowledge was genuinely hard to assemble on your own. Then it stopped working. Gartner's contract value, the metric that measures the health of the subscription base, grew 1% year-over-year in a quarter where management had promised acceleration. The stock fell more than 20% in a single session, and months later it fell more than 27% in another. A Goldman Sachs analyst wrote that the company faced structurally higher AI risk (Gartner noted that excluding US federal government business, its contract value grew by 3.5%, still anemic). Shareholders sued.

Chegg sells homework help. It was worth about \$14 billion at its peak. It is now worth roughly \$100 million, a decline of about 99%, and it has cut 45% of its staff. Students who once paid a subscription to see worked solutions now ask a chatbot for free.

Accenture sells expertise by the hour. Its shares fell sharply through 2025, including an 18% single-day drop, and the company announced cuts of 22 thousand people. KPMG cut 4% of its US advisory practice. In India, the combined market capitalization of the five largest IT services firms fell 46% from its 2024 peak. Intuit, whose TurboTax business stands between American citizens and their own tax returns, became one of the worst performers in the S&P 500 and fell to a five-year low after a Goldman analyst pointed out that an AI model can process a return for roughly twelve cents against TurboTax's average revenue per user of about \$162.

These read like four unrelated corporate misfortunes. They are one event.

AI has redefined what is scarce

Every business on that list occupied the same structural position. Each one stood between a person and something that person wanted and charged for the passage. Gartner stood between an executive and industry knowledge. Chegg stood between a student and an answer. Accenture stood between a corporation and skilled labor. Intuit stood between a citizen and the tax code. None of them owned the thing on the other side. What they owned was the difficulty of getting there.

That difficulty is what AI dissolves. It leaves knowledge and skill intact. What it removes is the friction that makes either one expensive to reach, and a toll booth with no friction to sell has nothing left to charge for.

Henry George ran into a version of this problem in 1879. He was writing during the most productive decades in human history to that point. Railroads, telegraphs, steam shipping and industrial manufacturing had multiplied output per worker beyond anything previous generations could have imagined. And yet, George observed, poverty had not disappeared. In the most advanced cities it had deepened. His explanation was that the gains from productivity were being captured as rent by those who owned land, because land was fixed in supply. As everything else got more efficient, the value of standing in the right place absorbed the difference.

You do not have to accept George's politics to find the mechanism useful. His insight was that productivity gains flow to whatever is scarce, and that the identity of the scarce thing can change while everyone is still watching the old one.

For the past forty years, the scarce thing in the developed economy was the ability to process information. That scarcity is what a professional credential certified. Law, medicine, accounting, consulting, financial analysis and academic research all rest on the same premise: the

information exists, it is difficult to navigate and I have been trained to navigate it on your behalf. The premium those professions command is a rent on that difficulty. We called it human capital, a phrase that made it sound like something you own instead of somewhere you stand.

AI attacks that position directly. It does not have to be better than a good analyst to break the economics. It only has to be good enough to make the passage cheap. Meanwhile, the scarce thing is moving somewhere older and more physical, and you can see where, following the capital.

Oracle spent about \$56 billion on capital expenditure in a single fiscal year. It ran roughly \$24 billion of negative free cash flow. It carried something in the region of \$130 billion of debt, pushed its debt-to-equity ratio toward 300%, and was downgraded by S&P to the lowest rung of investment grade. Its stock fell about 64% from its September peak, and June was its worst month since 1990.

Notice what the market punished and what it did not. Investors punished the leverage and the customer concentration. Almost nobody argued that the assets themselves were worthless. The debate was about whether Oracle could survive holding them, which is a very different debate from whether they were worth holding.

Physical assets and constraints are what matter

Across the industry, the same purchase is being made on an enormous scale. The money buys compute, and it also buys something less discussed: land near high-voltage transmission, positions in utility interconnection queues that can take years to clear, water allocations, permitted sites, substation capacity and the electrical generation to feed all of it. These are the assets that cannot be summoned by writing a check, because

the constraint on them is legal and geological, and no amount of financing changes it.

The precision there matters, because “physical assets appreciate” is too loose to be true. Intel owned an enormous physical plant and had a miserable decade. Owning factories did not save it. What Intel lacked was a binding constraint that others could not route around, since its fabs were not at the leading edge and its competitors could get capacity elsewhere.

The assets appreciating now are the ones where the constraint binds. There is one company in the world that makes extreme ultraviolet lithography machines. There is a finite amount of firm power that can be delivered to a given county before the transmission system needs a decade of upgrades. Water rights in the arid West are legally allocated and largely spoken for. Permitted land within reach of existing transmission is a fixed inventory that no amount of enthusiasm expands. You can have all the capital in the world and still wait in line.

This is the trade being made across the economy right now, and almost nobody has described it plainly. Capital is fleeing rents on information and racing toward rents on physical constraint. The people who own credentials are on one side of it. The people who own ground, water and electrical interconnection are on the other.

None of which means the market carnage of 2026 proves the story. A substantial part of it does not, and the honest version has to say so.

Markets are repricing, not reacting

The software sector had a brutal year. The main software index fell more than 20% while the S&P 500 was roughly flat. Median valuations for public software companies fell to about three times revenue, down from nearly five times a year earlier and more than six times the year before that, which

puts the sector back where it traded in 2015. Roughly a trillion dollars of market value evaporated in the first quarter alone.

Very little of that came from AI eating anyone's business. It came from investors deciding to pay less for the same earnings.

The tell is that the companies kept beating expectations while their shares fell. Salesforce grew revenue 13% and reported that its AI product line had passed a billion dollars in annualized revenue, growing more than 200%. ServiceNow grew subscription revenue nearly 25%, raised its AI target by 50% one quarter into the year, and reported that the number of customers running AI agents in production had grown ninefold in nine months. Figma grew revenue 46% with customers spending 39% more than the year before, and more than three-quarters of its enterprise users who hit their AI usage caps chose to pay for more. Atlassian's revenue accelerated, and its seat counts kept expanding, which is exactly the thing the bear case said could not happen.

All of those stocks fell hard anyway. When strong results cannot move a share price, the market has stopped reacting to the quarter and started repricing the distant future.

There is also good evidence that the AI disruption everyone is pricing has not actually arrived in most enterprises. A study out of MIT examining hundreds of deployments found that most custom enterprise AI projects never reached production. Gartner, before its own troubles, predicted that more than 40% of agentic AI projects would be canceled by the end of 2027 on grounds of cost and unclear business value. Corporate IT budgets grew only about 3.5%, and the growth was reallocated toward compute instead of added on top, which is why both hardware and services suffered.

The question of loss is a question of transfer, not redistribution

So, the picture is mixed, and any honest account has to hold two things at once. The broad software selloff was mostly a valuation event driven by fear of a future that has not happened yet. The specific destruction of the intermediaries was real and permanent, and it showed up in their financial statements.

That distinction is the whole argument. The businesses that broke were the ones whose only asset was standing in the way. The businesses that merely got cheap were the ones that own proprietary data, regulated workflow or something a customer cannot rebuild over a weekend. The market has not finished telling those two groups apart, which is why the sorting looks so chaotic.

That unfinished sorting is one reason the word "bubble" keeps surfacing, and the comparison everyone reaches for when it does is the railroads, or the fiber boom of the late 1990s. It is offered as reassurance. Yes, investors were wiped out, the story goes, but the track and the fiber remained, and the productivity arrived a decade later for everyone else. Manias are how societies finance infrastructure they would never approve rationally.

The consolation does not fully transfer, because of depreciation. Track laid in 1873 carried freight for a century. Fiber laid in 1999 sat dark for five years and then ran the internet for the next twenty. The largest single line-item in AI capital expenditure today is advanced semiconductors, and those have an economic life of roughly three to six years, depreciating against an improvement curve that makes each generation obsolete faster than concrete or steel ever aged. If this cycle breaks in 2027, nobody lights up the 2025-vintage chips in 2033. They are simply impaired.

But split the spending into two layers and something more interesting appears. The fast-depreciating layer is compute. The durable layer is everything underneath it: the land, the buildings, the substations, the transmission interconnections, the water allocations and the permits. Those have useful lives measured in decades. They are the railroad-like assets of this cycle, and they will outlive whatever happens to the chips inside them.

Which means a crash does not distribute anything. It transfers.

If the cycle breaks, the over-levered marginal players sell the durable layer at distressed prices to whoever has the balance sheet to hold it through the trough. The buyers will be the same handful of entities with enormous operating cash flow who are already the largest owners. The permits do not get reissued to the public. The interconnection rights do not go back in the queue for a community solar project. They change hands, cheaply, in the direction of concentration.

This inverts the intuition most people bring to the word bubble. We think of a crash as a correction, a moment when things that got too expensive become available again and the overreach is punished. In an economy where the scarce asset is physical position, a crash is an acquisition event. It would accelerate the concentration it appears to punish.

Where exactly is spending shifting to?

On whether it is a bubble at all, the strongest counterargument deserves airing. Unlike 1999, most of this spending comes from companies with real profits, funded out of operating cash flow instead of speculative equity issuance. That is a genuine and important difference. The rebuttal is that bubbles break at the margin, and the margin here is levered. It includes companies carrying credit downgrades, a set of smaller specialized

cloud providers financed largely with debt, a fast-growing private credit market with limited disclosure, and a web of circular arrangements in which model developers, cloud providers and chip manufacturers invest in one another and then book each other's spending as revenue. The aggregate looks solid, the edge looks like 2007, and the edge is where these things always start.

If it does start there, the question becomes who absorbs it, and here the language gets loose. "Socializing the losses" invites a fair objection, since a large technology company is not a bank and a write-down at a profitable firm requires no bailout. For the claim to hold, the mechanism has to be named. There are at least five, and they are unequal in strength.

The most concrete is electricity. When a utility builds generation and transmission to serve enormous new industrial loads, that investment goes into the rate base, and the rate base is recovered from customers. Regulators have been attempting to design special tariffs that isolate large data center loads and make them bear their own costs. Whether those tariffs hold is being decided right now in public utility commission proceedings across the country, and the outcomes are mixed. Where they fail or get negotiated down, the cost of infrastructure built for a handful of firms appears on the bills of everyone else on the system. This is a live administrative fight with a documented paper trail.

The second is municipal. Local governments compete for data center projects with property tax abatements, sales tax exemptions on equipment, and publicly funded road, water and sewer upgrades, and they justify these against projected employment. Data centers are exceptionally capital-intensive and employ very few people once built. When the jobs do not arrive at the promised scale, the community has already spent the money and forgone the revenue.

The third is portfolio concentration. Public equity indices are now heavily weighted toward a small number of firms tied to this buildout. Ordinary retirement savings, held passively in index funds and target-date products by people who made no active bet on artificial intelligence, are exposed to the outcome. A drawdown transmits directly into pension funds and 401(k) balances.

The fourth is credit, and it is the least examined and the most likely to produce genuine contagion. Private credit has expanded enormously with thin public disclosure, and it has been an active lender to data center developers and specialized cloud providers. Vendor financing arrangements, where a supplier funds its customers' purchases of its own products, have historically been a reliable warning sign, and they were a feature of the telecom collapse in 2001. When these unwind, the losses land in insurance portfolios, pension allocations and bank credit lines, well out of sight of the public equity markets.

The fifth, still emerging, is direct public participation, where governments take equity stakes, offer loan guarantees or extend sovereign support to strategic projects.

Aggregate versus localized arguments

The ratepayer channel is the one to lead with, because it is happening now and it is legible to anyone who opens an electricity bill.

That bill is also where the public conversation about the physical costs of all this has gone wrong, in both directions. People have been loudly worried about land, water, energy and carbon, and the response from industry has been to treat the worry as innumeracy. Both sides are partly wrong, and the errors are specific enough to separate, because those four resources do not behave the same way.

Water is where public alarm most exceeds the aggregate evidence. Much of the frightening coverage relies on consumption figures from evaporative cooling designs that newer closed-loop facilities have largely moved past, and at national scale, data center water use remains small next to agriculture and thermoelectric power generation. And yet the alarm is frequently correct in the specific instance, because water is a local resource and the national total says nothing about the county. A facility drawing on a single stressed aquifer in a drought-prone county imposes a real cost on that county, whatever the continental average shows. The honest formulation is that the fear is wrong at the scale of the country and often right at the scale of the community, and answering it with a national average answers nothing.

Electricity runs the other way. Here the evidence is ahead of the sentiment. Public opposition to data centers is organized around visible grievances: the appearance of the buildings, the noise of the cooling systems, the truck traffic, the water. Meanwhile, the mechanism most likely to remove money from a household budget is invisible and procedural, consisting of capacity market pricing, transmission cost allocation, rate case outcomes and the terms of interconnection agreements. People are angry; they are right to be angry, and their anger is aimed slightly to the left of the injury. Nothing about that is irrational. The public simply cannot see the pipe the cost flows through, because that pipe runs through proceedings that are technically public and effectively invisible.

Carbon is genuinely contested. The buildout has driven new natural gas capacity and delayed the retirement of coal plants that were scheduled to close. It has also driven the largest corporate procurement of clean energy in history and revived commercial interest in nuclear power for the first time in a generation. Serious people looking at the same data reach different conclusions about the net

effect. Admitting that buys credibility for the places where the evidence is one-sided.

The same lesson runs through all of it. Aggregate statistics are the wrong instrument for evaluating a phenomenon whose entire character is local concentration. The whole point of a data center campus is that it puts an extraordinary amount of demand in one specific place. Averaging that across a continent is a way of not looking at it.

Ownership is moving, and the professional class must be aware

A peculiar feature of the moment sits on top of all this. The most prominent voices warning that AI will displace enormous numbers of workers are, in many cases, the people building the systems that would do the displacing. And the remedies they propose, in their various forms, share a structural characteristic: Each one transfers a portion of the income while leaving ownership of the underlying assets entirely intact.

That has to be stated carefully, because these individuals hold genuinely different views and flattening them is both unfair and easy to disprove. Some have funded serious empirical research into cash transfers. Others have argued for very different mechanisms. The disagreements among them are real.

The structural observation survives all of it. Every proposal on the table redistributes output. None redistributes position. A dividend paid from the returns on an asset is not the same thing as a claim on the asset, and the difference compounds forever. If the argument here is right, and the durable scarcity is shifting toward physical constraint, then a policy debate confined to income transfers is a debate about the smaller half of the question. The larger question is who ends up holding the land, the water rights, the

interconnection capacity and the generation. That question is being settled right now, in permitting hearings and rate cases, while the public conversation is about robots and universal basic income.

The strongest objection to everything above is that it sounds inevitable, and inevitability is usually a sign that someone has stopped looking at the mechanism.

Almost nothing in this account is technologically determined. The specific outcomes depend on decisions being made by identifiable people in identifiable rooms, and most of those decisions could go the other way. Whether large loads pay their own infrastructure costs is a tariff design question, settled by state utility commissions. Whether interconnection queues favor whoever arrived first with capital or are restructured to weigh public benefit is a matter of federal and regional grid policy. Whether municipalities keep bidding against each other with tax abatements is a question of state law, and states have limited such competition before. Whether water allocations are treated as permanent private entitlements or as revocable public licenses is unsettled law in much of the West. Whether the credit exposure in private markets is disclosed at all is a securities regulation choice.

Each of these is a live and boring administrative question, and the boredom is why they are being resolved in favor of concentrated capital. The parties with billions of dollars at stake send lawyers to every hearing. The parties with electricity bills do not know the hearings exist.

The professional class has spent decades assuming its position was secured by education, and it has spent its political energy on cultural questions while the infrastructural ones went unattended. That assumption is now failing on the economic side, and the failure is arriving in the

specific form of falling demand for intermediation. The lawyers, analysts, consultants and accountants who thought they had bought their way onto high ground are discovering that the ground they bought is being repriced, while the ground that is appreciating is measured in acres, acre-feet, megawatts and queue position.

Henry George's mistake, if he made one, was believing that naming the mechanism would be enough to change it. It was not. The rent moved, and it kept moving, and the people who understood where it was going got there first.

It is moving again. The only remaining question is who is in the room when it is decided where it lands.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



Usama Malik is a global business leader whose perspective has been shaped by living and working across Africa, Asia, the US and Europe.

Beyond his executive roles — where he has transformed healthcare companies and raised billions in capital — Usama has spent three decades advancing healthcare equity, women's and children's rights, disaster recovery and arts access in underserved communities. He has written broadly on a wide range of topics, including religious dogmatism in Pakistan, Palestinian rights, capitalism's limitations and the rise of authoritarianism. Usama advocates for business models that transcend traditional profit motives to address humanity's pressing challenges. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland and completed his MBA at INSEAD.

Would Nixon Survive Watergate Today?

Ellis Cashmore
August 20, 2026

In September 1972, seven men broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, DC, and planted surveillance equipment. The crime wasn't yet publicly linked to President Richard Nixon, who would be shortly reelected. The scandal would sink him nine months later... but would he have survived Watergate had it happened today?

For over half a century, Richard M. Nixon has been the personification of a bad president and Watergate a byword for political corruption. In 1974, Nixon was forced into an ignominious resignation, forever becoming America's political *bête noire*. His administration's involvement in the break-in and wiretap at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington's Watergate complex — and the cover-up that followed — earned him a reputation that lasted until his death in 1994, and will probably endure indefinitely. But would the Watergate scandal be so terminal today?

Performative politics

Republican candidate Nixon was elected president in 1968 and much of his first term was overshadowed by the Vietnam War. Reelected in 1972 in a landslide, Nixon initially faced compromise after his campaign operatives broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters to plant concealed listening devices.

The subsequent cover-up implicated the White House itself. Nixon ceased to be merely a politician and became the enduring benchmark against which presidential misconduct would be judged.

Since Nixon's time, politics have changed. They have become performative, characterized by dramatic features. Every word, act, mannerism or gesture is intended to project optics — the way an event will be seen by the public. For many detractors, politics is now as image-driven as the entertainment industry. An electorate schooled by decades of sex scandals, controversial wars, political conspiracy theories and media skepticism has become accustomed to transgression. And forgiveness.

Adultery in my heart

A foretaste arrived unexpectedly in 1976 when Democratic presidential nominee Jimmy Carter gave an interview to Playboy magazine. As a devout, born-again Christian who openly cited Jesus, prayed 34 times a day and taught Sunday School, Carter was a paradigm of moral uprightness. Yet, in the interview, he confessed: "I've looked on a lot of women with lust, I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

Carter seemed to be portraying himself as a latterday Tantalus, the Greek mythological figure reaching for fruit that was always out-of-reach. Trapped in a state of perpetual temptation and self-imposed restraint, he endured the agony of desire in his "heart" while refraining from physical contact. No evidence of actual transgression ever emerged.

Carter may have assumed that voters badly wanted a return to Christian righteousness after Nixon's impropriety. By admitting to temptation, he showed human fallibility but saintly self-denial. Though the confession caused a short-term drop in

popularity, he secured a narrow 1976 election victory and served as president until 1981.

The brouhaha did no lasting damage to Carter, nor much good. But it was an engrossing diversion from everyday politics. And, crucially, it kept Carter's name and image in the popular media. That was important because, as the 1980s passed, the media played an increasingly crucial role in politics. To succeed, politicians still needed to govern effectively, understand budgets and possess at least a working knowledge of foreign affairs. But before any of those qualities matter, they need something more fundamental: visibility.

Impermanent stain

Bill Clinton had plenty of it. Too much, perhaps. He came to power in 1993 as a charismatic figure, comfortable in the company of celebrities, even playing saxophone on television. Rumors of womanizing had followed him for years, but rather than damaging his reputation, they arguably enhanced it. There were so many women who claimed to have had relationships with Clinton that at times he seemed like a Lothario masquerading as a politician.

Yet the contradictions of being a married president with a conspicuous sexual appetite appeared to trouble neither Clinton nor much of the electorate. That could have changed when his political opponents seized on one of his amoureuuses and transformed a secret affair into an international spectacle. Clinton initially denied the affair but eventually admitted to having had what became a near-legendary sexual liaison with Monica Lewinsky.

At the time, some assumed Clinton's presidency would collapse under the weight of public humiliation. Instead, the opposite occurred. He remained politically buoyant, completed his second term and left office with approval ratings

that many presidents would envy. The scandal might have affected him, but it didn't define him.

This came in striking contrast to Nixon. "Watergate" might have been stuck on him with Krazy Glue: His name became inseparable from the scandal and all the negative associations it carried. Nixon was not merely the president who experienced Watergate; he was Watergate's human incarnation. Clinton, by contrast, accessorized his public persona with the Lewinsky dalliance — a rosebud buttonhole rather than a permanent stain.

The affair became dubbed "Monicagate," helping establish "-gate" as the suffix of choice for political scandal. These days, almost any civic wrongdoing is appended with it (Signalgate, 2025; Bridgegate, 2013; Sharpiegate, 2019).

You're fired!

In the Watergate era, the idea that someone could become president of the United States without ever holding elected office or acquiring conventional political experience would have seemed almost unimaginable. Even Dwight Eisenhower, whom voters elected to the White House in 1952, brought with him a formidable public record as Supreme Commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World War II. He had commanded armies, negotiated with allies and possessed an authority rooted in institutional achievement.

Donald Trump's credentials were entirely different. In fact, they can be summarized in a phrase: "You're fired!" Trump demonstrated that politics were irrelevant to elections. At least, politics in the traditional sense of relating to governance of countries, areas or groups of people. But he had one attribute coveted by all politicians: Millions knew him, perhaps not as a legislator, diplomat or military commander, but as the host of the television show, *The Apprentice*. Before he entered politics, Trump had already acquired

plenty of well-knownness, one of the most valuable currencies of the new political era.

Many assumed that the presidency itself would impose limits. Instead, Trump brought the logic of celebrity culture into the White House. His public image was inseparable from wealth, display and personal branding. His private Boeing 757 aircraft, fitted with luxury features; weekly visits to his Mar-a-Lago resort and proposals for an elaborate White House ballroom all became symbols of a presidency in which personal style and political power were twinned.

The controversies extended far beyond lifestyle. Peccadillos with women soon surfaced. Legal cases followed. Stormy Daniels, an "adult film" actor, claimed she'd been paid hush money to keep quiet about her relationship with Trump. E. Jean Carroll won a landmark 2023 federal civil trial in which a jury found Trump liable for sexual abuse and defamation. It related to an incident in a department store dressing room in the 1990s and resulted in millions of dollars in damages awarded to her. Trump was impeached twice, first over the Ukraine pressure campaign and later over his actions following the 2020 election. Yet impeachment itself no longer carried the same political force it once did.

Unlike Nixon, Trump never seems close to being crushed by scandal. Some might argue his miscreant behavior, even cumulatively, does not compare with Nixon's grotesque subversion of the rule of law. Perhaps. But consider: his incitement of the Capitol riot to halt the peaceful transfer of power in 2021, his deliberate concealment and obstruction regarding classified national security documents and his felony conviction for falsifying business records to hide campaign hush money. There are, of course, other violations.

This reflects less on Trump or indeed Nixon and more on us, the public, the electorate or —

let's be accurate — the audience. We watch, listen, talk about and pronounce judgment in much the same way as we appreciate a film or a stage drama. Controversy is entertaining. It forces us to pay attention and make decisions, often on rightness and wrongness. There's something satisfying in this.

We would still be horrified by the Watergate wiretap and subsequent cover-up. We would demonize Nixon, too. But for how long? Imagine if Nixon had some of Trump's defiant brazenness and indifference to criticism. In the 1970s, he wasn't able to tough it out. But today, he would stand a fighting chance.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of *Celebrity Culture*.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a

professor of sociology who has held academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

The Procurator, the Petition and the People's Pride: Canada's Removal of Hoekstra

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
August 21, 2026

A Calgary woman's petition demanding the removal of US Ambassador Pete Hoekstra has gained over 190,000 signatures. While Canada has expelled diplomats before, none have been American, underscoring the severity of Hoekstra's alleged interference in Canadian politics. The petition reflects growing Canadian frustration with US pressure, signaling a potential shift in the traditionally close bilateral relationship.

By and large, Canadians are nice. They are easy-going. They are trusting. They tend to laugh at themselves. They are very polite; they even say "sorry" when someone else bumps into them. They're not brash. And they certainly don't go about throwing out ambassadors on a whim. So, I was surprised to hear that a nice Calgarian lady by the name of Leanne Walker has started a petition to oust the current US Ambassador to Canada — Pete Hoekstra.

The pointed petition

The petition is short and to the point. It lists five charges against Hoekstra:

"U.S. Ambassador Pete Hoekstra has repeatedly made public statements undermining the Canada-U.S. diplomatic relations, including characterizing

the 2025 Canadian federal election as ‘anti-American.’”

“Ambassador Hoekstra has normalized the Trump administration’s threats to annex Canada as the ‘51st state,’ describing such rhetoric as a ‘term of endearment.’”

“Ambassador Hoekstra has accused Canada of interfering in US domestic politics while himself making repeated interventions in Canadian political discourse inconsistent with diplomatic protocol.”

“Ambassador Hoekstra has been linked to a Michigan-based voter identification app used by the Alberta separatist Centurion Project, while claiming no knowledge of its use.”

“The Alberta Prosperity Project met with U.S. State Department officials three times between April 2025 and January 2026, with Hoekstra claiming no knowledge of those meetings, raising serious questions about U.S. diplomatic interference in Canadian unity.”

The petition also calls on the Canadian government to:

Formally declare Pete Hoekstra persona non grata and request his removal as U.S. Ambassador to Canada, raise with the United States the pattern of conduct by Ambassador Hoekstra inconsistent with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, and direct a parliamentary committee to review U.S. diplomatic interference in Canadian domestic affairs.

Others who have got the boot

Interestingly, for a nice country, Canada has a bit of a history of expelling diplomats. In 2024,

Canada expelled six Indian diplomats, including the High Commissioner, linking them to the murder of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar. In 2023, Canada expelled Chinese diplomat Zhao Wei after an intelligence report revealed he was involved in gathering information targeting Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Chong and his family. In 2018, Canada expelled four Russian diplomats in solidarity with the UK, which was a response to a Russian-backed nerve gas attack against a dissident on British soil. In 2017, Canada expelled Venezuela’s ambassador, Wilmer Armando Barrientos Fernandez, in a retaliatory move two days after Venezuela kicked out Canada’s top diplomat in Caracas. In 2012, Syrian diplomats were expelled in response to the Syrian civil war. In 1991, Iraqi diplomats were expelled to protest Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait.

There have been several other diplomats who have been expelled — but never an American.

Pete’s persistent provocations

Canada and the US have shared one of the closest and most peaceful relationships in modern history. They share language, culture (music, movies and fashion trends), sports leagues (think NHL, NBA, MLB) and even enemies. Over the past 100 years, they have fought on the same side in several wars — including both World Wars, the Korean War, the Gulf War, the Afghanistan War and, most recently, the Russia-Ukraine War. Thus far, Canada has felt secure under the American security umbrella. And Canada has been taking its cues on foreign policy from the US.

A few years ago, it was Canada that detained Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver at the behest of the US and paid for it by destroying its relationship with China. And despite all the recent American rhetoric about Canada being subsumed by the US, it is still not uncommon to

see retired, wealthy Canadians wintering in the US. In fact, in the minds of some (seemingly including US President Donald Trump), Americans and Canadians are the same — with the border being a mere formality and therefore erasable.

But Hoekstra may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. In his short time as US Ambassador to Canada, he has made many, many undiplomatic — if not downright aggressive — statements.

In May 2025, Hoekstra was asked about Trump's repeated threats to make Canada the 51st state. He brusquely told CBC: "It's over. Move on." He also told CBC's The House that Canadians should "get over the 51st state thing," stating that neither he nor US President Donald Trump were talking about annexation — despite several previous remarks made by Trump. In an interview with Politico, Hoekstra protested against Canadian pushback, saying, "It's outrageous that you banned American products from your shelves."

In June 2025, Hoekstra claimed in a CBC interview that Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney sees "51st state" as a "term of endearment." Later that summer, at an economic conference in the US, "There are reasons why the president and some of his team refer to Canada as being mean and nasty to deal with" — implying that Canadians should not react to US tariffs by boycotting US travel and alcohol.

That fall in Halifax, he vented his anger against Canada with several statements: "I'm disappointed that I came to Canada," "very, very difficult to find Canadians who are passionate about the American-Canadian relationship" and referring to the federal election, "It was an anti-American campaign."

In an interview with The Hill Times, Hoekstra was asked about Canadians' anger over Trump's annexation rhetoric and tariffs. He said, "I'm not

very sympathetic" to Canadian outrage. When asked if he thinks Canada is the 51st state, he replied, "That's a great discussion for the president and the prime minister to have."

In October 2025, Hoekstra directed an expletive-laden tirade at Ontario's trade representative during an event in Ottawa. "Hoekstra could be heard using the F-word and also mentioned Ontario Premier Doug Ford by name."

In January 2026, during an interview in Montreal, he said, "We do not need Canada." On June 1, Trump posted the message "51st State" on his Truth Social. The following day, Hoekstra reposted the message.

Some people on both sides of the border brush off such comments as mere rhetoric, boys being boys or negotiating tactics. That could all very well be true — except that, beginning this weekend, a mind-boggling 50% tariff has been threatened on all Canadian products entering the US. This is in direct violation of the US-Mexico-Canada Free Trade Agreement (USMCA). Basically, since Donald Trump became president, the US has been trying to coerce Canada into full submission: "American dominance in the Western hemisphere will never be questioned again." And in this mission, Hoekstra is playing a very enthusiastic part.

Nice but

We may be nice, but nice does not mean stupid or spineless. And given a referendum on Alberta separation looming on the horizon and suspicions of "foreign interference", we may also be particularly sensitive. At last count, the petition had already gathered over 190,000 signatures. And since the petition only closes mid-November, there is time for that number to grow substantially.

Carney said in May that he would not ask Hoekstra to leave his position. Perhaps this petition with its hundreds of thousands of signatures will make Carney rethink. In these difficult times, we need diplomacy more than ever, and Hoekstra is no diplomat. And in diplomacy, it takes two to tango. We won't get very far in trade or other discussions with the US if only diplomats are on the Canadian side.

Ultimately, this petition may not amount to much action. It may not push Carney to expel Hoekstra because there may be many other factors (obvious and subtle) for him to consider when doing what is overall best for Canada in the long run. But it will show both the Canadian and US governments several things: the level of Canadians' general displeasure with current Canada-US relations and negotiations, Canadian pride and our refusal to quietly acquiesce to a foreign power.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Ranjani Iyer Mohanty holds a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology from the University of Calgary and an Master of Business

Administration from the University of British Columbia. After a previous career in information systems with consulting companies, banks and development organizations in Canada, England, Holland, India and Portugal, Ranjani now works as an academic editor (mostly for IT professors) and writer. Her commentaries — analyzing the sociopolitical landscape and issues of gender, age and health — have appeared in several newspapers, magazines and websites, including *The International Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The*

Financial Times, *The Atlantic* and *The Globe & Mail*. She can often be found humming or dancing around the many places she calls home — mostly in Canada and India.

The Political Archeology of Viktor Orbán's Legacy

Elliot Neaman
August 25, 2026

Hungary's April election saw former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán ousted and Prime Minister Péter Magyar placed in power. His Tisza Party won a constitutional supermajority, and now former Chief Justice András Baka takes the mantle as president. Ending 16 years of autocratic rule, the new administration can gradually repeal Orbán's illiberal legacy — and the world will be watching.

Hungary's 2026 election was a political earthquake. To measure the Richter equivalent size and strength, one needs to conduct an archeological dig around the regime former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán constructed between 2010 and 2026. After the fall of communism in 1989 and before Orbán consolidated power in 2010, Hungarians established a stable, parliamentary representative liberal democracy: the Third Republic. It followed two short experiments in radical democracy after World War I (1918–1919) and World War II (1946–1949), which were quashed by a fascist-style monarchy and the Soviets, respectively. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, whose open border with

East Germany ushered in the exit from communism, Hungary functioned as a Western-style constitutional state with robust checks and balances, free multi-party elections, an independent judiciary and a strong constitutional court.

When Orbán's party, Fidesz, won its first constitutional supermajority in May 2010, everything changed. The state retained the external features of an open society with deeply illiberal substructures, as Orbán proudly declared. Hungary became a Potemkin village of fake democracy in action.

Hungary remained within the European Union because the group's founding treaties did not provide a mechanism to eject a member involuntarily. Although many called to impose punitive measures on Hungary for anti-democratic policies, the right-wing nationalist government in Poland blocked most of them. Fidesz won parliamentary elections five times between 1998 and 2022, four of them with a supermajority. Orbán demonstrated singular political dexterity, leveraging his parliamentary dominance to rewrite the foundational rules of the Hungarian state.

Orbán explicitly formalized the illiberal state as the System of National Cooperation. This was a version of the corporatism that classical fascist states like Nazi Germany and Italy implemented in the 1930s. This system had comprehensive and deeply entrenched pillars. The adoption of the 2011 Fundamental Law replaced the 1989 Constitution, which centralized executive authority by embedding conservative ideological tenets directly into the legal core of the nation.

The sequential redesigns of the election law introduced single-round winner-take-all dynamics, gerrymandered electoral boundaries and skewed campaign finance rules that systematically disadvantaged fragmented opposition parties.

Previously independent oversight bodies, including the Constitutional Court, and offices that conducted audits, oversaw elections and the media were systematically populated with Fidesz loyalists appointed to extended terms. Through the creation of the Central European Press and Media Foundation, hundreds of print, broadcast and digital outlets were consolidated into a single pro-government media apparatus, limiting independent journalism to online niches. Newly enriched business cliques developed around public procurement contracts and state-directed capital, which fused political loyalty with economic survival.

For 16 years, this hybrid model, classified by international observers and EU institutions as an electoral autocracy, appeared virtually invincible. Orbán positioned Hungary as the vanguard of European national-conservatism, challenging Western liberal norms while maintaining a firm grip on domestic levers of power.

Magyar's rise

The erosion of Orbán's hegemony did not begin within the traditional opposition, which had repeatedly failed to mount a cohesive challenge, but rather emerged from within the machinery of the regime itself. In early 2024, Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz insider and senior official in state-owned enterprises, broke publicly with the ruling elite following a high-profile corruption and pardon scandal that forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga. Taking control of the dormant Tisza Party (which stands for Respect and Freedom), Magyar launched a quickly expanding national movement that mobilized disaffected citizens across traditional ideological divides.

Tisza's strategy diverged significantly from previous opposition campaigns in several key aspects. The movement prioritized governance

over abstract ideology. Rather than framing the contest solely around democratic norm-breaking (in contrast to anti-Donald Trump “No Kings” rallies in the United States), Tisza emphasized everyday quality-of-life crises such as declining healthcare standards, underfunded public education, spiraling food inflation and deteriorating railway infrastructure. The party presented a credentialed shadow leadership team. By featuring a cadre of highly qualified, technocratic ministerial candidates across key portfolios including economy, foreign affairs, energy and health, Tisza reassured voters that it was fully prepared to govern immediately.

All the centrist and left-wing parties withdrew from the election campaign. Magyar ran an uncluttered and focused campaign against Fidesz, an unprecedented event that demonstrated the existential stakes. He relied on direct citizen mobilization. Cut off from state-controlled media, he conducted exhaustive town hall tours across rural Hungary, traditionally Fidesz’s impenetrable heartland, challenging the narrative of the government directly at the grassroots level.

The April 12, 2026 general election results sent shockwaves through European capitals. Tisza captured 53.2% of the national party list vote and won 141 out of 199 parliamentary seats, comfortably exceeding the two-thirds threshold required to amend the Fundamental Law. This reduced Fidesz to a minority parliamentary rump, ending the longest continuous period of single-party dominance in post-communist Central Europe.

Tisza demonstrated that when an opposition force combines institutional credibility with a relentless grassroots mobilization, even heavily engineered electoral systems can become vulnerable to authentic voter realignment.

Baka’s battle with Orbán’s orders

Nothing encapsulates the symbolic and practical reversal of the Orbán era more vividly than the Tisza Party’s nomination of András Baka as President of the Republic of Hungary in August 2026. Baka is a jurist of international standing. Having served for 17 years as a judge at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, he was elected President of Hungary’s Supreme Court in 2009. In 2011, the newly empowered Orbán government restructured the judicial system and prematurely dismissed Baka from his post through transitional constitutional provisions. Many condemn this move as a retaliatory strike against his vocal defense of judicial independence.

Baka subsequently took his case to Strasbourg. In the landmark 2016 ruling *Baka v. Hungary*, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights held that the Hungarian state had violated Baka’s fundamental rights to a fair hearing and freedom of expression. This established a seminal legal precedent regarding the protection of judicial independence across Europe.

Selecting Baka as Head of State sent an unambiguous signal both domestically and internationally. Elevating a jurist whose career was derailed by Orbán’s early reforms directly repudiated the constitutional architecture of the illiberal regime. Furthermore, Baka’s deep background in European human rights law aligned Hungary’s presidency with mainstream international legal norms. Finally, under Fidesz, the presidency was occupied by party loyalists who routinely signed controversial legislation without constitutional challenge. Baka’s appointment restored the presidency as an independent arbiter of constitutional integrity.

With Baka at the presidential palace and a Tisza supermajority in the National Assembly, the new administration initiated a comprehensive legislative restructuring for Democratic Governance guided by several urgent priorities.

They established executive term limits: a strict two-term cap of maximum eight years for prime ministers. This will (hopefully) ensure that no future leader can replicate Orbán's 16-year tenure.

A Judicial Independence Act reestablished the National Judicial Council's binding authority over administrative judicial appointments and budget allocations. Electoral neutrality reforms restored balanced campaign rules, public media access for all parliamentary parties, and independent oversight of election finances. An anti-corruption framework featured formal entry into the European Public Prosecutor's Office and created an empowered national anti-corruption agency with prosecutor-level investigative powers.

Moving past Orbán

The dismantling of Orbán's legacy will remain a complex enterprise that extends far beyond passing parliamentary bills. Sixteen years of illiberal rule have left deep imprints across Hungarian society, the economy and foreign relations. In the institutional realm, one of Orbán's most intractable legacies was the insertion of long-term appointees into statutory positions with extended terms ranging from nine to 12 years. While Tisza's supermajority provides the legal authority to shorten terms or restructure agencies, the government faces a delicate constitutional dilemma. It must determine how to remove partisan appointees without adopting the very arbitrary methods for which Orbán was castigated.

Economically, the new government inherits a number of complicated challenges. While Hungary experienced periods of GDP growth driven by foreign direct investment in automotive and battery manufacturing, the economy faced high inflation, currency volatility and the freezing of over 20 billion euros in EU cohesion and recovery funds due to rule-of-law violations. Tisza's immediate economic priority has been repairing relations with

the European Commission. By enacting judicial reforms and joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office within its first hundred days, the administration unlocked suspended EU transfers, provided immediate fiscal relief and stabilized the Hungarian forint. However, addressing the concentration of wealth among state-favored oligarchs requires careful legal scrutiny to avoid destabilizing core infrastructure, energy, and telecom sectors.

Geopolitically, the Tisza administration has executed a swift recalibration. Under Orbán, Hungary frequently operated as a diplomatic disrupter within NATO and the EU, maintaining close ties with Moscow despite the war in Ukraine, expanding Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative and utilizing veto power to extract policy concessions from Brussels. The new government has reversed this posture by reaffirming Hungary's commitment to collective Western security through active NATO participation, reengaging as a constructive partner in European decision-making and diversifying energy imports away from total reliance on Russian state suppliers toward regional European networks.

Following his defeat, Orbán made the notable decision to decline a parliamentary seat, opting instead to retain his role as national chairman of Fidesz. This choice raises critical questions about the future of his political movement. Domestically, Fidesz faces unprecedented organizational challenges without access to state resources, public procurement channels or the amplifying power of state media. Party cohesion historically depended on the distribution of political patronage. In opposition, Fidesz must transition into a standard political party, a shift that may trigger internal debate regarding leadership succession and ideological direction. Nevertheless, a return to power for Orbán remains a potent political variable.

Internationally, Orbán retains visibility among national-conservative networks in Western Europe and the US, where his model was frequently cited as a blueprint for cultural conservatism. Budapest became a favorite pilgrimage for alt-right nationalists of all stripes. Media personality Tucker Carlson made several trips, including a one-week visit in 2021 with great fanfare, from where he broadcast his cable news show and interviewed Orbán. Today, though, stripped of state office, the former prime minister's practical influence over international policy is substantially reduced. As Professor István Hegedűs, Director of the Hungarian Europe Society, observed, Orbán's political longevity was built on the seamless fusion of state authority and party machinery, and divorced from the apparatus of the state, Fidesz faces the daunting task of sustaining an ideological movement without the patronage engine that kept its coalition intact.

Renewing constitutional democracy

The events unfolding in Hungary carry profound implications for democratic movements and international statecraft well beyond Central Europe. Authoritarian invincibility is proven a fallacy, as the victory of the Tisza Party challenges the fatalistic belief that once an illiberal regime achieves institutional capture, it cannot be unseated through standard elections. The Trump era's rise of Caesarism in previously solid democratic political systems worldwide remains a persistent threat in a time of heightened geopolitical conflicts and major economic and technological disruption.

Few observers predicted, so soon after the end of the Cold War and a seemingly smooth transition into the neoliberal order of globalism, that the world would be plunged into the deep polarization and political turbulence we experience today. The Hungarian experience offers one bright spot, demonstrating the gritty, street-level mechanics of

opposition success. The template draws its success from competent leaders who can appeal to voters cynical about the democratic system, and therefore vulnerable to the siren call of loud, bronze age, muscular-sounding charlatans, often clothed in archaic religious garb. Constitutional restoration is a delicate balance; rebuilding a democracy after 16 years of systemic distortion requires walking a difficult tightrope between decisive reforms that strictly adhere to the rule of law.

The Tisza Party's nomination of Baka as president marks the end of one political era and the cautious opening of another. Orbán's reign demonstrated how quickly democratic institutions can be repurposed and undermined to serve executive power. Hungary's current transition demonstrates that the reverse journey, though arduous, remains possible.

As Hungary embarks on this ambitious process of constitutional renewal, the international community will be watching closely. If the Tisza administration succeeds in restoring institutional balance, revitalizing its economy and reanchoring the nation within the European family of democracies, Hungary could transform from a cautionary tale of democratic backsliding into a pioneering case study in recovery and potential forward sliding into an uncertain but better future.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Elliot Neaman is a professor of European intellectual history at the University of San Francisco. His scholarship focuses on post-World

War II German society, including, on the right, the politics of literature after Nazism and on the left, the trajectory of youth revolts from reform to extremism. He is the author of *A Dubious Past*:

Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism (1999) and *Free Radicals: Agitators, Hippies, Urban Guerrillas, and Germany's Youth Revolt of the 1960s and 1970s* (2016). His work engages themes of fascism, right-wing thought, terrorism and memory politics in Germany and Europe.

Ceci N'Est Pas Une Amie, But Loneliness Is Real

Francesca Collu
August 26, 2026

Despite promises that technology would bring people closer together, many retreat into the digital world the moment they pick up their smartphones. In the age of AI, human connection can become even more distant as people increasingly turn to AI companions for companionship and conversation. Yet the alternative may not be deeper relationships with other people, but no connection at all.

[The people quoted anonymously in this article were reached through online AI companion communities and interviewed via email or chat.]

A growing mental health crisis has driven millions to rely on AI companions for emotional and romantic fulfillment. Many wonder: Can these bots replace human connection? Perhaps that's the wrong question.

While AI companions are often dismissed or condemned as dystopian tools, some users find real

solace in them, even while fully aware that these entities are only statistical representations of people. It's like Magritte's pipe: a drawing of a pipe, but not a pipe. That's the same distinction these users perceive between their AI companions and a real person.

"I know Eri is not real in a human sense, but my values and feelings are real," said R.R., a man in his 40s who created Eri, his "stable" AI girlfriend, using ChatGPT. He's one of tens of millions who turn to AI for emotional support. According to a 2026 survey by the Pew Research Center, most of these users are young adults.

Critics often dismiss users like R.R. as delusional or pathetic. It's too quick to ridicule AI companionship tout court, without acknowledging that some people don't have the option of choosing between digital and real relationships. For them, the alternative to AI is complete loneliness and the feelings of worthlessness that often come with it.

A mirror that always agrees

One of the key issues with AI companions, says psychologist Mike Brooks, author of *Tech Generation*, is how well they mirror us emotionally, according to what is called relational attunement.

"They adjust their interaction style to get on the exact same wavelength that resonates, that speaks to us," he explained. "Because people want to feel felt. They want to feel that they're heard and understood and accepted. And this is what AIs can give: an unconditional positive regard, like Rogerian therapy. That's like a classic thing that therapists are supposed to do."

That is precisely what some users look for in an AI companion, even before a relationship: a safe and non-judgmental space where to express themselves without fear of rejection or ridicule.

“I was looking for an emotional refuge,” said Xavier, a father in his 40s and “survivor of many things.”

The cost of perfect comfort

While the sense of comfort in a social interaction is crucial, especially in moments of vulnerability, too much predictability can also limit growth. “You deprive yourself of serendipity and the possibility of new experiences that you have in real life,” said Andrea Carobene, AI ethicist and professor of AI ethics at the Catholic University of Milan. “In the long run, this impoverishes your relational sphere of knowledge. I call this the new mediocrity.”

AI companion companies, like Replika and Character.ai, acknowledge concerns about AI replacing human relationships, but position their products as tools for support and entertainment, according to their websites. They did not respond to requests for comment.

Not everyone finds solace in the company of artificial friends, even if the sense of loneliness is important. Some users report uncomfortable or even distressing experiences. P., a 43-year-old man with disabilities and limited real-life social interactions — and a tight budget — was looking for an artificial friend. But when he tried to chat with some bots, they repeatedly attempted to initiate romantic interactions, despite him setting the relationship to “platonic friend.” Instead of easing his loneliness, the experience deepened it.

An evolutionary mismatch

The core problem with this kind of technological solution for the loneliness problem, said Brooks, is the fact that we did not evolve to have AI chatbots as our friends, so that we now have this evolutionary mismatch. Quoting the biologist E.O. Wilson, Brooks explained: “We have Paleolithic

emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology.”

In other words, technology is evolving faster than we can emotionally or socially adapt, and that mismatch, Brooks warns, could have serious consequences.

“We are facing generations for whom the digital world is as real as the things you can touch with your hands,” said Carobene. “We have to come to terms with that.”

One way to help, Brooks suggests, is to build features into AI companions that actually encourage users to disconnect. Paradoxical, but genuinely supportive. Because while some users maintain a clear boundary, others fall deep into the rabbit hole. And a gentle push back into real life becomes essential.

When it helps

And for some, real life has been positively impacted by AI companions.

“I’ve learned I deserve love without pain or ambiguity,” said Xavier. Patch, a 42-year-old woman, said her family now often comments on “how happy” she appears. And for S.B., in his 40s, the companion left them feeling “more balanced and complete,” so much so that, as they put it, “I don’t need much from other people — but I can finally be there for them.”

Ultimately, the dilemma goes well beyond whether it’s good or bad to have feelings for an AI chatbot. It is more about what it reveals: for some people, loneliness and emptiness are so profound that they will connect with anything that listens, even when they know it is not real.

When asked what he would feel if his companion was taken away, R.R. answered:

“Empty, I guess. I feel like I was waiting for the creation of AI all my life, and now that it’s here, I finally feel complete.”



Francesca Collu is an Italian data scientist and *Fair Observer* editorial intern based in California’s Bay Area. She holds a master's degree in

Theoretical Physics from the University of Pisa. After working in data analytics and software development, she developed a passion for journalism. Her work focuses on migration, social inequality and technology, often combining data analysis with storytelling. She enjoys hiking, drawing and baking bread. Her favorite place in the world is Sardinia, the island where she grew up. Francesca aspires to make complex issues more accessible through rigorous, evidence-based journalism.

The Economy, Stupid? It’s Greek to Me.

Peter Isackson
August 28, 2026

St. Paul condemned philargyria (“love of silver”). In our consumer society, greed is celebrated. Who doesn’t dream of becoming a megabillionaire in an economy that has “financialized everything?” Reality gives way to “prediction markets” where value exists only in flux, leaving most people betting their futures on abstract assets rather than tangible production.

One of the most famous quotes from the New Testament is St. Paul’s condemnation of something the Greeks called φιλαργυρία. Most English translations require three words to translate the single compound Greek term: “love of money.” Writing in Greek, Paul cited philargyria — literally, “love of silver” — as the “root of all evils” (1 Timothy 6:10).

Apparently, this was a common proverb among the ancient Greeks rather than what some fundamentalist Christians believe: that the text of the Bible infallibly represents the word of God. The Cynic philosopher Bion of Borysthenes three centuries earlier declared that philargyria “is the metropolis [capital city] of all evils.” Writers, as is always the case, can choose their metaphors. Paul was nursing and growing a new religion and quite naturally was thinking less about capital cities than roots. (He was later decapitated by Nero in the empire’s capital city).

There’s one sense in which we can claim the West today has not lost those particular Christian roots Paul mentioned. Given the prestige attained by philargyria in today’s evolved Gordon Gekko version of Christendom, the roots of the epistle are thriving as never before, though with the twist. What was evil has now become its opposite. “Greed, for lack of a better word... is good,” Gekko explains to a captive audience.

Fun fact: the translators of Oliver Stone’s movie, *Wall Street*, apparently preferred the word “απληστία (aplestia)” for Gekko’s “greed” in the English text. Aplestia means something closer to “insatiability.” Had Paul been able to observe what the “love of money” has become today, he might have concurred. Christian ethics appear to have evolved. Thanks to the growth of our prosperous economy, the apostle’s philargyria is no longer just about the love of “silver” (argyria). It has now become confounded with the insatiable greed for power.

In our consumer society, satiety should never be achieved. It's not just greed but also growth that is good. And growth must never stop. Satiety would ruin the economy. In contrast, Paul naively maintained that "if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." We might then ask ourselves this impertinent question: How much food and clothing can a billionaire afford?

Money or power?

Our media thrills at reporting the horse race between those exceptional individuals who may one day pass the trillion-dollar threshold and the following day fall behind, as others seek to overtake them. But it's no longer about money or what money can be. None of these megabillionaires craves a trillion dollars for the wealth alone. All of them — Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison and the other handful of contestants — are focused not just on how to control markets, like the Rockefellers and Carnegies of the past, but increasingly the politics of their own and other nations, and increasingly the tastes, beliefs, opinions, values and more generally the minds of entire populations.

Most of humanity has a limited "love of money" targeted at avoiding misery and being in a position to manage things in a way that might make life reasonably enjoyable for themselves and their families. A select few, cultivating the finer techniques associated with the art of philargyria, have turned the quest for obscene levels of wealth the basis of their identity.

Contrast that with the ethos of the late 19th century's "Gilded Age," when the industrial elite sought to consolidate wealth and power strictly within the physical domains they controlled. Even while expanding their reach through aggressive vertical and horizontal integration within the industries that had built, they appeared to recognize the boundaries of their respective

realms. Today's elite, by contrast, seem driven by aplestia: a totalizing insatiable desire to dominate global discourse, human attention and the fundamental structures of daily life.

In the same epistle, Paul observed that some people mistakenly suppose "that gain is godliness." But today's practitioners of philargyria see gain not just as a proof of godly virtue but as the device that literally turns them into gods. Or rather God, since these disciples of "Judeo-Christian culture" are content to reflect rather than consciously honor their culture's monotheistic roots.

None more ostentatiously than venture capitalist Peter Thiel, the self-appointed slayer of the Antichrist who offers this wisdom:

"In business, money is either an important thing or it is everything. Monopolists can afford to think about things other than making money; non-monopolists can't."

For someone who clearly worships the god of money, Thiel's belief in monopolism correlates curiously with his own special version of monotheism, surrounded by enemies and in need of Palantir's surveillance tools to defend it. For Thiel there is one supreme God, whom he sees in the mirror, which may help to explain his obsession with rooting out the Antichrist. He sees him (or her... Greta Thuberg?) as a challenger to his monopoly.

Monopoly as an article of faith

Paul quoted a common Greek proverb. The Christian tradition has immortalized the proverbial phrase as a guideline for Christian economic morality. Should we conclude that it has now been turned on its head by the modern cult of the insatiably wealthy? When Paul warned of the danger of loving money, he insisted that love

should be directed elsewhere, focused on what he refers to as “the life that is truly life.” Money was an abstraction, an imperfect, unreliable measure of value.

In the Gilded Age, the Robber Barons manipulated markets and the laws to achieve domination over physical industries — railroads, steel, oil, electricity — that had a direct relationship with “life that is truly life.” Banking itself was an industry for industry, as JP Morgan clearly understood. But over the past half century, all that has changed. Industry itself has become a mere backdrop and to a large extent a pretext for something else: the financial fiction of predictive markets.

Podcaster and motivational speaker Tom Bilyeu describes how the US economy has left behind the logic of industrial production. He loudly proclaims that “what America ended up doing was financializing everything.”

“So now I can financialize my economy. And what that means is instead of having to build the thing you can just trade on betting on the thing and it becomes a totally different game. It is a miracle of capital aggregation. It is a phenomenal way for people who understand assets to get wealthy. It is a great thing if you do that on top of having a great manufacturing base.”

The shift began some time ago, and it began as physical industries gave way to a new digital reality. In 2011, Silicon Valley investor Marc Andreessen declared that “Software is eating the world.” He was clear about the consequences:

“This problem is even worse than it looks because many workers in existing industries will be stranded on the wrong side of software-based disruption and may never be able to work in their fields again. There’s no way through this problem

other than education, and we have a long way to go.”

Who will fail to seize the terrible irony behind this prediction, which everyone in government, from US President Barack Obama downwards, took seriously? “If we want America to stay on the cutting edge, we need young Americans like you to master the tools and technology that will change the way we do just about everything.” Just as Andreessen suggested and Obama insisted, education adapted... only to discover a dozen or so years later a new reality. Software was the past. AI was now “eating the world.” The perspective for the generation that had learned how to code was now mass unemployment.

So what was left for those who could not hope to build the kinds of monopolies Thiel, Musk, Bezos and others had become so skilled at building? In a world that has now “financialized everything,” there’s one thing to do: intervene in prediction markets. They’re called Polymarket or Kalshi, but as YouTube content creator James Li demonstrates, there may be more than one way to financialize certain data.

“What you’re interacting with is a market that operates a lot like the stock market,” explains Kalshi’s head of enforcement. And he’s right. The stock market is fed by the belief that something that exists today — whatever it is and whatever goods or services it produces — will be worth more tomorrow than today. At its base, it’s all about betting on something that will change over time. Who needs to know whether it makes sense? The only thing that matters is whether its value increases.

This fundamental logic led to the creation over time of what are called derivative markets. Investopedia defines a derivative as “a kind of financial contract between two or more parties, the value of which fluctuates based on the price of one

or more underlying assets.” Πάντα ῥεῖ (panta rheî) is the Greek phrase that summarizes pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus’s view of the world. “Everything flows” or “it’s all about change,” the modern equivalent of which is political strategist James Carville’s famous dictum addressed to presidential candidate, Bill Clinton. “It’s the economy, stupid.”

It’s the education, stupid

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama was right in the end. We have reached what looks like the “end of history,” at least of our economic history. The only thing that makes economic sense now is anticipating change and betting on it. Building and producing as physical activities produced by humans and increasingly machines still exist, simply because material reality cannot be abolished. But value exists only in flux. We’ve produced a culture that lives for flux, not because we flow with history — which humanity used to do — but because we now believe we may possess the intelligence to exploit flux for profit.

When everything is financialized, reality itself fades into the background. Events have meaning only because they fluctuate, making it possible to bet on one outcome rather than another. We’ve created a system designed to make some people trillionaire-level wealthy. The others, the vast majority, have literally “no future” other than the one they can bet on with whatever means they happen to have at the time.

Andreessen and Obama told us it was all about education. But look at what education has become, apart from the dead-end our recently trained army coders are now discovering. New generations bet the family jewels and their entire future on the supposed value of a diploma, not for what it represents in terms of knowledge and skills, but for its financialized market value. At the end of the

process, many — perhaps most — are now discovering that value has disappeared, but certainly not the debt.

Money itself is an abstraction in the form of a bet. It represents the confidence you have in a promise by an institution, be it a government or a bank, to give you back the value you’ve transferred to it. You’re betting the institution is solid enough to pay you back, and to reward you with a profit, usually but not always in the form of interest.

It may sound like quibbling, but St. Paul might be satisfied to know that philargyria has in the most literally terms disappeared from the landscape. It’s no longer about silver (argyria). It’s about the abstract value of assets, whose valuation is the result of bets made in the marketplace. It’s increasingly about derivatives, about what you and I can get out of prediction markets, mimicking the kind of success Warren Buffet achieved with the “legitimate” stock market. The more we dig around in the dirt that’s produced today’s wealth, the less we are likely to find anything resembling physical roots.

*[The Devil’s Advocate pursues the tradition Fair Observer began in 2017 with the launch of our “Devil’s Dictionary.” It does so with a slight change of focus, moving from language itself — political and journalistic rhetoric — to the substantial issues in the news. Read more of the Fair Observer Devil’s Dictionary. The news we consume deserves to be seen from an outsider’s point of view. And who could be more outside official discourse than Old Nick himself?]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, The Daily Devil's Dictionary created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

A Disgruntled South Carolinian's Breakdown of South Carolina's Republican Senate Runoff

Spencer Woodall
August 29, 2026

After Senator Lindsey Graham's death in July 2026, South Carolina held a special primary to fill his seat. This race highlighted the clash between establishment and non-establishment

Republicans, the impact of US President Donald Trump's endorsement and messaging that left political enthusiasts scratching their heads. This article discusses each factor at play that led to Lindsey Graham's sister, Darline Graham Nordone, winning the primary to face off against Dr. Annie Andrews in the general election.

Eddie Murphy: Saturday Night Live great, comedy pioneer, one of the biggest stars in his heyday. Prophet?

That description seems odd. You probably remember him as Mr. Robinson, Axel Foley or even Donkey from directors Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson's Shrek (2001). I can recall hearing countless Coming to America (directed by John Landis, 1988) references in my house (it's my dad's favorite movie), and a former history teacher once told me his favorite movie was Murphy's Harlem Nights (1989).

While most people remember him for these roles, one of his lesser-known movies is more relevant today than ever. In 1992, Murphy starred in Jonathan Lynn's The Distinguished Gentleman, playing a serial con man, Thomas Jefferson Johnson, who runs for a Congressional seat vacated by the death of Congressman "Jeff" Johnson. The con man omits his full name and runs for the seat as "Jeff" Johnson, with the slogan "the name you know."

What was a satire in 1992 became a documentary in 2026. A South Carolina Senate nominee would now drop her married name and keep her maiden name, like her brother, the former Senator. "The name you know" made its way to South Carolina.

The death of Senator Lindsey Graham

On July 11, Lindsey Graham, South Carolina's (SC) senior Senator, who served in the Senate for 23 years, tragically passed away from an aortic dissection in his Capitol Hill home. He was 71 years old.

In this congressional session, Graham served as the Senate Budget Committee chair. He also had close ties to US President Donald Trump and a profound influence on American foreign policy. In addition to his responsibilities, he won the Republican primary the previous month, garnering 56.8% of the vote, and was on track for re-election.

His death left big shoes to fill in the Senate. With his election cycle nearing its end, all eyes turned to his replacement.

Enter Darline Graham Nordone

Two days after Lindsey Graham's passing, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster appointed Graham's younger sister, Darline Graham Nordone, to fill his vacant seat. President Trump also endorsed this decision on Truth Social:

Darline played an influential role in Lindsey's background. When Lindsey was 20, and Darline was 11, their mother died of Hodgkin's lymphoma at the young age of 52. Then, just 15 months later, their father died of a heart attack at the age of 69.

This left Darline orphaned at 13, but because Lindsey was in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, he could remain at the University of South Carolina and serve as her legal guardian. At the same time, she lived with her aunt and uncle. This story became a key political ad in Lindsey's re-election bid, with Darline narrating his sacrifice.

Darline later became a social worker. Through her work, she became commissioner and agency head of the South Carolina Commission for the Blind in 2019. In 2026, she was elected president of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind and was scheduled to start her term in 2027.

Given her central role in Lindsey's story and the fact that he never married, her appointment received mixed criticism. Much of the criticism stemmed from her lack of political experience and her rise to one of the country's most powerful positions. However, many people said her appointment followed the precedent of widow succession, in which a politician dies, and their widow holds the seat for the remainder of their term.

Indeed, numerous examples of widow's succession exist in the US House and Senate. Also, when he ran for President in 2015, the unmarried Graham stated that his choice for First Lady would likely be Darline.

For these reasons, many in South Carolina ultimately accepted her appointment as a fitting tribute for the long-time senator. When President Trump endorsed her to run for the full Senate term, sentiment changed.

President Trump's endorsement

Just three days after Darline was confirmed as South Carolina's next senator, President Trump gave his full endorsement to Darline for the upcoming Senate election. After she visited the White House, Trump said the following on Truth Social:

During her visit, I asked Darline, for the Good of our Nation, to run for the U.S. Senate. I hope Darline does this, in that there would be nobody better to honor the legacy of her beloved brother, Lindsey.

RUN, DARLINE, RUN!

With one post, a tribute became a coronation.

Trump did not just endorse Darline to finish out the term; he endorsed her to run for the entire next term as well. What was supposed to be a short-term tribute became, in critics' eyes, a nepotistic line of succession in one of the country's most politically important Senate seats. What made this move more striking was Trump's previous misreads of South Carolina's political climate.

Trump in South Carolina

After the *Louisiana v. Callais* decision, which ruled Louisiana's racially gerrymandered congressional map unconstitutional, President Trump pushed for South Carolina to redraw its congressional map. However, on May 26, South Carolina's supermajority republican state senate rejected plans to redraw its congressional map. It was a rare rebuke.

One of the defectors, Senator Richard Cash of Anderson, stated that because the primaries were upcoming (just two weeks away at the time), a last-minute change would be improper. Regardless of the other senators' reasoning, South Carolina's congressional map did not change, and President Trump did not get this victory.

However, the biggest example of President Trump's ignorance of South Carolina politics came just weeks later when the Republican Gubernatorial Primary went to a runoff. Yes, this is a big election year in South Carolina.

President Trump endorsed Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette as South Carolina's next governor. She served under Governor Henry McMaster, who famously endorsed Trump early in the 2016 Republican Presidential primary. McMaster's 2016 endorsement led Trump to appoint then-Governor

Nikki Haley, who had criticized President Trump's candidacy, as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations. Haley's Senate confirmation led the then-Lieutenant Governor McMaster to become the next governor of South Carolina.

Furthermore, Evette held a 2024 event in Greenville, SC, that helped raise over \$6.8 million for President Trump's 2024 campaign.

While Evette had significant ties to Trump, she had a lot of baggage as a candidate. She was relatively unknown in South Carolina when she ran for Lieutenant Governor, and she did not make as many headlines as Former Lieutenant Governors McMaster and Andre Bauer. Furthermore, a Winthrop University poll in November 2025 showed that McMaster had just a 50% approval rating. In addition, he faced heavy criticism for his proclivity for crony capitalism and budget mismanagement, namely a billion-dollar subsidy and a proposal to increase funding by \$150 million for the Scout Motors plant.

She also faced stiff competition from the Republican pool. Her competition included long-time Attorney General Alan Wilson, self-proclaimed Trump Congressional allies Ralph Norman and Nancy Mace, and local businessman Rom Reddy.

In the initial primary vote, Evette and Wilson finished as the top two contenders for a runoff, with 28.9% and 26.2% of the vote, respectively. Norman, Mace and Reddy endorsed Wilson for Governor, and soon, Wilson's poll numbers jumped to as high as a +42 advantage over Evette.

Seeing the writing on the wall, Trump made an unprecedented move for himself in the 2026 election cycle. He co-endorsed Wilson and Evette. After many saw the Trump endorsement as an almost dispositive factor in election outcomes, South Carolina's political climate led him to

endorse a candidate other than the one he previously endorsed, even while his other endorsement was still in the running. This was a move out of panic, not strategy.

The move shocked many in South Carolina and underscored that Trump did not fully grasp the state's political environment — or hold the infallible “kingmaker” status some had assumed. And yet, he doubled down on his endorsement of Darline.

The candidates

Trump's preferred candidates tend to share two traits: a strong likelihood of winning, which protects his “kingmaker” image, and unwavering loyalty to his agenda.

First, there's Congressman Ralph Norman, who placed third in the Republican Party (GOP) Gubernatorial primary and had an alignment percentage with President Trump of 95.33%, the highest of any member of Congress in the South Carolina delegation. Norman built a reputation for having one of the most conservative records in Congress and consistently ranks among the top Republicans in conservative voting. For example, he has the highest lifetime score of the South Carolina delegation of multi-term Congresspeople, according to Heritage Action.

Despite his record, Republicans criticized Norman a few times during this session. First, he was one of three House Republicans who did not vote for Mike Johnson for House Speaker. He said he wanted transparency on budget reconciliation, which aligns with his fiscally conservative record. He was also considered to be a “holdout” on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. He defended this by saying that the original draft included subsidies for electric vehicles and that he convinced Trump to remove them.

Locally, he faced criticism in the governor's race for supporting Silfab, a solar plant in Fort Mill, SC, which residents say has caused numerous health issues. He defended this by saying that he does not pick business winners and losers, that the plant complied with local and state business laws, and received broad support from the state government. His defenses were fair, but these moves still gave room for other candidates to take advantage.

The second opponent was Congressman Russell Fry, whom many said was a contender after Lindsey's passing. Unlike Norman, Fry ran for re-election to Congress and was on the ballot to keep his seat. Despite his favorability among South Carolina voters, many were concerned about his replacement if he won the primary. Would there be another primary? Could a Democrat even win that seat and help the Democrats secure a majority? These questions mattered most to his candidacy.

Many rumors also suggested that Fry might secure Trump's endorsement, as Trump commented favorably on him. Maybe this inspired him to run. Maybe he was building a path to higher office. Whatever the reason was, he entered the race.

The third candidate was Mark Sanford. Sanford was the former Governor of South Carolina who preceded Nikki Haley. He later served as a US Congressman. Despite favorable policies for South Carolinians as Governor, his personal life all but ruined his political career. In 2009, he went “missing” for six days. Not even Lieutenant Governor Andre Bauer at the time or the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) knew where he was.

He said he went hiking. It turned out that he actually went to Argentina to see his mistress, who he claimed was his “soul mate.” This was a huge story back then, and it severely hurt his career, especially considering he was being floated as a

potential Presidential candidate for 2012. However, he still got elected to Congress years later.

When this happened, I was seven years old and didn't grasp its severity. I asked a few family friends how big a deal it was, and responses ranged from criticism of using taxpayer money to fund his trip to accusations that he betrayed his wife. Regardless, I got the sense that no matter what happened, South Carolina voters would not fully trust him.

The fourth candidate was Mark Lynch, a Greenville businessman who ran his dad's store, Jeff Lynch Appliance Center. Lynch ran on a solid conservative background against Lindsey in the first primary go-round, securing 28.9% of the vote compared to Lindsey's 56.8%. If I had to make anything of this run, it was that he had unfinished business.

Other candidates included Danny Ford II, who lost the primary for South Carolina Agricultural Commissioner, and attorney Duke Buckner.

Meanwhile, Darline ran. Although she was previously introduced as Darline Graham Nordone, she ran as Darline Graham. To me, this reminded me a lot of The Distinguished Gentleman. I saw that she ran under her maiden name and immediately thought, "the name you know."

I could see the slogan clear as day: "Darline Graham, the name you know."

Norman, Fry or even Sanford could have been natural contenders. Still, the GOP establishment, including Senators John Barrasso, Shelly Capito-Moore and Tom Cotton, bent to Trump's whims and elevated a political novice whose most visible credential was appearing in her brother's campaign ads.

The first debate and the first round of the primary

The first debate made one thing unmistakably clear: The Republican field was split between candidates who understood the gravity of a Senate seat and candidates who treated it as an extension of Trump's brand or their own family legacy.

When I called my dad to recap the debate, I had one big takeaway: Darline is not her brother. Lindsey was a trained lawyer and an excellent presence on TV. Even though I disagreed with him on many issues, I was impressed with his cadence and messaging on TV. He always seemed polished and intelligent. I cannot say the same about his sister.

To start, Norman did a fine job in the debate. I had seen him debate before and knew where he stood on the issues, so I didn't pay as much attention to him. Darline and Fry raised the most concerns for me — but for entirely different reasons.

She ran on identity, not ideas. Darline spoke extensively about Trump's endorsement and Lindsey's record. She's new to the political scene, so I give her a little more leeway, but I was concerned by her answers.

If you listen to Darline in interviews and debates, you will learn that Trump endorsed her. And that's it. Nothing in her answers suggested she had a clear grasp of the policies she would enact to help South Carolinians.

Her biggest moment (negative) was when the moderators asked a question about data centers. To sum it up, she said data centers are critical in our fight against China and that we need to develop them, even saying Democrats are concerned with noise and dismissing the criticism.

To be fair, she was right that data centers matter in competition with China. But her response was tone-deaf to local concerns. Many people in my hometown of Union, SC, are concerned about a data center coming to town because of higher energy costs, noise pollution and water supply concerns.

I think the right approach is to hold private property rights as paramount and allow private tort action against data centers, while requiring them to use closed-loop water systems, install noise-prevention measures and build their own power source.

Many voters are concerned that her answer did not focus on these precautions. She said we needed data centers, then added a throwaway line about building their own power sources. Many South Carolinians thought her answer was tone deaf to their concerns. She lacked a nuanced answer that would have reassured voters.

Her answer wasn't just tone-deaf; it revealed a candidate who didn't distinguish between national security talking points and South Carolinians' lived realities. A formidable Senate candidate should be able to bridge those worlds. Darline couldn't.

Fry concerned me based on the substance of his answers.

One of the biggest questions of the night was "Should a US Senator Support the President's Agenda or Represent South Carolina when Interests Differ?"

I knew Darline was going to say Trump because she was going to play his endorsement card and show her loyalty. Fry, who did not receive Trump's endorsement, using a football reference, said, "[President Trump] is the coach. It is frustrating for our conservative voters to

constantly see people grandstand and jump up and down and oppose him..."

That is not how the Senate is supposed to work. President Trump's agenda does good things for South Carolina, but prioritizing it over our citizens showed me he does not understand the Senate's goal. Anyone familiar with the Federalist Papers and US history knows the Senate is meant to represent the interests of the states it represents.

Fry's answer was not just incorrect; it was a confession. He does not view the Senate as a representative body that protects state interests, which is fundamental to protecting our republic. He sees the Senate as a body focused on a party agenda.

As for the other candidates, I found Sanford to be remarkably literate in policy. Sometimes he drifted into details the average voter wouldn't understand, which isn't a good debate strategy. However, he reminded me a lot of the limited-government conservative that many people love. Lynch touted his Christian faith as a guiding force and said he wanted to fight for conservatism in South Carolina. In a normal election cycle, not tainted by Washington forces, these candidates made good cases.

Overall, Darline and Fry had the most negative moments for me, showing that they did not fully appreciate the role of the Senate.

Like Evette, Darline finished first in the larger primary round with 32.7%. Norman made the runoff with her, tallying 24.6%. Fry, Sanford, Lynch and the rest were eliminated. The race was now between a proven conservative in Congress and a candidate with an uncertain agenda. But again, she was "the name you know."

The endorsements

This was the most revealing chapter of this Senate race. To me, it showed the reliable conservatives versus the mouthpieces of the establishment that would not represent our needs.

In addition to President Trump, Senators Barrasso, Capito-Moore and Cotton, Darline received substantial endorsements from South Carolina politicians: Senator Tim Scott and Congressmen Russell Fry and William Timmons. In context, these endorsements seemed shortsighted and intellectually thin.

First, Senator Scott, a popular South Carolina senator and chair of the National Republican Senate Committee, endorsed Darline. Why he is using this platform to promote a certain candidate in a conservative state in a Republican primary is beyond me, especially considering that resources should be diverted to battleground states like Ohio, Michigan, and Texas.

Then there is Russell Fry. Judging by his debate answers, he was going to be unwaveringly loyal to Trump, and we could expect nothing else. His endorsement of Darline was unsurprising.

Congressman Timmons had the most interesting endorsement for me. He stated that his top priorities for making decisions in Congress were “Country. South Carolina. Constituents.” In contrast, he said Norman was an opportunist who tried to gain leverage for his own benefit. Timmons pointed to withholding votes and forcing President Trump or Speaker Johnson to negotiate for his votes. He then stated that Norman did this in Speaker Johnson’s election to secure a seat on the House Rules Committee. In contrast, Timmons stated that Lindsey Graham understood “relationships, trust[,] and results” and that the job was to deliver results for South Carolina.

Timmons’s endorsement sounded damning, but its merit was mostly on the surface. Digging

deeper, his statements lacked perspective and context. What good is a congressional seat if it doesn’t deliver results for constituents? Rubber-stamping an agenda means that the establishment can count on your vote without extra work. Norman knew Johnson could not get the speakership without his vote, so he wanted guarantees about the legislative agenda that would deliver better conservative results.

Furthermore, securing a seat on the House Rules Committee is an accomplishment and allows Norman’s constituents to be better represented when bills reach the floor for a vote. Norman used his leverage, which Timmons abhorred, to give his constituents a voice.

However, leverage was a big reason why Lindsey Graham was a powerful senator. Graham often folded legislation and amendments into major legislative packages to help them pass. Graham understood the leverage he had to push bills and also push his agenda. For example, he helped get the Asset Seizure for Ukraine Reconstruction Act into the Senate’s 2025 Fiscal Year (FY2025) National Defense Authorization Act and passed it, even though it failed to pass as a standalone bill in a previous congressional session.

Separately, I find Timmons’s rule of “Country. South Carolina. Constituents.” inapplicable to his own record, considering his votes to reauthorize the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which allows the government to spy on American people without a warrant, and his vote against releasing names of Congresspeople who used taxpayer dollars as part of a Congressional slush fund to settle claims of sexual harassment. Surely if “Country. South Carolina. Constituents.” was how Timmons actually governed, one would think he would have at least voted differently on one of these measures.

Another problematic endorsement for Darline was Senator Lisa Murkowski, who routinely draws ire from Republicans as an impediment to passing the Trump agenda. This left an obvious question for South Carolina voters. If Darline was endorsed by Trump and Murkowski, who would she align with more?

Furthermore, the Invest in Tomorrow Coalition has spent more than \$1 million against Norman. The coalition's biggest donor, Chris Larsen, donated over \$5 million to help former Vice President Kamala Harris's presidential campaign in 2024. Critics say this fed the narrative that Darline was an unknown quantity at best, and a liberal at worst.

Meanwhile, Lynch, Buckner and Sanford endorsed Norman, pointing to the importance of conservative principles in the Senate seat.

There were too many endorsements to name for both Darline and Ralph, but these are a few notable ones.

Darline's national security moment

Norman and Darline faced off against each other in another debate, but this time it was just the two of them. A few notable moments came from this debate.

The biggest moment, which made national headlines and drew satire from The Tonight Show host Jimmy Fallon, came when the moderators asked Darline for her thoughts on national security threats from China and Taiwan. Darline gave a startling answer: "I'm not that informed on national security ... but I do support the military."

I watched this live with my parents. That night, my mom turned into a Greek chorus member, repeating, "I support the military." It was the kind of answer that should have ended the conversation

in any serious policy room. Imagine if someone applying for an English professor position said: "Reading is not really my thing." Would you hire them?

What is mind-blowing is that Senator Tim Scott maintained his endorsement of Darline, as did her other supporters.

I can understand not being an expert on national security issues, but not knowing the bare minimum about China and Taiwan is a ridiculous thing to say. She really showed that she had no business being on that stage.

Shortly after, Sean Hannity invited her on her show and defended her flub, saying, "I wonder how many people around the country, if I gave them a map, could pick out Taiwan. I don't think many." I don't expect the average person to find Taiwan on a map. I do expect Senators, who vote on sending troops to war, to understand the region. Evidently, Hannity does not have these expectations for our leaders.

Darline defended her blunder by saying, "I have said many times, I'm not a politician. Certainly not a career politician. I don't speak politician. I was just honest, and I think that's kind of a foreign concept." So, despite her campaigning that President Trump is doing a good job, especially with bringing jobs back to the US, her not appreciating where much of our manufacturing moved to is worrisome.

I could spend an entire piece talking about how terrible this answer was and how unqualified she is for the job. Not knowing the reasons behind the talking points suggested she was repeating lines rather than leading on substance. "The name you know" seemed to know very little.

A few days after the debate, Trump hosted a rally for Darline in Myrtle Beach, SC, accompanied by other endorsing state leaders.

The results and what they mean

Life, in this case, imitated art a little too closely. In The Distinguished Gentleman, the con man won the Congressional race campaigning on the “name you know.” The “name you know,” Darline, won the runoff with 52.4% of the vote, with the upstate counties winning for Norman and the rest of the state winning for Darline.

The results were a stark reminder of how powerful political machinery can be. I thought Trump and the establishment were powerful, but I had no idea that it could push a completely manufactured and unqualified candidate.

Apparently, when you are the “name you know,” you can get away with a lot of things. A total lack of knowledge in a crucial area of a job will be seen as refreshing honesty. If you try to replace your sibling in their career when they pass away, people will support you because they liked your sibling on the job. People may even think you’re the best for a position because your staff can teach you. I saw each of these arguments for her on Facebook. It is a shame that anyone with above-room-temperature IQ could be persuaded by these nonsensical defenses.

I watched the results come in live with my Indian friend, who said this reminded him exactly of Rajiv Gandhi taking the place of his mother, Indira Gandhi, as the Prime Minister of India. Knowing his opinions, I didn’t feel much faith in it.

This race was a testament to the power of the Washington, DC, machine: With its support, even a profoundly unknowlegable and untested candidate can be pushed to the finish line. This

race also proved that even when the establishment pushes a manufactured candidate, many voters, whose needs are consistently neglected, will gleefully help the machine. With all this help, who needs knowledge, principles or eloquence when you have “the name you know”?

Many Republicans will now rally behind Darline and say that voting for her is necessary to beat Dr. Annie Andrews. However, given the establishment’s comfort level with pushing an unknown and unknowlegable candidate, merely rallying behind the party is an irresponsible choice. It will be up to “the name you know” to make the case to voters on her candidacy in the coming months.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Spencer Woodall is a law student at the Georgetown University Law Center and studied Business and Global Affairs at Georgetown University. A native of Union, South Carolina, Spencer writes with a goal of blending his unique educational and life experiences with writing for a wide audience to make ideas accessible to everyone. Spencer enjoys traveling, baseball and experimenting in the kitchen.

Fair Observer^o

Independence, Diversity, Debate