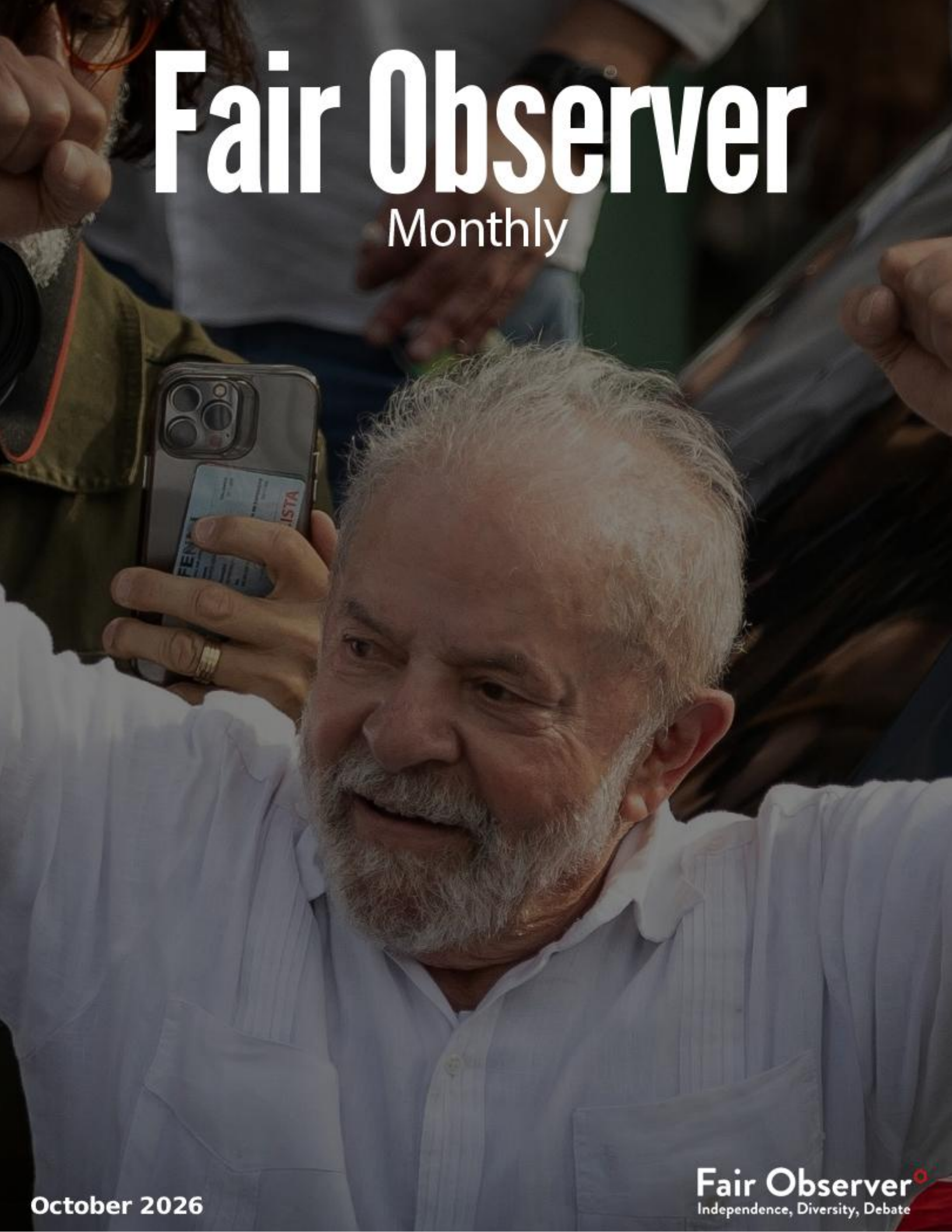
Fair Observer

Monthly



October 2026

Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



October 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: Isaac Fontana / 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

FO Talks: Trump's Dangerous New Playbook 8
Gary Grappo, Atul Singh

Trump, Nietzsche and the Art of Mistrust 10
Ellis Cashmore

Tracking Super Typhoon Bavi, from the Marianas to China 13
Francesca Collu

Rule, Cool or Cruel Britannia? A Nation Abused by Politicians, Corporates, Extremists and the Establishment 17
Alan Waring

Brazil Is the Country of the Devil — and God Knows Who the "Believers" Are 27
Luiz Cesar Pimentel

Peter Thiel: Prophet, Provocateur or Threat to Liberal Democracy? 31
Elliot Neaman

No More Trauma Porn: New Books and Therapy for Cult Recovery 36
Anke Richter

Will America's Democratic Flaws Be Its Undoing? 39
Duncan Ritchie

A Moment of Truth for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Wider Horn of Africa 51
Martin Plaut

Brazil's 2026 Elections: The Right Advances and Bolsonarism Endures 55
Helder Ferreira do Vale

From Import Dependency to the People's IPO: The Dangote Refinery Paradigm 59
Olawole Fajusigbe

We Will Never Forget the Brazilians Who Did It, nor the Brazilians Who Supported Them **62**
Luiz Cesar Pimentel

Lula's Historic Comeback in a Rightward-Shifting Brazil **65**
Helder Ferreira do Vale

Rubio's Greece Speech and the Relics of a Past That Never Was **69**
Alfredo Toro Hardy

Presidential Runoff in Bulgaria: What Is at Stake? **74**
Sophia Beiter

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.fairobserver.com/publish or contact us at submissions@fairobserver.com

FO Talks: Trump's Dangerous New Playbook

Gary Grappo, Atul Singh
October 03, 2026

In this episode of FO Talks, Atul Singh and Gary Grappo examine the Trump administration's threats against allies and approach to nuclear weapons. Unpredictable American leadership undermines security guarantees and encourages nuclear proliferation. Gary advocates sustained diplomacy, coordinated economic pressure on Iran and caution against nuclear escalation.

Editor-in-Chief Atul Singh and former US Ambassador Gary Grappo, who served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative Tony Blair in Jerusalem, examine the Trump administration's approach to allies, adversaries and nuclear weapons. They examine threats against Oman, doubts about American security commitments in East Asia and the risks of expanding nuclear options. As they express, unpredictable leadership weakens alliances and encourages countries to seek security through their own nuclear arsenals.

Threatening Oman undermines a longstanding alliance

Gary describes the Iran conflict as an "unnecessary war from the very beginning." He argues that Washington entered the campaign without a coherent strategy and is turning toward economic pressure because military action has failed to produce its expected victory. Iran's leadership has demonstrated resilience and remains committed to preserving the Islamic Republic.

Oman's position in the Strait of Hormuz makes diplomacy especially important. Gary explains that its territorial waters contain the deep channels used by large vessels entering and leaving the Gulf. Oman's negotiations with Iran therefore concern its sovereignty, maritime access and national interests.

The distinction between transit tolls and service fees matters. Gary distinguishes charging vessels simply to pass through the strait from charging for services such as emergency assistance or environmental cleanup. He notes that the negotiations remain opaque, while Oman has publicly affirmed its international obligations.

Washington should clarify these issues through conversations with a reliable partner. Threatening to bomb Oman instead turns a diplomatic disagreement into an assault on allied confidence. Gary calls such threats "unconscionable."

The problem extends beyond presidential rhetoric. Atul and Gary criticize reliance on Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff across major diplomatic portfolios. Concentrating negotiations among presidential confidants, while leaving diplomatic posts unfilled, deprives other governments of dependable channels for resolving disputes.

South Korea questions the American guarantee

Atul shifts the discussion to East Asia, where he describes growing anxiety about resources diverted toward Iran and American pressure on partners to support the war. Allies that were never consulted have little incentive to commit personnel or equipment to a campaign whose objectives remain unclear.

Gary regards South Korean skepticism as justified. Its security relationship with Washington involves shared planning, joint training, compatible weapons and closely aligned military doctrine. Suspending exercises therefore affects an integrated defense system and raises questions about the durability of American commitments.

He suspects the decision occurred without adequate analysis or consultation, while acknowledging that private communications may exist beyond public view. For South Korea, uncertainty is particularly dangerous because North Korea retains its nuclear arsenal and has abandoned reunification as a goal.

Gary dismisses the prospect of North Korean disarmament. A negotiated freeze might be possible, depending on what Washington offers, but eliminating the arsenal is another matter. Any engagement with Pyongyang must account for the security of American allies.

Atul argues that an unreliable guarantee strengthens South Korea's incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. Gary shares that concern and extends it beyond East Asia. Countries exposed to Russian threats, particularly Poland, could also reconsider dependence on external protection.

Modernization raises questions about nuclear restraint

Atul introduces Pentagon discussions about expanding nuclear options associated with Elbridge Colby. Gary distinguishes these debates from the longstanding existence of American tactical nuclear weapons and the modernization of the arsenal.

Lower yields and improved precision do not make nuclear use predictable. Gary explains that tactical weapons originally addressed fears of overwhelming conventional attacks during the Cold War. Renewed Russian aggression has revived questions about their potential military role.

Nevertheless, possessing options does not resolve the uncertainties surrounding their use. Other governments' responses could defy military planning, and escalation could become impossible to control.

For Gary, the source of alarm is presidential judgment. Allies and Americans worry about how Trump might employ capabilities that previous presidents approached with caution. Modernization becomes more unsettling when policy appears to change with successive social media posts.

Economic pressure offers an alternative to escalation

Atul reports arguments from young Republicans who favor tactical nuclear strikes against Iran to force surrender. Gary rejects their reasoning: "I don't think it would be effective." Such an attack could kill many people while hardening the leadership's determination.

He also challenges the assumption that disruption in Hormuz leaves no alternative. Economies can adjust through different supply routes, production changes, reduced consumption and infrastructure investment. These adaptations take time but offer a preferable response to nuclear escalation.

Gary advocates stronger sanctions, continued maritime pressure and coordination with allies. He acknowledges the severe hardship facing ordinary Iranians, while arguing that economic pressure could bring their leaders into negotiations.

The discussion ends with a warning. American power depends on credible commitments and sustained diplomacy. Threatening partners while

loosening nuclear restraint risks weakening both, leaving allies less secure and proliferation more attractive.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Gary Grappo is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korbel School for International Studies, University of Denver. He possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private and nonprofit endeavors. As a career member of the Senior Foreign Service of the US Department of State, he served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative, the Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, in Jerusalem. Grappo held a number of senior positions in the State Department, including Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the US Embassy in Baghdad, US Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, and Charge d'Affaires and Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Atul studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He worked as a corporate lawyer in London and served as an officer in India's volatile border areas where he had a few near-death experiences. Atul has also been a poet, playwright, sportsman, mountaineer and a founder of many organizations. His knowledge is eclectic, and his friends often joke that it comes in handy when access to Google is limited.

Trump, Nietzsche and the Art of Mistrust

Ellis Cashmore
October 04, 2026

US President Donald Trump's recent lawsuit against CNN, MS NOW and Politico illustrates his deep mistrust of traditional journalism. This strategy, combined with platforms like Truth Social and Trump TV, seeks to bypass editorial filters and control his narrative directly. However, cultivating widespread skepticism toward media institutions inadvertently undermines trust in his own statements, creating a paradox where authority is destabilized for everyone.

In 2022, between his periods in office as US president, Donald Trump sued CNN for $475 million. The lawsuit claimed that the media group had "tried to taint" Trump with a "series of ever-more scandalous, false, and defamatory labels," including a persistent association between Trump and Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler. The case was dismissed. "Being 'Hitler-like' is not a verifiable statement of fact that would support a defamation claim," concluded District Judge Raag Singhal, a Trump appointee.

It was one of many lawsuits Trump has filed against media outlets, including august publications such as The New York Times and The Washington Post, objecting to coverage during his presidency and in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election he lost to Joe Biden. Now he has barred three major news outlets from the White House.

God's-eye view

Trump is prodigiously litigious. He, his administration and his various businesses have been involved in 61 media and defamation lawsuits since 2015, according to Axios. Since returning to the White House, Trump has ramped up his legal actions, giving the impression either that he is under siege by an unremittingly hostile media, willing to bend reality to their own preferences, or that Trump is delicate and can't tolerate criticism. Or, a third possibility: Trump and his critics have different versions of what counts as true.

Not that there is an absolute truth in any objective, neutral sense of the word. The idea that we can stand outside the world and observe it from some privileged, disinterested vantage point has exercised philosophers for centuries. Friedrich Nietzsche questioned the possibility of whether Weltanschauungen (views of the world) can be unaffected by interpretation. Ludwig Wittgenstein showed how profoundly language and the forms of life in which it is used shape our apprehension of the world. Michel Foucault examined the indissoluble relationship between knowledge and power: What societies accept as true is bound up with the institutions, practices and authorities that produce and circulate knowledge. These are very different intellectual traditions, but they converge on one proposition: There is no God's-eye view of reality.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann gave the subject a sociological treatment in The Social Construction of Reality. What we take to be reality is not discovered; it is "socially constructed." The knowledge we use to understand the world is produced, transmitted and sustained by human beings interacting in society and reaching agreements on what counts as truth.

This doesn't mean that everything is equally true, that evidence is irrelevant or that a demonstrably false statement somehow becomes true if it's accepted by a critical mass of people. It means something arguably more unsettling: Our access to reality is always mediated by other human beings, institutions, language, culture and perspectives. Which brings us back to Donald Trump and his spat with the media.

Truth Social vs. fake news

Trump accused CNN, MS NOW and Politico of "constant" fake news and declaimed: "Media Outlets shouldn't be able to constantly write or report FICTION and LIES when they're covering the President of the United States, the Trump Administration, or the United States of America." (Trump's capital letters, of course). He intimated that other media organizations could follow.

There's another dimension to this story that's become more important in recent months. Trump doesn't depend entirely on organizations that he regards as antagonistic to him to communicate with the public. He has his own platform, Truth Social, launched in 2022 by the Trump Media & Technology Group. Its name is an epistemological boast: Not merely news, but truthful news. Trump has used the platform extensively to announce policies, attack opponents and react to media coverage, often before traditional news organizations have a scent of the story.

Truth Social is not a conventional news organization in the sense that it doesn't employ reporters to investigate events independently of the president. It's a social-media app through which Trump and others can communicate directly with a global readership, short-circuiting the editorial selection, fact-checking and interpretation performed by traditional news organizations. The president's September 18 announcement of the White House ban itself appeared first on Truth Social (of course). Then came Trump TV.

Trump TV

On September 21, the White House launched a 24-hour online stream called Trump TV: The Essentials Station. Rather than functioning like a legacy news channel, it screened administration-selected footage of Trump's speeches, appearances, bill signings and other events. A sort of White House "highlights reel."

The timing of the launch was interesting: The same day that the three banned outlets filed their lawsuit challenging the prohibition on the basis of the First Amendment, other television networks responded by suspending their participation in the presidential video pool rather than replacing CNN, leaving the administration with its own outlet for distributing sounds and images of the president. It has now resumed. (The pool comprises NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox News and CNN and supplies video feeds and information to other news organizations; thus it is the primary way that viewers globally watch Trump.)

I should add that the Trump family's involvement in the media isn't confined to the White House. On September 24, a Trump Organization affiliate applied for a federal trademark for "Trump TV" covering political news and commentary, just days after the White House began using the name. The application doesn't establish what the family intends to do with it. It just fits another adjunct to an expanding media presence bearing the "Trump" brand … I mean, name.

The coincidence is that, as Trump has become more and more angry with organizations that relay and mediate information about him, his own media apparatus has expanded. Whether this is a deliberate strategy or simply the progression of separate enterprises and presidential initiatives, we can't know. But we can infer. Alongside the news organizations Trump mistrusts, there are now channels through which Trump can circulate with audiences "unfiltered," so to speak.

The American Constitution's First Amendment is clear: Congress may make no law abridging freedom of speech or of the press. Explicit, perhaps. But does that mean every governmental attempt to control access, accreditation, briefings or institutional relationships automatically constitutes a violation of the Constitution?That's pretty much the question presented to the courts. Trump didn't abolish the constitutional freedom to publish; he attempted to alter the conditions under which particular news organizations exercise it. But federal judge Timothy Kelly ordered the White House to restore access to the three banned news outlets, leaving the situation fluid.

The art of mistrust

The First Amendment protects the right to speak. It doesn't guarantee anyone will believe what they hear. Earlier, I wrote of Berger and Luckmann: Their approach encourages us to wonder what happens after speech. In other words, how some versions of truth acquire the status of socially recognized reality and others are just ignored. Journalists, editors, broadcasters and institutions don't simply transmit facts; they participate in the social creation and legitimation of what comes to count as factual knowledge. Their authority depends partly on conventions, routines,

agreements and, crucially, trust. Nietzsche used the term “art of mistrust” to describe his philosophical approach that strips away social, cultural, moral and other kinds of façades to question unspoken motives, power interests and even self-deception. I doubt Trump is a Nietzschean scholar, but he has helped cultivate a habit of mistrust in which Americans are encouraged to accept nothing at face value. And, whether he likes it or not, that includes what he says.

The art of mistrust has no apparent finish line. If you teach people that a newspaper is lying, why should they assume the president is telling the truth? If the journalist has an agenda, why doesn’t the president? If every institution has interests, why shouldn’t the institution occupying the White House have its own?What Trump has destabilized, or even debunked, isn’t just news. It’s the authority of the people and institutions that authenticate news. Trump can offer his own account, but he can’t give it the status of incontestable reality because he can’t step outside the circle.

He’s helped assemble and fashion an audience that’s learned not to take mediated reality on trust. But an audience that mistrusts the media does not necessarily become an audience that trusts Trump. The art of mistrust doesn’t discriminate: Everyone and everything is under scrutiny.

This may be the unintended consequence of Trump’s media frontal. By cultivating audiences that ask who is speaking, what interests they hold and whether their version of reality is designed to support those interests, he’s advanced something that looks uncannily like Nietzsche’s art of mistrust. But once the habit takes hold, it affects everyone — including the guyß who started it. Trump has discovered that it’s easier to smash authority than to replace it.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson.]

[Kaitlyn Diana 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?

Tracking Super Typhoon Bavi, from the Marianas to China

Francesca Collu
October 05, 2026

Between June and July, the western North Pacific was battered by its second super typhoon this year. The Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC), a joint US Navy and US Air Force command in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, took notice. I interviewed its typhoon duty officer to learn how such a natural titan originates, and the complexity of predicting its evolution.

Between June 25 and July 14, 2026, what seemed to be a simple tropical depression in western North Pacific, developed into a super typhoon. Typhoon Bavi, also called Inday in the Philippines, was the second super typhoon of the 2026 Pacific typhoon season. Over just a couple of weeks, the storm swept through Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and near Taiwan before making its final landfall in eastern China, triggering heavy rains and landslides that ultimately killed dozens of people and left dozens more missing across the Philippines.

I had the chance to discuss it with Brian Howell, a civilian Typhoon Duty Officer with the 1st Weather Group, US Air Force, serving at the Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC) — a joint United States Navy and Air Force command based in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. JTWC is responsible for issuing tropical cyclone (TC) warnings across the Pacific and Indian Oceans on behalf of the US Department of Defense, covering roughly 85% to 89% of the world's tropical cyclone activity. Civilian agencies and forecasters throughout the region rely on its forecasts.

Below is the written interview. My questions are bolded.

The interview

Bavi went from a tropical depression to a Category 5 super typhoon (JTWC's highest tier, for sustained winds above 150 mph) in a very short window near the Marianas, and its intensity kept swinging up and down after that as it approached China. What conditions let a storm intensify that fast, and was there anything about Bavi's environment that made it happen so quickly?

Brian Howell: A tropical cyclone requires three main ingredients to rapidly intensify: a deep-layer of warm ocean waters, a strong outflow mechanism in the upper atmosphere that evacuates mass from the column and favorable (low) vertical wind shear conditions. [Author's note: Wind shear refers to a difference in wind speed or direction at different altitudes, which can tear a storm apart if too strong.]

In the case of Bavi, all three parameters were in a near-optimum state. The ocean waters were anomalously warm east of Guam due to the strong El Niño, which provided a robust source of energy for the storm.

In the upper atmosphere, the wind shear was very low and there was strong divergent flow over the top of the circulation which supported dramatic and rapid bursts of deep convection to form an eye and continue to deepen the system.

You mentioned the anomalously warm waters east of Guam tied to the strong El Niño. [El Niño is a recurring warming pattern in the central and eastern Pacific that influences global weather, including tropical cyclone activity.] Beyond this specific event, do you see storms like Bavi becoming more frequent as part of a broader pattern? I know this might be more a climate-science question than an operational forecasting one, but what are your thoughts?

Howell: As you mention, this is more of an issue about long-term climatological trends vice an operational one. While we have seen a subtle signal indicating an increase in the number of strong tropical cyclones over the past few years, we aren't sure if this is a true signal in the climatology of TC activity, or an artifact of improved detection technology and analysis techniques.

Bavi went through three separate eyewall replacement cycles over its lifetime: each time weakening and then reintensifying before wind

shear and the third cycle finally broke it down for good on its way toward China. Can you explain what's physically happening inside the storm during one of these cycles? [Eyewall replacement cycle is a process where an outer ring of thunderstorms gradually replaces a storm's original eye, temporarily weakening then restrengthening it.]

Howell: Eyewall replacement cycles (ERC's) frequently occur in intense tropical cyclones, particularly those reaching 100 kts [185 km/h, or 115 mph] or higher peak winds. However, the timing, duration and outcome of ERCs are extremely difficult to predict.

For example, an ERC event may take anywhere from hours to days, and the cycle may fail to complete, or it may complete and immediately initiate a new cycle. During an ERC, an outer ring of convection first forms at the fringes of the circulation, usually about two to three times the size of the inner eyewall.

Once this outer ring forms, it begins to choke off the inflow of air to the inner eyewall, depriving it of the fuel to maintain itself. Cut off from its energy source, the inner eyewall shrinks in size and eventually collapses, replaced by the new, larger eyewall.

When the inner eyewall erodes, the cyclone weakens as the central pressure adjusts to the new, larger eyewall. Once the outer eyewall begins to contract, the system will usually reintensify.

The storm was unusually large, with gale-force winds extending from Taiwan through the Ryukyus even before landfall. Does a storm's physical size scale with its intensity, or are those two fairly independent properties?

Howell: We like to say size doesn't matter when talking about tropical cyclones. One can have very large storms which are very strong or relatively weak, and the opposite is also true. The two properties are independent of one another.

Rapid intensification is more common in smaller systems, since there is less mass that needs to rotate, and it can respond quickly to a deepening eye. Whereas larger systems tend to weaken more slowly, as they have more momentum to dissipate.

How far out was JTWC forecasting Bavi's eventual landfall in China, and how much did that track prediction shift over time? What makes a storm's future path more or less predictable, and where does most of the remaining uncertainty come from at that stage?

Howell: We first predicted landfall in China on July 6, when the system was located northwest of Guam, roughly five days out from landfall. JTWC produces forecasts that extend out to 120 hours (five days) from the initial time of the forecast.

We take great pride in the accuracy of our forecasts. In this case, for the five-day period leading up to landfall, our forecasts deviated from the system's actual track by no more than 75 nautical miles at most.

These are historically low forecast errors, and dramatically better than the typical average error ten to 20 years ago. Areas of high pressure, or anticyclones, steer tropical cyclones. [Anticyclones are areas of high atmospheric pressure that push and guide a storm's path, similar to how a current steers a boat.]

Changes in the strength orientation of these anticyclones drives the predictability of the forecast over time. Track forecast uncertainty is highest when steering flow is weak, or when there are competing steering mechanisms, leading to a larger spread of potential outcomes that we must consider.

Did JTWC coordinate directly with Chinese meteorological services as Bavi approached landfall, or do you operate independently while the China Meteorological Administration (CMA) issues its own warnings?

Howell: We did not coordinate with the CMA as Bavi approached landfall. As a matter of routine, JTWC does not coordinate our forecasts with any other forecast agency, and we all generate our own, independent forecasts.

After reaching its Category 5 peak between July 5 and 6, Bavi weakened rapidly on approach to China. What intensity was it at when it actually made landfall near Yuhuan on July 11? What cuts off a storm's energy supply once it moves over land?

Howell: We estimated the intensity to be 80 kts [148 km/h, or 92 mph] when the storm made landfall in eastern China. Heat fluxes from the ocean provide the energy source for tropical cyclones. Moving over land removes this energy source.

Combined with the frictional effects of terrain that tear apart the low-level vortex structure, tropical cyclones normally rapidly weaken and dissipate over land.

You watched this storm from formation near Kwajalein on June 25 through dissipation in mid-July. As a forecaster, what's the moment in a storm's life cycle where you're most uncertain, and how does JTWC handle communicating that uncertainty to the public and to decision-makers?

Howell: The most uncertain time in a typical TC's lifetime is during the formation phase, when the structure is weakest and most ill-defined. One of the most important functions the forecasters perform is generating something called the "TC Vitals," which is basically where we analyze all available data to generate a set of parameters which we insert into the forecast models to describe the TC's current position, intensity and structure.

During the early part of the storm's lifecycle when the cloud patterns are disorganized, the center of the system is challenging to locate and analyze. This is particularly true if there is limited data available to diagnose what is taking place below the clouds in traditional visible or infrared satellite imagery.

If we don't have high confidence in where the system is located, how strong it is or what the structure looks like, then those uncertainties carry forward into the model output, generating uncertainty in the entire forecast.

We communicate these uncertainties via our Prognostic Reasoning messages, which we produce as part of our warning suite for every TC forecast. In these messages, we discuss confidence in the initial position, intensity and structure, and do the same for the forecast points.

A nearly unfathomable natural wonder

It is one thing to read that a storm reached winds of 285 km/h, and quite another to try to actually picture what that means: a mass of air and water, larger than entire countries, spinning with a force that can tear apart buildings and reshape coastlines, born from nothing more than warm ocean water and a favorable arrangement of the atmosphere above it. It's so far removed from things we see every day that it's difficult to visualize.

This is part of why I wanted to build something interactive for this piece, rather than simply describing Bavi's path in words. A typhoon in the western North Pacific can feel very far away, an abstraction made of acronyms. But watching its

intensity rise and fall, hour by hour, across its own timeline — tracing its evolution as Howell described, watching the storm climb to Category 5 and fall back more than once before its final landfall — is a small way of bringing that distance closer, of letting readers hold the storm's life cycle in their own hands.

And I find something quite moving in how much of what drives a storm like Bavi traces back to physics most of us encountered in a classroom long before we ever thought about typhoons. Looking at the plots, I'm tempted to reach for Bernoulli's principle here. That same idea explains how an airplane wing generates lift: Where air moves faster, pressure drops. A typhoon's eye, with its howling winds circling a low-pressure core, is a large-scale echo of that same intuition, even if the full picture — a vortex held in balance between pressure, rotation and the Earth's own spin — is more intricate than any single equation from a physics textbook. Still, it serves as a reminder that the same basic rules governing the world around us, at every scale, connect basic physics to a super typhoon crossing the ocean.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Francesca Collu is an Italian data scientist and *Fair Observer* editorial intern based in the California 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 climate change, 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.

Rule, Cool or Cruel Britannia? A Nation Abused by Politicians, Corporates, Extremists and the Establishment

Alan Waring
October 06, 2026

The UK's governance, both political and corporate, has undoubtedly drifted into a semi-catatonic state of cynical dishonesty and hypocrisy, abandoning the public, failing to deliver bold promises and committing grave injustices, often on a mass scale. The country's current predicament raises serious questions about the integrity and accountability of those in power. Without substantial reforms, Britain risks a dystopian future marked by deepening public disillusionment and institutional decline.

The days are long gone when (according to the old unofficial anthem "Rule Britannia") Britain should rule the waves, and many Britons believed that the "sun never set" on their Empire. The voluntary systematic dissolution of the British Empire began as far back as 1867 with Canada becoming a self-governing dominion, followed by Australia and New Zealand (1907), the Union of South Africa (1910) and the Irish Free State (1922), with the bulk of the remainder in the Near and Middle East, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean between 1945 and 1975. With Hong Kong's sovereignty being returned to China in

1997, only a few small scattered overseas territories, such as the Falklands and Gibraltar, remain British.

To be sure, just as a few people believe that the earth is flat rather than spherical, even as late as the 1960s, deluded pockets of Brits denied that the British Empire would finally disappear. For example, the far-right League of Empire Loyalists was formed in 1954 by A.K. Chesterton, a former pre-World War II (WWII) member of the British Union of Fascists, and attracted some 3,000 members plus 8,000–10,000 supporters at its peak.

Finally acknowledging that the colonial independence momentum was unstoppable, in 1967 the League dissolved and, in a move of possibly "misguided patriotism," promptly joined with the Racial Preservation Society and the Greater Britain Movement to help create the far-right National Front, which later spawned the British National Party (BNP) and thence a number of derivative far-right groups such as the English Defence League (EDL), Britain First, Patriotic Alternative, Homeland Party, Pegida UK and For Britain. Most of these are still active but small and insignificant. A few are both disruptive and dangerous.

The post-WWII evolution of the British radical- and far-right is important for understanding the contemporary malaise in Britain, not just public concerns and despair about a range of economic, social, justice and governance issues seemingly continually propagating crisis, but also how these have become fertile ground for far-right exploitation and agitation.

Far-right subversion and agitation in 2020s Britain

Some of these far-right entities are more strident and thuggish than others. Some openly proclaim their far-right ideology and encourage intimidation and violence against ethnic and religious minorities. Many of their leaders and members have criminal convictions and jail sentences for hate-related or violence offenses (e.g. Britain First, BNP, Patriotic Alternative). Britain First's leaders' convictions have been high-profile. Leaders and members of proscribed extreme-right terrorist groups such as National Action and its derivatives also have convictions (2018, 2020, 2021, 2022) under terrorism laws. One-time National Action leader Jack Renshaw is serving life for murder plots, and attempted and actual murder.

More slippery far-right leaders include Tommy Robinson (aka Stephen Yaxley-Lennon). His far-right credentials include variously being a BNP member, co-founding and leading the EDL, co-leading Pegida UK, brief membership of For Britain and at one time advising Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Gerard Batten, the leader of the former Brexit Party, on anti-Muslim strategy. Robinson abandoned his earlier street thuggery and reinvented himself as a "political activist" and even self-styled "journalist."

For years, Robinson, who was bankrupted in 2022, has had close ties with, and reportedly received financial support from, radical or far-right US sources such as Elon Musk (2025, 2026), Robert Mercer and Robert Shillman. He has contributed input to the Mercer-funded Rebel Media and Alex Jones's Infowars, funded by Shillman.

Despite his list of criminal convictions relating not only to ethnoreligious intimidation and hate-mongering but also to assault, fraud, a false passport and contempt of court, plus civil judgments against him for libel, Robinson has also been supported by none other than senior Trump personnel in both Trump presidencies. Steve Bannon, US President Donald Trump's strategy adviser up to August 18, 2017 — who was later jailed in 2024 for contempt of Congress and in

2025 received a 3-year suspended sentence for his "Mexican Wall" fraud (later pardoned by Trump) — described Robinson (then in jail) as "the [expletive] backbone of this country" off-air following an LBC radio interview in London and ranted at the LBC host.

In May 2026, US Vice President JD Vance attended a "Unite the Kingdom" protest rally organized in London by Tommy Robinson and praised the protesters. Trump himself also favorably retweeted unverified anti-Muslim claims by the former deputy leader of Britain First, Jayda Fransen, who has also been jailed for hate-related crimes.

Robinson has also not been shy of courting support and finances from right-wing sources and regimes across Europe, and even paradoxically Israel (2025, 2026) and hostile states such as Russia in 2021 and 2026.

Some radical-right groups and their leaders assert publicly that they are simply "patriotic" and deny that they are at all anti-democratic, or racist or extremist. Many groups appear to attract a range of confused and noisy attention-seekers, such as the oddball Pink Ladies, who include far-right agitators linked to the Restore UK party.

Nevertheless, wherever they sit on the radical-right spectrum, they all commonly seek to stoke public fears about legitimate concerns, such as large-scale immigration, social housing and benefits for immigrants and asylum seekers, inadequate policing, overcrowded prisons, and inadequate sentences and early release of violent criminals and sex offenders. The radical right typically seeks to inflame and exploit public outrage by a mixture of a few facts liberally overdosed with exaggerated narratives, fake "facts" and stories, and wild assertions that lay blame both at the door of foreigners, immigrants, and benefit claimants and their own political opponents.

Hate-filled religious nationalism

More recently, the UK radical right has sought to hijack the Christian religion to justify themselves, asserting that Britain must become an exclusively Christian country, with all their hate targets converted, repressed, deported or disposed of. The irony of such un-Christian animosity and hate-filled demands appears to have escaped their attention. In this, they seem to share the same hate-filled objectives expressed by Pete Hegseth, US Secretary of Defense, and JD Vance.

Hegseth's book American Crusade and his public rhetoric, Vance's strong support for the Seven Mountains Mandate, and Trump's unconstitutional Christian nationalism Rededicate 250 White House jamboree in May 2026 — which implicitly repudiated the 1st and 14th Amendments — indicate just how much far-right militant "Christian" supremacist nationalism now has control of the Trump administration. The infamous Project 2025, which underpins Trump's dismissal and deconstruction of US democracy in his second Presidency, closely aligns with American Crusade and Seven Mountains.

Although most unlikely to succeed, the UK far right clearly think they can emulate Trump and co's hijacking and distortion of Christianity to sanctify their own agenda.

The radical- and far-right narrative asserts that the "weak-and-woke" policies of the legacy mainstream political parties are to blame for creating a multicultural Britain that is described as underproductive, crime-ridden, and collapsing under the weight of uncontrolled immigration and so-called "progressive" legislation and policies. At the same time, post-Brexit Britain is still not free of allegedly stifling EU and EU legislation. This is

the particular mantra of Reform UK and Restore Britain, which each claims to be the only realistic salvation from Britain's alleged demise.

Scandal-tarnished Reform UK

Reform UK is derived from the former UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its Brexit Party successor. Numerous members and supporters also have pasts linked to far-right organizations such as the BNP. Despite Reform UK's policy to ban such individuals, examples regularly surface of them infiltrating the party. Some have argued that Reform is a far-right party, although more accurately it is populist radical-right, as, although frequently abrasive and obnoxious, it lacks the nastier credentials of far-right entities e.g. EDL, Britain First, Patriotic Alternative.

Nigel Farage, the controversial high-profile populist leader of Reform UK, has a long but checkered political career in various radical-right guises. He was a founding member of UKIP in 1993, a party dedicated to getting the UK out of the EU. He served as UKIP leader twice, from 2006–2009 and 2010–2016. After helping secure the 2016 Referendum outcome to leave the EU, Farage quit as UKIP leader in 2016 and then left UKIP in 2018.

Farage then formed the Brexit Party, aimed at holding the British government to account (then under Conservative Party rule) in carrying through the full terms of Britain's EU departure scheduled for 2019. Thereafter, the Brexit Party rebranded as Reform UK in 2021. Farage returned to lead Reform UK in 2024.

He has stood many times as a UK parliamentary candidate but only succeeded in 2024, for the constituency of Clacton, a small rural town on the Essex coast with an unenviable reputation for high levels of social deprivation, poor housing, unemployment, benefit claimants and substance abuse. His performance there as a local constituency Member of Parliament (MP) has been lackluster and has attracted local and national criticism for his absenteeism, especially for spending time visiting his political confrere Trump, his cabinet and the Republican Party (GOP) coterie in the US. Farage has defended himself by asserting that he was "putting Clacton on the map" so residents would no longer be seen as "nobodies".

From 1999 to 2020, Farage was an MEP, alongside a small contingent of other UKIP MEPs who then became Brexit Party MEPs. This MEP contingent drew heavy criticism for being elected to the European Parliament (EP) for their admitted sole political purpose of undermining and ultimately destroying both the EP and the EU. In 2010, Farage, a superb and witty orator and advocate, gained mass publicity and attention across Britain and Europe for his devastating criticism in the EP of EU Council President Hermann von Rompuy, in which he described von Rompuy as having "the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk" that no one had ever heard of. Such legion antics became part of Farage's signature over his 20 years as an MEP.

In addition to Farage's charismatic political performances (whether applauded or loathed), he has long been the subject of scrutiny and criticism, and now also UK parliamentary and police investigations, over his personal and party finances. In 2016, Farage's financial links to the controversial British oligarch Arron Banks came under suspicion. Banks reportedly donated several million pounds to UKIP over some years, in addition to at least £12 million to the Leave.EU Brexit campaign, which UKIP heavily supported. Banks himself became embroiled in the Electoral Commission's investigation into whether his Leave.UK political campaigning fund had broken a range of UK electoral and accounting laws

connected with the lead-up to the 2016 Brexit Referendum.

Just as controversial was the confirmed allegation that, over the year after the Referendum, Banks also provided "grace and favour" gifted funding for Farage's living costs and overseas political engagements, to the tune of some £450,000 (~$580,000).

More recent damning revelations are that Farage and/or Reform broke strict UK Parliamentary rules governing MPs' financial probity and conduct. In one instance, he acknowledged the receipt of a £5 million "gift" from the Thailand-based British crypto oligarch Christopher Harborne in the 12 months prior to the 2024 General Election in which he was elected as an MP. But he claimed that it was a private gift for his elevated personal security protection and was not subject to MPs' declaration obligations. The Parliamentary Standards Committee is investigating. If found in breach, Farage could face significant sanctions.

In a second instance, the Metropolitan Police and the National Crime Agency are investigating the alleged circuitous transfer of large illicit donations to Reform from Farage's long-time British associate from UKIP and Brexit Party days, George Cottrell, a Montenegro-based crypto entrepreneur with a fraud conviction in the US. Potential criminal offenses include money laundering, deception and evading restrictions on unlawful political donations from foreign sources. Cottrell's mother allegedly donated two sums totaling £500,000 ($677,181) to Reform in May 2024 via its Deputy Leader, Richard Tyce MP. Cottrell's mother has admitted she received the money from her son and passed it to Reform. A further £1 million ($1.354 million) from Cottrell was allegedly donated by his mother to Britain Means Business, Tyce's private fundraising entity, with half allegedly passed on to Reform.

On September 3, 2026, a third scandal befell Farage and Reform, involving an alleged conspiracy to induce illicit foreign donations from America and pro-Reform polls portrayed as "independent" but allegedly paid for by Reform. A Channel 4 (C4)/Verbatim undercover investigation revealed how such undeclared donations in the £4,000 to £30,000 bracket (illegal under UK electoral laws) were possible. Covert video purportedly showed a further proposed £500,000 ($675,190) donation being finalized in Farage's presence, but this never went through as the C4/Verbatim investigation concluded and was broadcast. Reform's political rivals have demanded a major police criminal investigation. Farage tried to deflect attention by denigrating the Verbatim investigation. Two senior Farage aides who featured in this scandal resigned, protesting their innocence.

In the midst of Farage's and Reform's financing controversies, on September 12 came the announcement that two individuals were each providing Reform with £36 million ($48.7 million) donations. One donor is the same Thai-based Christopher Harborne being investigated over the £5 million "gift" to Farage. The other is Ben Delo, a wealthy British businessman reportedly relocating from Hong Kong to the UK.

In 2022, Delo was convicted in the US on banking violations and sentenced to 30 months' jail. He was pardoned by Trump. With this new £72 million donation dwarfing the total of all other UK political party donations, public, parliamentary, and government alarm is growing that Reform is trying to subvert the democratic process through US-style undue political influence by a few uber-wealthy individuals and their views and vested interests. While perhaps normal in some countries, in Britain such purchase is widely regarded as corruption. Tightened retrospective regulation is now expected.

In characteristically ebullient salvationist style, Farage and senior officials at Reform's annual conference, which coincided with the C4 broadcast, announced that a Reform victory at the next general election would require a 100-day "emergency cabinet" to save Britain from its many alleged existential threats, barely disguising their intentions for authoritarian rule and imposed radical-right hegemony.

Total lack of self-awareness

For all Farage's charisma and undoubted political skills, he suffers from an affliction common to populist politicians (e.g. Trump), namely TLoSA (Total Lack of Self-Awareness). For example, he loves to convey an image of a patriotic but humble "man of the people," average Joe — someone who ordinary voters can relate to, someone who enjoys a pint of beer in the local pub and knows personally what struggling to "make ends meet" or to get a reasonably paid job means, or what hospital waiting lists mean. However, Nigel Farage actually comes from a totally different background, one of relative privilege and affluence. He attended the fee-paying independent private school Dulwich College before becoming a commodities and metals trader at various brokerages in the City of London, and eventually a campaigner and politician.

Since 2024, his annual earnings from TV broadcasting, brand ambassadorship for a gold bullion company, and other income streams have been estimated at well over £1 million ($1.36 million) and possibly over £1.5 million ($2.039 million), on top of his MP salary of some £96,000 ($130,521). In addition to eye-watering financial "gifts" or gifts-in-kind from wealthy supporters such as Arron Banks and Christopher Harborne, he also enjoys an annual pension of £73,000 ($99,253) from his time as an MEP (from an institution which he had set out to destroy!).

Thus, although Farage's financial status is strikingly different to that of the vast majority of voters, he persists in trying to project a public image of "ordinariness" and modest wealth, as if voters will not notice the deception or care. His rhetoric expresses a steadfast animus against "the Establishment," that is, the dominant, informal network of powerful and socially prominent people and institutions purported to hold social, political and economic control of the nation. He regularly swipes at the UK political system, the media and the "ruling class," despite the irony of his having been for decades a stalwart member and beneficiary of that very Establishment.

For example, while repeatedly berating the "ruling class" for allegedly abandoning disadvantaged white working-class males, he nonetheless is a staunch supporter of, participant in and beneficiary of elite capital interests that are not remotely concerned about such "losers" (the term often used by Farage's political hero and confidant President Trump).

Reform currently claims a 270,000 membership. Recent independent polls suggest that Reform's indicative electoral support may have reached its likely maximum potential and plateaued at some 24%, perhaps reflecting a public tiring of Farage's "salesman's patter," unconvincing and unpalatable policies, unsavory chums (domestic and foreign), and dubious financial probity.

Restore Britain — a harsher version of Reform UK

The Restore Britain party is yet another in the chain of successors to UKIP. The party was formed in 2025 by ex-Reform MP Rupert Lowe, following a much-publicized falling out with Farage. Restore's official policies are a much harsher, more strident version of Reform's, placing it closer to the far right.

Throughout 2026, Lowe has drawn significant media attention and public outrage for his various utterances. For example, he has made frequent disparaging anti-immigrant and racist remarks, a notable example occurring in July. He has also belittled the Dunblane School Gun Massacre in Scotland, in which 16 children and a teacher were killed, by falsely stating on the Joe Rogan Experience in the US that there had been only "one murder" and suggesting that Britain's strict gun controls were overkill.

Another ex-UKIP member of Restore's national team is Henry Bolton, who was forced out as UKIP's leader in disgrace in 2018. He then formed the short-lived One Nation party, registered as the Our Nation party. In July 2026, he joined Restore as its national security and policy spokesperson. While in UKIP, his social media friendship with over 500 members of other, more far-right groups, such as Britain First, attracted adverse comment.

Restore Britain is targeting the same voter segment as Reform UK. However, it lacks the charismatic leadership of Reform's Farage and Reform's membership numbers and organizational resources. Restore Britain currently claims approximately 96,000 members. Moreover, Restore's even more brutal policies than Reform's are likely to attract only the most extreme elements among Reform supporters to switch to Restore.

Overall, Reform and Restore are fringe populist radical-right parties which, despite relentless noisy, colorful, controversial and sometimes outrageous publicity, and vote surges in by-elections, remain essentially protest parties rather than serious contenders for governing Britain. Nevertheless, some of the radical right's contrary anti-social beliefs and attitudes often find strange bedfellows among mainstream party political expedience, corporate malfeasance and Establishment self-interest.

Cruel Britannia

One of the most infuriating aspects of Britain today is the embedded "forked tongue" duplicity of politicians of all parties at all levels. While publicly projecting much concern and piety on a whole range of topics heavily impacting many citizens, a panoply of ministers and legions of MPs in a succession of governments plus hordes of local authority councilors have instead opted for a cynical laissez-faire "too much trouble, too many obstacles, not the right time" posture when it comes to taking necessary and timely action. Many are only interested in easy "low-hanging fruit" topics that will deliver them electoral votes more readily.

Britain's radical- and far-right enthusiastically exploit such governance failures, especially scandals, of those in power or authority, by portraying themselves to an increasingly disillusioned electorate as the only salvation, the only antidote.

Scandals in Britain in recent years involve variously incompetence, negligence, corporate crimes, corruption, government collusion and establishment protection. Legion examples of official negligence, if not complicity, provide fertile ground for exploitation, exaggeration and agitation by the radical and far right. However, the latter tend to "cherry-pick" which topics are closest to their political ideology and which are most likely to gain them the most public support. The following are just a few examples of such scandals:

Contaminated blood

Over 30,000 patients were infected with HIV and/or hepatitis from infected blood transfusions from the 1970s to 1990s. Many were not informed for decades. More than 3,000 have died as a result. Some 3,500 have received government

compensation, but tens of thousands more are still waiting.

Failure to detain known mentally disturbed individuals with violent histories

Two high-profile cases with tragic consequences, including multiple murders, have highlighted the lack of "joined-up supervision and control" of potentially dangerous individuals with known mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. In June 2023, Valdo Calocane, a paranoid schizophrenic, murdered three strangers in Nottingham and attempted to murder three others, all in less than one-and-a-half hours. In July 2024, Axel Rudakubana, previously diagnosed as autistic and exhibiting violent episodes but not as dangerously psychotic, killed three schoolgirls attending a dance class in Southport and severely wounded eight others plus two adults in a frenzied attack.

Overcrowded prisons and early release of prisoners

Britain's prisons are chronically inadequate and full to capacity. Early release schemes to relieve overcrowded prisons have resulted in mistaken releases through faulty administration as well as ill-conceived potential releases of dangerous offenders guilty of domestic violence, murder and sex crimes. Following a public outcry, Prime Minister Andy Burnham has announced that killers, and notably the convicted killers of police officer PC Andrew Harper, will no longer be eligible for early release.

Political corruption

Sleaze, corruption and a general decline in maintenance of moral standards in British public life have been recognized at least since the 1990s and transcend different political parties in government. For example, from 2019 to 2023 alone, at least ten senior Conservative government ministers and MPs were involved in sleaze, corruption or sex scandals, as detailed in my 2023 Fair Observer article in the section headed A Collapse of Moral Standards in Public Life (the litany of florid financial scandals involving Farage and Reform UK are described earlier).

Since coming to power in 2024, the Labour government has also been beset by scandals centered on ethics, although thus far not on a scale comparable to previous Conservative administrations.

Two particular scandals, still running after two decades or more, have involved large corporations and incompetent, colluding government ministers and administrators. These are the Post Office Horizon scandal and the Water Industry scandal involving both deliberate pollution and hyper-inflated price rises.

Post Office Horizon Scandal

As my Fair Observer articles in 2024 reported in detail, the Post Office Horizon Scandal involves the UK's government-owned national Post Office corporation and Fujitsu, which supplied it with supposedly "fool-proof" but in fact deeply flawed Horizon accounting software from 1999 onwards. As a result, over 1,000 sub-postmasters (independent contractors in small towns and villages) were falsely accused of accounting fraud, prosecuted, fined large sums and some imprisoned. A number of attributable suicides and premature deaths are recorded among victims. The scandal has been described officially as "the most widespread miscarriage of justice in UK legal history."

Group civil actions by aggrieved sub-postmasters against the Post Office were all found in their favor. Judges noted in 2019 that the Post Office's steadfast denials were untenable and one of "bare assertions and demands that ignore what

actually occurred" amounting to "the 21st century equivalent of maintaining the earth is flat."

The much vaunted government compensation scheme has regrettably so far been a half-risen, if not half-collapsed, soufflé. Of the claims received as at 31 March 2026, while some 12,000 had been settled to the tune of £1.519 billion ($2.05 billion), a further 1,500 to 2,400 remain unsettled. Critics cite structural failings and bureaucratic delays.

Meanwhile, a number of senior executives and administrators of the Post Office and its Fujitsu supplier, as well as lawyers, are under criminal investigation for perjury and perverting the course of justice, as part of the massive Operation Olympos investigation. Whether any of the as-yet-unidentified eight prime suspects will ever face prosecution remains uncertain. The status of the discredited and much vilified former Post Office Chief Executive, Paula Vennells, in the Olympos investigation is unknown.

Mismanaged, polluting and price-scamming water companies

Since privatization in 1989, many UK water companies (mostly owned by foreign corporations and investors) have been mismanaged at all levels, including causing large-scale pollution through raw sewage dumping (often deliberately) and overcharging customers so flagrantly that it amounts to mass corporate fraud. Recently commenting on outrageous bills, an "angry" Prime Minister Burnham accused water companies of treating customers "like a blank cheque." Yet, despite the obvious harm to customers, a complex system of state regulation to protect the public has failed abysmally for years and instead enabled and encouraged wayward water companies to continue their greedy, anti-social and often criminal activities.

In recent years, to justify massive rises in customer bills, water companies have pleaded poverty, unavoidable rising operational costs, and the need for costly infrastructure renewal and therefore new capital investment. This ignores the fact that, for years, many of them paid out huge investor dividends while ignoring the need to reinvest in infrastructure renewal. It also evades the fact that capital investment is normally obtained from institutional and corporate investors, equity funds and the capital markets, not by billing ordinary customers who will receive no equity for their non-notified and hidden "investment." Customer bills should cover actual consumption and not include hidden charges for capital investment that would be more costly if obtained from conventional sources. Such deception amounts to mass corporate fraud, given the millions of customers being scammed.

For example, by 2024, the foreign-owned Southern Water Limited had been fined a total in excess of £216 million ($292.6 million) for large numbers of environmental crimes relating to unlawful pollution discharges into watercourses and coastal areas. Some were accidental, some deliberate and many involved raw sewage. In one major court case in 2021, Southern Water was fined £90 million ($122 million), with the judge commenting that the company had shown "a disregard for the law from the top down." In a further case in 2026, the same judge imposed fines totaling £7.126 million ($9.654 million) on the company relating to 51 pollution offenses across 17 sites.

In September 2026, the former CEO, three former Southern Water senior executives and three others were charged with conspiracy to defraud for falsifying environmental pollution data between 2012 and 2017 to avoid £45 million in fines for pollution offenses. Previously, all criminal cases had related to causing actual pollution. For the first time, prosecutors have laid fraud charges.

Observers are wondering why fraud investigations and charges have been conspicuously absent regarding the present company management's hyper-inflated bills, which for 2024–5 alone imposed for many of its 4.8 million customers a 55–65% increase (not the Ofwat assertion of 47–53% over 5 years) compared to a core inflation rate of some 3%. For example, my own annual Southern Water bill just for wastewater services for a typical two-person household shot up 56.5% from £306 to £479 and is projected to double again by 2030.

Instead of acting as the pricing regulator to impose price caps on cavalier water companies, Ofwat has acted more as a rubber stamp for their outrageous demands. The incoming Labour government in 2024 decided to replace the delinquent Ofwat and several other discredited water regulators with a single "high-powered" regulator to "create stronger protections to keep bills predictably affordable and fair." However, the new regulator is unlikely to start before 2028 or 2029, and even then may not deliver what is promised to millions of customers.

Despite decrying the environmental crimes of water companies, leaders and MPs of all parties have proposed no concrete, practical proposals to rapidly and effectively stop the abuse of hyper-inflated customer bills. Only a handful of MPs (e.g. 2025-1, 2025-2, 2026) have publicly raised the Southern Water bills scam. The Parliamentary Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Committee did summon the company's CEO to explain and justify the hyper-inflated bills, but no corrective actions, immediate or planned, resulted. Overall, government, MPs and Parliament appear to have abandoned the public to fine words and sympathy. This forsaking of the "presumption of regularity" entices a disillusioned and cynical public into the arms of radical- and far-right salvationist parties.

For his part, Farage (perhaps true to his capitalist free-market beliefs in unfettered corporatism) could only suggest that failing water companies should be allowed to go bust. However, he has failed to acknowledge that this would also then force nationalization at taxpayers' cost since millions of customers would require continuity of daily water and wastewater services. Perhaps the specter of nationalization costs is what tempts hypocritical ministers and timorous MPs to utter empty sympathy and look the other way.

In conclusion, a decline in contemporary Britain in political and corporate governance and in moral integrity in public life, coupled with a failure to eradicate multiple iniquities imposed on the public, is encouraging radical political opportunists to offer them an unrealistic fast-track fake salvation. Continuity of Cruel Britannia thus seems assured.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Dr Alan Waring is a retired risk analyst with extensive international consulting experience with government departments, corporations and institutions. He is the author of *Corporate Risk and Governance* (2013) and several other books on risk, as well as the editor and contributor to *The New Authoritarianism: A Risk Analysis*, a three-volume publication by Ibidem, published from 2018 to 2021. He is also an Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Risk and Decision Sciences (CERIDES), European University Cyprus.

Brazil Is the Country of the Devil — and God Knows Who the "Believers" Are

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
October 13, 2026

Brazil's first-round election results illustrate how many citizens choose their politician not based on who's best for the country, but who they feel shouldn't prosper. Contempt for the poor, which has blossomed under prosperity gospel theology, has devoured our care for democracy and our moral values. But that's what happens when political alignment overtakes factual understanding: You become stupid.

When someone thinks their own life got worse because someone else's got better, the ballot box stops choosing governments and starts handing out punishment. The best diagnosis of the average Brazilian came in a one-minute statement by Felipe Nunes, the founding partner of Quest, a Brazilian polling and research institute. He said that the country's representative citizen is someone who believes his own life has not improved enough over the past 20 years and who sees Brazil as having improved mainly for the most disadvantaged. Then came the essential cherry on top: He believes those people did not deserve to improve their lives.

That perception — that someone else has improved without deserving to — is what gets me. Because it turns inequality into resentment and resentment into moral judgment.

Let me translate that into non-academic English: The average Brazilian is frustrated, resentful, selfish, insensitive and largely indifferent to other people. Did you notice that Sunday's election was not really about politics at all, but about morality? When political decisions are no longer about how we live together but about breaking the basic civic pact, is dialogue still worth trying?

That last question is not rhetorical. I mean it. I am tired of banging my head against a brick wall.

Left or right? No, just spite

There is a civilizational difference between voting for someone because you believe that person will manage the state better and voting for someone because you believe certain people should never have reached their current position. In the second case, politics arrives already rotten, carrying an earlier idea of who deserves what, as though the world were unjust strictly in the immediate vicinity of one's own navel.

From day zero of the Bolsonaro family's political abomination, it was obvious that this was not simply a matter of left versus right. Or do you really think the great villains of history can be measured on that ideological ruler? Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein — even Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Would you really take their judgment to the liberal and progressive columns?

Right and left remain useful categories for understanding economic, social and institutional positions. The problem begins when those categories become an alibi for any behavior committed in their name. Defending a smaller state, more market freedom, social conservatism or tougher criminal policies is one thing. Believing that democracy itself can be discarded whenever an election produces an inconvenient result is another.

Politics does not create the grotesque Brazilian contradictions we know so well: "the right-wing poor person"; the "Christian" who screams to Pontius Pilate that he prefers Barabbas; the criminal who has been politically sanctified; the female leader who opposes women's rights. I could go on, but you get the point.

Curiously, these stop looking like contradictions once politics is organized around belonging. A person can lose money, rights and access to public services and still vote for someone who offers an identity he considers superior to his own material condition. Politics stops answering the question, "What will improve my life?" and starts answering, "Who are we?"

Returning to the argument: Politics do not create these aberrations. Corrupted morality and character do. And when I say morality, I am not talking about good manners, going to church or behaving politely in the supermarket line. I am talking about the set of values that determines who deserves protection, who deserves opportunity, who deserves punishment and, above all, who can be treated as less than human without causing discomfort.

My own moral code is convinced that once we have constituted a society capable of providing education, healthcare, public safety and housing for everyone, these things cease to be individual privileges and become collective obligations.

Love for God and contempt for the poor

I stopped using that argument some time ago; I gave up trying to have civilized conversations with the morally repulsive. I noticed that, judging by the expression on the other person's face while listening to me, I was beginning to diagnose these scoundrels according to the ICD-10 codes F70 to F79 — codes that refer to degrees of intellectual disability.

I know someone who calls herself a believer. Actually, she calls herself a "crentona" — a Brazilian slang intensifier derived from crente, meaning an evangelical believer, roughly equivalent to saying "a hardcore believer." I liked the word, so I am borrowing it. She probably uses the extra syllables to suggest that she is more Christian than the rest of us, whom she presumably judges according to our own ICD codes.

And since she is so proud of it, I used her for a small experiment to understand how far the relationship between religion and extremism could go. I am sorry to tell anyone who has never conducted such an experiment that there is no humanity left in that kind of person. Absolutely anything becomes acceptable when it can be used to justify extreme aporophobia — the rejection or contempt of poor people — and the most reduced version of the idea that if a politician might one day, however remotely, benefit them personally, they will vote for him, whoever he is.

Aporophobia is a relatively new word in Brazil's political vocabulary, but it describes a very old feeling: contempt for poor people precisely because they appear to have no power, no property and no ability to return the favor.

In practice, this became painfully clear on Sunday, October 4. If it did not, explain to me how in 2018, Sérgio Olímpio Gomes, who was removed from the ROTA — the most heavily armed and lethal special unit of the São Paulo Military Police — amid a career marked by high-lethality operations and investigations involving 16 deaths, could win a seat in the Brazilian Senate over Marina Silva, one of the greatest and most consequential women in Brazilian history.

Does it really make sense to spend time explaining that if Jesus came back tomorrow, obtained a Brazilian voter registration card and walked into a polling station, He would probably

not vote for Flávio Bolsonaro, a man whose résumé looks less like a career history than a police file — involving allegations of money laundering through chocolate stores, a R$134 million ($26.8 million) deal with banker Daniel Vorcaro to finance a film about his father, Jair Bolsonaro, and the defense of a police officer accused of killing a child?

The episode is even harder to digest because we are not talking about an abstraction called "public security." We are talking about Ana Clara Gomes Machado, a five-year-old girl who took two deadly rifle rounds in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, in 2021, and about Flávio Bolsonaro, who acted as lawyer for Bruno Delaroli, the military police officer accused in the case.

We have reached the point where one of the candidates in the runoff will either become president or serve hard time. Prison seems like too little for Flávio, a man accused of taking billions of reais intended for retirees' food and medication.

Political tribalism overrides intelligence

While we are at it, challenge yourself to name someone from this political camp whom you genuinely admire intellectually. Whenever someone emerges who makes you think, "Hmm, I could probably have a ten-minute conversation with this guy without the unbearable embarrassment of realizing I have sat down next to a fascistoid with a cognitive deficit at a dinner table full of strangers," that person is immediately elevated to the status of prophet.

Take Renan Santos, for example, a former candidate whom I am praising here for his ability to construct and articulate an argument, not for a worldview with which I almost completely disagree.

It is curious how intelligence works inside a political tribe. When someone manages to articulate an idea with even moderate competence, the mere ability to formulate a complete sentence can be mistaken for genius. The bar falls so low that anyone capable of connecting three arguments without tripping over them is treated as an enlightened thinker.

And here I need to correct my own provocation: I did not mean to make psychiatric diagnoses. The F70–F79 codes in the ICD-10 refer to intellectual disability, a clinical condition that manifests during development and has absolutely nothing to do with a person voting badly, defending a stupid idea or believing a political lie. Using those codes as an insult would be scientifically wrong and would turn disability into a slur.

I am talking about something else, something much more widespread and politically more dangerous: the inability to distinguish fact from conviction once conviction has become identity.

The same Quest director found a frightening piece of data in his research: A whole 42% of Brazilians failed to correctly answer even one of four factual questions concerning the economy, unemployment, public safety and health. Further, 70% overestimated how much they knew. This is not a question of diplomas. It is a kind of factual illiteracy that allows politics to fill the empty spaces with whatever narrative confirms what people have already decided to believe.

"It's the economy, stupid"

Then come certain members of Brazil's left-wing, New Age-ish, kumbaya wing — the people who tell us that we must "welcome" differences, pursue non-aggressive dialogue and try to win the runoff through love. Man, did you notice that we have just heard the loudest scream of hatred from a Brazilian ballot box since the country returned to

democracy? Do you also want me to put a flower down the barrel of a militiaman's rifle?

There is a problem with that unfortunate word — "welcome" — once it becomes a political method. To welcome something presupposes that there is something there to be welcomed, and some ideas first need to be confronted, dismantled and exposed. A democratic society can live with political disagreements; it does not need to turn every moral disagreement into a group therapy session. It is not enough merely to avoid being racist; one has to be anti-racist. The same applies to every manifestation of fascism.

As for those who believe the political answer lies in the famous campaign slogan American strategist James Carville used during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign — "It's the economy, stupid" — I am sorry to report that the intention is good, but that is not quite it.

The slogan became one of the most efficient formulas in modern political campaigning because it captured a simple truth: People's material circumstances often matter more than political theory. But there are moments when economics cannot explain what is happening because a person is not voting to improve his own life. He is voting to prevent someone else's life from improving.

Let me give you a piece of data, in tribute to my friends Lelê, Polly and Diego. Brazil returned to the United Nation's Hunger Map in the 2019–2021 period and reached 2022 with 33.1 million people experiencing severe food insecurity. Over the following two years, approximately 26.5 million people moved out of that condition, and the UN removed Brazil from the map again in 2025.

Think about that for one second: millions of children who will not go to sleep crying because they are hungry. That is the kind of insensitivity I mean when I talk about the average Brazilian. Once again, Brazil finds itself divided between the Bolsonaros and the Silvas — between the politics of resentment and the politics of social inclusion.

Prosperity gospel: what Jesus wouldn't do

There is another piece of this Brazilian freakshow that deserves attention: the enormous popularity among some Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches of the so-called "prosperity gospel," a distortion of Christian principles according to which God wants us to become rich here on Earth.

And crucially, that process begins by sharing everything we have with the church and its pastors, because God will supposedly return it to us tenfold. What interests me about this theology is the exchange it produces. Suffering stops being a condition that society should confront collectively and becomes a failure in an individual relationship with God. Poverty appears as insufficient faith, while prosperity becomes a kind of divine receipt.

It is an extraordinarily efficient theology for a consumer society: You believe, you give, you receive. And if you did not receive, something must have gone wrong on your side. Is that what late capitalism looks like?

Here I need to make a distinction that the religious far right itself helps obscure: the problem is not Christians, not evangelicals and not even the participation of religious people in politics. Religion has always been a way of organizing values, communities and public action.

The problem begins when a particular religious interpretation becomes a moral authorization to strip an opponent of his humanity. At that point, faith stops being an identity and becomes a political weapon. Exactly as in that biblical passage about the Last Supper, when Jesus asked everyone to put all the bread in His bowl and told them to go for it with all the wine available. (I am

obviously inventing that passage, but it helps explain the absurdity of turning the Gospel into a manual for personal enrichment.)

I would rather behave like Jesus when a fifth-act Rigoletto thunderstorm exploded over the Sea of Galilee while He and the disciples were in a boat. Jesus kept sleeping as if He had dropped two sleeping pills, until Peter woke Him in desperation. Jesus became seriously annoyed, stood up, ordered the waters to calm down and then gave them hell: "Men of little faith, why did you doubt?"

I think I would rather be woken up when all of this is over. Because at this point, it seems that only Divine Justice has any chance of getting the Brazilian fascists out of this mess.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Luiz Cesar Pimentel is a Brazilian journalist and writer, currently working at the intersection of AI and journalism. He has been in the communication field for 30 years, specializing in digital media, strategy and transmedia storytelling. Luiz led the Brazilian branches of MySpace, Jovem Pan and R7. His career includes roles as a reporter for Folha de S. Paulo and Carta Capital, editing the magazines Trip and Istoé and serving as an international correspondent in Asia. Luiz has also authored ten books on communication. He holds a postgraduate degree in international journalism from the Poynter Institute in Florida, a degree in artificial intelligence for communication from the University of California, Berkeley and a master's degree in Social Sciences (Religious Studies).

Peter Thiel: Prophet, Provocateur or Threat to Liberal Democracy?

Elliot Neaman
October 15, 2026

American entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel's transatlantic childhood shaped his unique blend of German philosophical seriousness and American entrepreneurial swagger. His recent Axel Springer Award in Berlin sparked controversy, reflecting his controversial role in tech and politics. Critics see his views on stagnation and progress as undermining liberal democracy, while supporters see him as a visionary challenging the status quo.

Few figures in contemporary technology and politics generate as much contradictory commentary as entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel. Depending on the lens, he appears as a visionary investor, a philosophical contrarian, a kingmaker of the American right, or, in darker readings, an architect of illiberal politics dressed in Silicon Valley language. To understand why he provokes such wildly divergent verdicts, start not in Palo Alto or Washington but in Frankfurt am Main, where the story begins: the peculiar transatlantic childhood that, biographers argue, shaped almost everything that followed.

A German childhood in America

Peter Andreas Thiel was born on October 11, 1967, in Frankfurt, then-West Germany's financial capital, to Klaus Friedrich Thiel, a chemical engineer, and Susanne Thiel. He was barely a year old when his parents packed up and moved the

family to the United States, settling first in Cleveland, Ohio, a city that could hardly have been more different from the booming, internationally minded Frankfurt they had left behind. Thiel's biographer Max Chafkin, author of the acclaimed 2021 book The Contrarian, has noted that this move, from West Germany's financial capital to a fading industrial city representative of the American heartland, left its mark on the family and, by extension, on the boy who grew up there.

What makes Thiel's American childhood unusual is that it was not, linguistically speaking, especially American at all. Although he was an infant when the family crossed the Atlantic, his German-born parents spoke only German to him at home for roughly the first 12 years of his life. Thiel effectively grew up bilingual and bicultural from the cradle, absorbing English from schoolmates and American television while his domestic world remained resolutely German.

It is a detail easy to overlook amid the PayPal Mafia lore and the Palantir conspiracy theories, but it goes some way toward explaining the curious hyphenated identity Thiel has cultivated ever since: a man frequently described, and who frequently describes himself, as German-American rather than simply American; a man who has retained his German citizenship alongside his American passport; a man who returns to Germany regularly, writes op-eds in German newspapers, and has, across four decades, been alternately celebrated and denounced by the German press as a native son who made it spectacularly, if unsettlingly, good.

The itinerant childhood did not stop in Cleveland. Klaus Thiel's work for various mining companies took the family to South Africa and then to Southwest Africa, present-day Namibia, while apartheid was still the law of the land, before the Thiels finally settled in Foster City, California, in 1977. Along the way, young Peter changed elementary schools seven times. In Swakopmund, he attended a German-language school that required uniforms and still practiced corporal punishment, and where, according to Chafkin, an unreconstructed nostalgia for the Third Reich lingered among parts of the German expatriate community.

Thiel said this experience instilled in him a lasting aversion to conformity and regimentation, which he later channeled into a very American vocabulary of individualism and libertarianism. He was, by most accounts, a lonely and bookish child, a gifted mathematician who loved science and fantasy fiction — especially authors like Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein and J.R.R. Tolkien — played Dungeons & Dragons, and rarely stayed anywhere long enough to make lasting friends.

It is this doubled inheritance, a German mother tongue and a German family culture grafted onto an American upbringing forged in the Rust Belt and the Namibian desert, that biographers keep returning to when they try to explain Thiel's peculiar mixture of Continental philosophical seriousness (René Girard, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss) and American entrepreneurial swagger. He is, in a sense, a product of both traditions and fully at home in neither, which may be precisely why he has made a career out of standing athwart consensus on both sides of the Atlantic.

After graduating as valedictorian of San Mateo High School, Thiel studied philosophy at Stanford, where a curricular fight over multiculturalism prompted him to co-found the conservative Stanford Review in 1987, a paper that would later seed an extraordinary network of Silicon Valley founders and Trump-era officials. He went on to Stanford Law School, graduating in 1992, and it was there that he encountered the French American literary theorist and anthropologist René Girard, whose mimetic theory — the idea that human desire is fundamentally imitative, and that

societies periodically resolve the resulting rivalries through scapegoating — became something close to an intellectual religion for Thiel. Girard's influence runs through everything from Thiel's investment thesis (avoid competition, build monopolies) to his more recent, headline-grabbing lectures on the Antichrist and the Katechon, the biblical "restrainer" of apocalyptic forces.

From Silicon Valley success to German recognition

The business career that followed is by now the stuff of Silicon Valley legend: a stint as a securities lawyer and derivatives trader, the founding of Confinity in 1998 with Max Levchin and Luke Nosek, its transformation into PayPal, the merger with Elon Musk's X.com, and the $1.5 billion sale to eBay in 2002 that minted the so-called "PayPal Mafia." Thiel used his proceeds to found the hedge fund Clarium Capital, then in 2003 launched Palantir Technologies, named, tellingly, after the all-seeing stones of Middle-earth, as a post-9/11 bet that data analysis could make the security state both more powerful and, in his telling, more lawful.

In 2004 he became Facebook's first outside investor, buying a 10.2% stake for $500,000, a decision that alone would have secured his fortune many times over. Founders Fund, Valar Ventures, Mithril Capital and a sprawling constellation of defense-tech and biotech vehicles followed, along with a growing reputation as the venture capitalist most willing to say in public what others in Silicon Valley only murmured in private.

It was against this decades-long backdrop that Thiel returned to the German public spotlight last month to accept the Axel Springer Award in Berlin. The publishing house behind the newspapers Bild and Die Welt said the award recognized Thiel's role in creating "entirely new markets and industries" and for having "helped defend democracies" while being "attacked and vilified" for it. It was not his first brush with German institutional recognition.

In 2018, the German American Heritage Foundation named him its Distinguished German-American of the Year, praising him for having "always remembered his roots and kept strong ties to his home country." In 2021, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung controversially awarded him the Frank Schirrmacher Prize, typically reserved for intellectuals and artists judged to have made "outstanding achievements in understanding our current events." The awarding foundation defended the decision by praising Thiel's "comprehensive work in analyzing the opportunities and risks of technological progress." Critics immediately denounced the claim as reputational laundering for a man whose politics sat uneasily with the prize's legacy.

The Axel Springer ceremony followed the same script, amplified. Accepting the award, Thiel returned to the theme that has defined his public persona for more than a decade: Stagnation, not runaway innovation, is civilization's greatest danger. He framed Europe's caution, its ingrained regulatory instinct and aversion to risk, not as prudence but as a symptom of decline, arguing that societies that stop daring to build stop growing altogether. Axel Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner framed Thiel as someone who "reminds us that progress requires courage and nonconformism," echoing the case Thiel made on stage: The future belongs to those willing to be publicly wrong rather than safely mediocre. The old Silicon Valley adage, "Go fast and break things," which has aged poorly, still seems to apply to him.

The award did not pass without controversy in Germany itself. Der Spiegel wrote that Axel Springer was presenting only half the story, while the Süddeutsche Zeitung observed that although Thiel's companies genuinely provide states with

capabilities they claim to need, the German right's embrace of him as a figure of hope carries real implications for democracy. They pointedly noted that the Christian Social Union politician Peter Gauweiler had publicly called on Berlin to make Thiel federal minister for artificial intelligence and technological sovereignty. That a serving German politician could float, even rhetorically, installing an American-based billionaire in a cabinet post is itself a measure of how far Thiel's German celebrity has traveled from mere nostalgia about a native son.

The European backlash and the messianic frame

Outside that carefully curated Berlin ceremony, the picture grows considerably more complicated. Chafkin portrays Thiel as someone whose intellectual influences, chief among them Girard's mimetic theory, feed a worldview that is both apocalyptic and messianic. Seen through that frame, Thiel's Berlin remarks about stagnation are not merely economic commentary but something closer to eschatology. Civilizational decline, in his telling, becomes an almost spiritual crisis, and entrepreneurship becomes a form of salvation.

Chafkin's account also ties Thiel's fascination with monopoly, secrecy and surveillance technology through Palantir to his acceptance-speech rhetoric: The same "courage" praised on stage becomes the courage to build instruments of state power that many liberal democracies would hesitate to deploy.

Thiel's speech also sits within a broader European anxiety. Since the 1990s, he has moved from libertarianism toward a more nationalist, democracy-skeptical posture, epitomized by his infamous line that he "no longer believe[s] freedom and democracy are compatible." Critics argue his Berlin remarks about "progress" versus institutional drag are a polished restatement of that same skepticism: regulation and democratic deliberation recast as obstacles rather than safeguards.

What once read as eccentric philosophy now looks prescient to some, as several billionaire tech founders — Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, David Sacks, among others — have drifted toward similar ground during US President Donald Trump's second term. A new generation of Thiel-funded politicians and technologists, including his former employees Blake Masters and US Vice President JD Vance, now echo Thiel's template, treating elections and institutional checks as friction to be engineered around.

Theology, AI and the post-liberal horizon

A further thread running beneath the acceptance-speech applause is the convergence of Christian nationalism with Thiel-adjacent political networks. Secular tech power has fused with religious-right activism to produce a movement skeptical of pluralism itself. Conservative thinkers such as Adrian Vermeule and Patrick Deneen have developed a post-liberal critique arguing that liberal democracy has exhausted itself: too procedural, too neutral and incapable of defending shared values. That critique, once confined largely to academic journals, now finds an unlikely stage in Berlin, where a Silicon Valley billionaire's applause line about "daring greatly" doubles, for critics, as coded support for dismantling the liberal guardrails his hosts claim to champion.

Thiel's own religious commitments complicate any easy caricature. A self-described Christian shaped as much by Girard's anthropology as by the evangelical household of his upbringing, he has in recent years devoted a series of private, off-the-record lectures — organized in 2025 by San Francisco's Acts 17 Collective — to the Antichrist, Armageddon and the figure of the Katechon, the mysterious restraining force of Pauline theology.

He has controversially labeled figures as varied as climate activist Greta Thunberg and AI-safety advocate Eliezer Yudkowsky as "legionnaires of the Antichrist." Scholars such as Matthew Avery Sutton warn that this rhetorical move risks "delegitimizing compromise" and casting democratic deliberation itself as spiritually suspect.

Vatican-affiliated commentators, including Antonio Spadaro and Paolo Benanti, have taken Thiel's theological framework seriously enough to critique it point by point. Benanti described Thiel's vision as "tragically cyclic, and therefore pagan," in which Palantir functions as a kind of modern House of Solomon serving what Benanti calls Thiel's underlying "political heresy": financing the forces that erode the nation-state with one hand while arming the state with panoptic surveillance capacity with the other.

Thiel views artificial intelligence as a pivotal force that could either break decades of economic stagnation or, if overregulation suppresses it, pave the way for global totalitarianism. While he acknowledges that AI carries genuine existential risks, he argues that a precautionary slowdown or heavy government regulation poses the greater threat to humanity. In his telling, crypto and AI sit at opposite poles of a single ideological spectrum: "Crypto is decentralizing, AI is centralizing." "[I]f you want to frame it more ideologically, crypto is libertarian and AI is communist." It is a formulation that captures both his anti-statist instincts and his deep unease about concentrated technological power, an unease he nonetheless seems willing to override when the concentrating entity is Palantir, or the American state itself, acting, in his view, on the right side of history.

Thiel is no longer merely a tech investor with idiosyncratic opinions accepting a trophy. He is a node connecting venture capital, applied surveillance technology, nationalist politics, religious conservatism and post-liberal philosophy, and his Axel Springer speech was less an acceptance than a manifesto in miniature. That the ceremony took place in the country of his birth, before an audience partly composed of the same establishment German press that has spent two decades trying to decide whether he is a native son to be celebrated or a cautionary tale to be studied, only sharpens the irony. Whether one reads his Berlin remarks as a clear-eyed critique of a stagnating status quo, a wealthy ideologue's polished case for democracy's retreat, or a visionary path to a brighter technological future depends largely on which version of the future one fears most — or hopes to build.

[Kaitlyn Diana 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. He has edited and introduced several translations of Ernst Jünger's works and contributed to volumes on the radical right, including *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*. Neaman is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Right-Wing Studies (UC Berkeley). His Selected Writings: *A Journey in Intellectual History* (1988–

2025) is forthcoming in the "Best of the Humanities" series from Columbia University Press.

No More Trauma Porn: New Books and Therapy for Cult Recovery

Anke Richter
October 17, 2026

Cults are not relics of the 1970s but modern high-control groups using coercive tactics, leaving survivors facing severe trauma, including mandated shunning and complex grief. Recognizing this public health crisis requires specialized recovery resources and systemic awareness to support healing. Understanding these dynamics helps us spot red flags and support those trapped in abusive environments.

Two years ago, I kicked off New Zealand's first cult conference, which will be live-streamed around the world again this month. When I mention my latest endeavor to someone new, I usually get two reactions. Either a startled, "Sorry, a what conference?!" — checking they haven't misheard me because the two c-words don't fit together. To outsiders, our small symposium with a big impact must sound nonsensical. Or hilarious, because the other response is a wink and a chuckle: "Oh, a conference where cult leaders compare notes?" Hahaha.

I get it. For most people, cults are just a joke. A pop-culture hangover from the 1970s, long gone: diamond-clad gurus and gun-toting groupies in orange robes or pink prairie dresses, speaking in tongues and chanting in circles, with crazy beliefs from Thetans to UFOs, and cringey names like Vanguard, Uriel or Father Yod. Strange rituals, secret societies, doomsday scenarios and a few massacres.

All that happened — from Waco to Heaven's Gate to Jonestown. Deeply disturbing but also fascinating. Put on the next true crime show and pass the Kool-Aid! But if we fixate only on those extremes, we misrepresent and misread the seemingly mysterious movements we call cults.

The hidden cost of leaving

There's one in every neighborhood. They don't act like in the Netflix documentary Wild Wild Country but manage to keep a low profile, unless they end up in court for labor violations or child abuse. They also don't all live in communes or dress the same. The largest high-control groups in the world are currently the Mormons (Latter-day Saints [LDS]) and the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs). You wouldn't spot their congregants — 27 million combined — in a crowd.

The majority were born into the faith, over generations. Many are still "physically in, mentally out" (a phenomenon called PIMO) because leaving means mandated shunning for ex-JWs. Everyone you once knew is forbidden to contact you. You're dead for them. The Exclusive Brethren, now rebranded as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), call it "excommunication." Many, like the researchers behind the Stop Mandated Shunning campaign, call it a human rights crime.

You lose your whole family, support network, history, identity and belief system. Unlike losing your family in a car crash, you can't even mourn

them. Or expect outsiders to understand the complex trauma and grief you carry while regaining a sense of self you never had. Think of that the next time you pass a pair handing out Watchtower copies at a street corner before judging them.

Anyone can be recruited

Door knocking isn't doing the trick these days. The internet is far more effective as a hunting ground — and university campuses where Korean bible cults recruit aggressively. No one "joins" a cult knowingly. Smart, successful, educated, mentally strong and socially competent people can get hooked. They're not immune, not even celebrities like Alison Mack from the TV show Smallville or supermodel Hoyt Richards (Bring Me the Beauties on HBO). Everyone has an Achilles' heel where something can land at the right time.

What attracts followers could be a legitimate yoga school, meditation retreat, coaching seminar or mainstream megachurch. Some outfits like Sri Chinmoy, the Twelve Tribes or ISKCON (Hare Krishna) run popular vegetarian restaurants around the world. Others run charities like the PBCC's Rapid Relief Team, which shows up with free food after a natural disaster.

Many cults are not religious but are built around personal growth, wellness, sexual empowerment or a political ideology. Their beliefs are not the actual problem. You could be practicing witchcraft with your coven each weekend without any hallmarks of a cult. But extreme beliefs can become a problem down the track, for instance, when fervent followers target immigrants, queer people or drag queens. This has happened from the Westboro Baptist Church in the US to Destiny Church in New Zealand.

Coercive control

The one thing that problematic groups all have in common is coercive control. It's a similar destructive dynamic that shows up in domestic or intimate partner violence. The most ignorant question about a battered wife — "Why doesn't she just leave?" — shouldn't be asked about people trapped in cults either. In their case, there isn't just one controlling villain, but the whole group enables and normalizes — or even spiritualizes — the abuse.

Group-based coercive control is therefore the main topic in the "cultiverse" — the growing global field of cultic studies researchers, survivor activists, exit counselors and podcasters that I move in. They are some of the most impressive, resilient and passionate people I've ever met. And most of them were once in a cult.

Since last year, we've had the Cult-Informed Professional Network in New Zealand. Among its 50 members are also some of the Australians who were involved in the recent Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organized fringe groups. This groundbreaking effort, even on a global scale, produced 39 recommendations in a 462-page report which could and should inform policy reforms in other countries too. And it will be a hot topic on a panel at the upcoming international Decult conference.

The sensationalist stuff that supposedly wacky people in cults get up to is not on our agenda, though, unless we try to correct those false media stereotypes. The therapists, doctors, child safety advocates and social workers in the network and at Decult want to bring cult education to the wider workforce, especially social services, judiciary, police and the health sector. They're pushing for systemic change, accountability and awareness. And they hope to improve cult recovery.

The long road to recovery

For those unfamiliar with the lingo: "Cult recovery" doesn't mean reviving extinct sects but healing the religious trauma and lasting harm from sexual, physical, psychological and financial abuse that occurs in cults on a large scale. Exiting a group is only the first step and doesn't automatically set you free. PIMO is one thing, POMI another ("physically out, mentally in"). It's not a happy place.

Deconstruction (the process of "unbuilding" a belief system) is different than the outdated model of deprogramming, a questionable form of reverse brainwashing that can be coercive too. Safe cult recovery requires specialized therapists who understand the fear of eternal hell if you leave the fold. Or the complex grief and guilt of victims who have also become perpetrators in a toxic hierarchical system. How to trust authority figures, communities and your own moral compass again?

When I interviewed dozens of former Centrepoint and Gloriavale kids who had all been abused in their communes, I often heard how they were let down by ignorant and even voyeuristic counselors later. Some survivors had to educate their therapists first and give them reading material to do their job. Luckily, things are changing. UK psychotherapist Dr Gillie Jenkinson offers a certificate in the Walking Free Model, and the Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion has an excellent mental health webinar too.

Resources for healing

But not everyone can afford a therapist or attend a cult conference. The best resources for struggling survivors trying to make sense of what happened are still books. First of all, memoirs — all heartbreaking, infuriating and illuminating. In the Shadow of Enlightenment by Sarito Carrol, Cult Bride by Liz Cameron or Born and Razed by Beth Granger are some of the recent ones in a rapidly growing genre that is dominated by strong female voices instead of trauma porn.

Cult recovery books are also having a resurgence. For decades, the self-help bibles in this field were Combatting Cult Mind Control by Dr Steven Hassan and Take Back Your Life by Dr Janja Lalich, which is still going strong. A friend who recently left a high-control esoteric group and is dealing with immense shame for having lost years of his life to a false reality found solace in Terror, Love and Brainwashing by Dr Alexandra Stein.

These experts have saved lives with their work. Literally. The suicide attempt rate of cult leavers who were raised in a coercive high-control group is ten times higher than among the average population. Add to that all the early deaths from addiction, overdoses or untreated medical problems, and you get why it's not a debate about religious freedom — or a joke — but an unrecognized public health issue. Cults have a hidden death toll.

Two new cult recovery books came out this year, and I highly recommend them. Former NXIVM members Sarah Edmondson and Nippy Ames from the documentary series The Vow have published "a no-BS field guide" with the same catchy title as their popular podcast: A Little Bit Culty: Navigating Cults, Control and Coercion. It lays out the playbook of control step by step, sprinkled with personal anecdotes and "Culty Cheat Sheets" to check red flags because "culty shit is everywhere." Perfect for someone on a workshop high after a Landmark Forum or Vipassana retreat.

The second one is What Now? A Practical Guide to Life After a Cult by American psychologist Chris Shelton, who was in Scientology from the age of four until he left at 27. Ever since, the bona fide cult survivor has been

fighting the good fight for others and against his former "church" and has gained a wealth of wisdom ("I learned the hard way so you don't have to"). His weighty book is not a quick fix but comes with a deep understanding of all the layers of pain and confusion — comprehensive, compassionate and pragmatic: "In the end, I believe you are the best guide for your recovery."

When to get out

It's not all black and white. High-control organizations exist on a spectrum. The local Baptist church might be on it, or your new workplace, or the theater class with a charismatic leader. It's not about slapping the c-label on something strange in an "us vs them" manner, as cults do, but about spotting red flags that can occur anywhere.

So how do we know when to call something out — or get the hell out? Former Late Show host Stephen Colbert has an answer in Shelton's book. "Here's an easy way to figure out if you're in a cult: If you're wondering whether you're in a cult, the answer is yes." He wasn't joking.

Decult 2026 "Voices of Courage: Pathways to Healing and Justice" is from 24–25 October in Christchurch and online, with an additional program on Zoom for US time zones. All 30+ sessions with 50+ speakers will be recorded to watch later. Virtual tickets are available now.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Anke Richter is a New Zealand correspondent in the Weltreporter network and an international observer of cults. She is the author of four non-fiction books. Her last one, *CULT TRIP: Inside the world of coercion & control* (HarperCollins, 2023), is an investigative and personal exploration of former and current sex cults. Richter's reporting has been published in *Die Zeit, Spiegel, FAZ, taz, New Zealand Geographic, North & South, The Spinoff, Stuff, RNZ, TVNZ* and many more. She is now the founder and pro bono director of DECULT, a grassroots charity that organized the first cult awareness conference in New Zealand. Richter was awarded New Zealand Skeptic of the Year in 2024 and won the Ethical Media Award from the Freedom Express Awards in 2025.

Will America's Democratic Flaws Be Its Undoing?

Duncan Ritchie
October 20, 2026

America faces a crisis of democratic legitimacy as structural flaws concentrate wealth and power while undermining citizens' trust in government. Growing inequality, political polarization and the erosion of institutional checks and balances threaten both domestic stability and America's international standing. This essay examines three possible paths ahead: democratic collapse, dysfunctional anocracy or democratic reconstruction. The last requires Americans to exercise their democratic agency and reclaim the consent of the governed.

Kayce Atencio was 19 when he suffered a heart attack caused by an undiagnosed congenital defect. It nearly killed him. The

medical bills that followed devastated his finances and impacted his credit, making it difficult for Atencio to secure a lease or mortgage. By 25, Atencio had to declare bankruptcy. He spent much of his adult life dodging homelessness, sleeping on friends' couches or staying with family. The instability took a toll, not only on him, but also on his two young children.

Atencio's story reflects America's flawed healthcare system; almost everyone in the country knows someone like Atencio. These stories are part of a much larger pattern. Nearly a third of working-age Americans with private health insurance are burdened by medical debt. Millions more struggle to make ends meet as the rising cost of housing, groceries and other essentials outpaces wage growth.

Despite living in the richest democracy on Earth, many families are just one unexpected bill away from a financial crisis. A third of middle-class families struggle to afford basic necessities, with minority communities being hit the hardest. This is the economic reality for many Americans today. And it raises a profound question: What happens when ordinary citizens stop believing their government works for people like them?

That question harks back to the radical proposition embedded in America's founding and the Declaration of Independence that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." But the consent of the governed is not won once in a revolutionary war or reaffirmed each election cycle. It must be continually renewed through institutions that are transparent, responsive, representative and worthy of public trust. That is especially important as America's population has expanded and its society has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse.

This is where the rubber meets the road. A December 2025 Pew study found that just 17% of Americans trust their government to do what is right at least "most of the time." The May 2026 Brennan Center for Justice Corruption Survey found that 72% of respondents had an unfavorable view of Congress; 52% viewed the Supreme Court unfavorably.

Grievance, inequality and polarization grab headlines on an almost daily basis. But these are manifestations of a far deeper underlying problem: There is a widening gap between what citizens expect from their elected representatives and what their political institutions are able (or willing) to deliver. Put simply, America faces a crisis of democratic legitimacy.

Why do so many Americans feel locked out of their own democracy?

There are, of course, many explanations. But three structural problems stand out: distorted representation, institutional dysfunction and perverse incentive structures.

Distorted representation

Placing control of elections in the hands of politicians and state legislatures has led to widespread partisan gerrymandering, allowing politicians to choose their voters rather than allowing voters to choose their politicians. This results in distorted representation, weakens accountability and leads to a decline in public trust. And it's getting worse. The 2025 Cook Partisan Voting Index classifies only 97 of 435 (22%) US congressional districts as competitive (meaning they had less than a 5% lean for one party or the other) versus 164 (38%) in 2000. In reality, only 21 congressional seats are classified as "Toss-Up" races in the 2026 election cycle (5%!).

Voter suppression (often cloaked in the guise of election integrity) exacerbates these distortions. These are not just local issues either. A partisan gerrymander or voter purge in Texas that contributes to changing control of the US House of Representatives effectively disenfranchises voters across the country. Recent "gerrymander wars" leading up to the 2026 midterms have undercut limited progress in instituting independent redistricting commissions. This is classic "race to the bottom" mentality, in which rational (and, in some instances, irrational) actors pursue a short-term, self-interested goal that results in collective harm and weakens democracy.

In 2023, Pew reported that three in ten Americans were dissatisfied with both the Democratic and Republican parties. By 2025, a Gallup poll found that a new high of 45% of American adults identified as political independents versus only 27% each for Democrats and Republicans; a majority (> 54%) of Gen Z and Millennials identified as independents. But the entrenched duopoly has stifled alternative voices, leaving disaffected voters nowhere to go.

Moreover, the primary process for selecting candidates for the duopoly can result in extreme, polarizing candidates being foisted on the general electorate by one or both parties. These extreme, often poorly qualified candidates who win gerrymandered districts enter Congress with a bombastic, performative brand of politics that is off-putting to unaligned voters, further straining the legitimacy of government institutions.

Institutional dysfunction

In "Federalist No. 10," Founding Father James Madison warned of the danger of a "tyranny of the majority." Madison's concern was principally that a faction representing a numerical majority might weaponize government against property-owning minorities. Several of America's constitutional institutions reflected that concern about unchecked majority power by incorporating counter-majoritarian principles. Over time, however, those institutions have increasingly come into tension with contemporary expectations of democratic equality. In some cases, they have succumbed to the "mischiefs of faction" of which Madison warned, producing outcomes that might be regarded not as the tyranny of the majority that he feared, but rather as a tyranny of the minority.

To illustrate, in 2024, the 47 elected Democratic senators represented 53.5% of the US's 50-state population, while the 53 Republican senators who held the majority represented 46.5%. In fact, not since 1996 has a majority Republican Senate cohort represented a majority of the population.

Think about that: During the 18 years Republicans have controlled the Senate over the past three decades, they have done so while representing a minority of Americans! That imbalance has had profound consequences. It has allowed Republicans to refuse to hold hearings on former President Barack Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Merrick Garland, then rush through President Donald Trump's nomination of Amy Coney Barrett four years later.

What many regarded as Republicans' bare-knuckle politics helped to consolidate a conservative supermajority on the Supreme Court that went on to issue unpopular landmark decisions — from Dobbs to presidential immunity. It also enabled passage of a succession of Republican tax cuts that disproportionately benefited corporations and higher-income households, exacerbating inequality while contributing to persistent, widening structural deficits that have added trillions of dollars to the national debt.

The filibuster compounds the Senate's anti-majoritarian structure. Theoretically, just 41

senators representing roughly one in nine Americans could block legislation supported by senators representing the country's overwhelming majority. The proverbial tail wagging the dog. In 2021, Senator Mitch McConnell infamously said that he was "'100 percent' focused 'on stopping' President Joe Biden's administration." As Democrats held the Senate majority at the time, McConnell's tool was the filibuster. That is not governance; it is obstructionism — a practical example of tyranny of the minority. That's precisely why Americans are frustrated that politicians are focused on partisan politics and not on solving their problems.

The Electoral College further compounds the Senate's representational distortion. A state's electoral votes are determined by the number of congressional seats plus two for its senators. The effect is that a Wyoming citizen's vote for president is worth 3.6 times that of a California voter (based on Electoral College and US Census data).

But for most voters, the point is moot. Forty-eight of 50 states use a winner-takes-all system, awarding all their electoral votes to the candidate who wins the statewide popular vote. That effectively renders millions of votes irrelevant to the Electoral College outcome. In 2024, only seven "swing states" (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin) were in play on election night. Swing states garner almost all the attention of presidential campaigns and a vastly disproportionate amount of their spending, while citizens in the rest of the country feel as if their voices don't matter. Arguably, the Electoral College may also influence who ends up on the presidential ticket — in particular, the selection of the vice president nominee because of their perceived ability to help deliver one or more swing states.

The Electoral College also allows a popular-vote loser to win the presidency, which has happened five times in America's 250-year history — twice since 2000, both times favoring Republicans (President George W. Bush in 2000 — with a conservative Supreme Court intervention — and Trump in 2016).

The reality is that for millions of Americans, their vote carries limited practical weight. Whether that perception is fair is beside the point. Democratic legitimacy rests not only on constitutional rules but on citizens' belief that their participation matters. The consent of the governed is difficult to sustain when millions of citizens feel that their votes have little or no influence over political outcomes. It is harder still when those citizens feel their voices are being stifled through electoral distortions and systemic institutional dysfunction.

Perverse incentive structures

Perverse incentive structures tilt politics further away from the interests of ordinary voters. The May 2026 Brennan Center for Justice Corruption Survey found that more than nine in ten voters regard corruption as a big problem in politics "that permeates every government institution." Supermajorities (90% or more) of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents were aligned on this issue, and 79% of Americans favor "significant reform," including a constitutional amendment to restore limits on money in elections.

Why, then, has Congress struggled to enact campaign finance reforms that enjoy broad public support? Part of the answer is that many politicians are captive to the existing system.

The hardest part of a politician's job is raising money to get elected and, once elected, to get reelected. They face hard choices, not the least of which is how to allocate their time. Time spent

fundraising from small-dollar donors is time not spent legislating, meeting constituents or being with family. Cultivating relationships with larger donors and Super Political Action Committees can ease that burden but often comes with strings attached. Those strings distort politicians' incentives, aligning them with large donors rather than with the ordinary citizens the politicians were elected to represent. The May 2026 Brennan Center for Justice survey found that the majority of voters (52%) believe their member of the US House of Representatives is very or somewhat corrupt.

The Supreme Court has played a hand here, too, fundamentally reshaping campaign finance law by striking down or narrowing many of the restrictions that actually made it through Congress. It has also reduced transparency around political spending, contributing to the growth of dark money in American elections. The Brennan Center for Justice reported that the "2024 federal election cycle was the most secretive since the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision in 2010," with $1.9 billion spent by dark money groups that do not reveal their donors. In parallel, the Court has narrowed the scope of public corruption under federal statutes (e.g., McDonnell v. United States, Snyder v. United States), making it significantly harder to prosecute. Against that backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that the May 2026 Brennan Center for Justice survey also found that 62% of voters believe the US Supreme Court is very or somewhat corrupt.

Democratic legitimacy depends on citizens believing that their elected officials are ultimately accountable to them. When elected officials appear more accountable to donors than voters — and when institutional distortions such as gerrymandering make electoral accountability harder to impose — public trust inevitably erodes. A partisan Supreme Court further erodes that trust by adopting a permissive stance on corruption and amplifying the voice of money while allowing donors to conceal the ultimate speaker.

The seeds of America's discontent

America emerged from World War II better placed than most countries to take advantage of an increasingly open global marketplace. The expansion of trade — the prelude to globalization — was enabled by economic and security treaties overseen by international institutions in which America was a crucial partner. Domestically, the New Deal and the GI Bill, and later progress on civil rights, expanded opportunities for an increasing number of Americans. For roughly three decades, ordinary Americans experienced rising living standards and a growing sense of a shared prosperity, undergirding democratic legitimacy.

Things began to change in the 1970s. America continued to prosper. But with the advent of globalization, a flatter, more accessible world allowed companies to optimize cost structures across global supply chains. Blue-collar manufacturing jobs moved to countries with lower labor costs and lighter regulation.

Within America's transition to a service- and, later, technology- and data-driven economy lay the seeds of discontent. The gains of prosperity were increasingly concentrated in fewer hands. Blue-collar communities that had come to expect each generation to be better off than the last instead experienced industrial decline, wage stagnation and diminishing economic security.

Politics was changing, too. Ronald Reagan helped reframe Americans' perception of government with his quip in 1986 that the "nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help." Newt Gingrich then reshaped the language of politics and corroded civility with his Grand Old

Party Action Committee (GOPAC) memo, titled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control." Scholars and journalists often cite the memo as a key turning point in American politics and an important contributor to today's toxic polarization. It gave rise to a more performative, tribal brand of politics and institutionalized the encoding of ideology through language. Republicans were encouraged not to treat opponents as rivals to be persuaded but as moral enemies to be defeated. As Gingrich himself put it in a 1978 speech to College Republicans, "[politics] is a war for power."

Before the advent of social media and recommendation algorithms, conservative talk radio, led by Rush Limbaugh, amplified and popularized Gingrich's weaponized political language. Then, Fox News carried that combative brand of politics into 24-hour cable television, fouling the public square. As the GOPAC memo itself observes, "Language matters." Renowned semiotician and cognitive linguist Marcel Danesi describes it thus: "There is no mind control without semantic control."

Trump's brand of hobgoblin politics is, in many ways, the inevitable conclusion of a nearly forty-year project initiated by Newt Gingrich's GOPAC memo to weaponize language in the service of tribal politics. Trump's success relied, in part, on appealing to disaffected groups who believed America no longer worked for them. That perception provided fertile ground for grievance, polarization and the politics of resentment and retribution. But Trump would not have succeeded had the groundwork not already been laid.

Artificial intelligence as an accelerant

Advances in technology have had a disruptive effect on societies throughout history. Whether they had a net positive or negative effect depended less on the technology, per se, than on how it was deployed by its owner — and on the incentives and regulations that governed its use.

AI is already accelerating democratic fragility and decay in at least two important ways. The first is through recommendation algorithms. Social media platforms are designed to maximize engagement. Engagement drives advertising revenue and, therefore, profit. Recommendation algorithms have become extraordinarily adept at learning what captures our attention. Posts that evoke high-arousal emotions such as anger, outrage and fear in humans spread further and faster than calmer, more considered content. This creates a perverse incentive for social media platforms to amplify content that is corrosive to civility and democratic discourse. Like Gingrich's ideologically encoded language, such content intensifies polarization, undermining trust and political legitimacy.

To compound the problem, generative AI has dramatically reduced the cost of deception by removing traditional barriers — time, effort and expertise — needed to develop content and has enhanced the perceived authenticity of that content. Political messaging that once required teams of designers, writers and translators can now be produced in minutes. Deception campaigns and propaganda can be hyper-targeted using publicly available data (e.g., users' social media activity); they can also be adaptive, generating interactive messaging to enhance persuasiveness. Multilingual fluency further reduces the cost. For platforms optimized for engagement, this abundance of emotionally charged content is a boon to profitability, even as it further corrodes the digital public square.

Technology companies reinvest part of their profitability in lobbying to limit regulatory oversight, especially of AI, and to secure policies to facilitate the development of AI infrastructure. Many legislators concede that the "government

lacks the knowledge and processes to regulate AI effectively," adding to the challenge of constraining the corrosive impacts social media and AI are having on society.

University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute Democracy Report 2025 notes that "disinformation is used … to purposefully inflate negative feelings and create a sense of distrust within the society, fueling polarization." AI did not invent America's hobgoblin politics. It industrialized it.

Industrial-scale AI-generated disinformation effectively targeted with recommendation algorithms can help trigger the authoritarian impulse of citizens already predisposed to believing democratic institutions no longer solve their problems.

Could democratic legitimacy be America's version of Goliath's curse?

In Goliath's Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse, Luke Kemp, a research affiliate with the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at Cambridge University, examines history through the lens of societal collapse. A "Goliath" is Kemp's term for a collection of hierarchies organized through dominance and, often, violence (or the threat of violence) to allow some individuals to control energy and labor with the objective of capturing "lootable resources" — in modern terms, these would include fossil fuels, commodities, property and data.

Generative AI provides a powerful new engine to monetize data and human attention. That monetization enables the concentration of wealth and power while accelerating the degradation of democracy; this, in turn, weakens the constraints on further concentration of wealth and power. It's a classic feedback loop.

According to Kemp's research, the characteristics that precede a Goliath's collapse are typically the concentration of power, the over-exploitation of labor by elites, and extreme wealth inequality. Military activity is often a contributing factor, as Goliaths seek to protect and expand the looted resources of those at the top of their hierarchies. War machines, inherently, demand hierarchy and resources, placing incremental stress on societies.

The irony is that, because Goliaths are extractive and hierarchical, success tends to breed rigidity and, with it, fragility. As power and wealth become increasingly concentrated, societies become less adaptable. Elites become insulated from the needs of citizens, who lose faith in institutions that no longer serve them. Historically, populations have responded by withdrawing their consent, emigrating where possible, resisting authority or, in some cases, rebelling against their rulers — "voting with feet and fire," as Kemp puts it. The majority of humans, it transpires, have an aversion to dominance.

External shocks — droughts, pandemics, financial crises or wars — rarely topple healthy societies on their own. Rather, they expose existing frailties. Kemp argues that societies based on democratic principles tend to make better decisions because they draw on diverse perspectives, information and expertise. In that sense, democracy is not merely a political ideal; it's a superior adaptive model.

In Kemp's framing, the US is a quintessential Silicon Goliath. It is economically dominant with the largest share of nominal global GDP and nearly half of global equity market capitalization. Information technology alone represents approximately one-third of the S&P 500's market capitalization, exceeding even the energy sector's peak of around 29% in 1980. And the US has the most powerful — and expensive — military in the

world and the second-largest nuclear arsenal (after Russia).

Does America exhibit the characteristics Kemp warns of?

According to the V-Dem Institute, American democracy has measurably decayed. In its 2025 report, the Institute notes that "Democracy took a beating during President Trump's first time in office. The [Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) score] fell from 0.85 to 0.73." Eighteen months into Trump's second term, the V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026 noted the LDI has "plummeted" to 0.57, a level not seen since the civil rights era.

The forces driving today's democratic decline, however, are profoundly different. The Institute attributes this deterioration to the concentration and expansion of presidential power, weakening oversight of the executive branch, attacks on the rule of law and suppression and intimidation of media and dissenting voices. Trump's deployment of America's war machine in Venezuela and Iran during Trump 2.0 illustrates the expansion of presidential power and weakening of congressional oversight.

The Center for Systemic Peace's (CSP) Polity Project's assessment is even more troubling than the V-Dem Institute's. In 2016, as if with a nod to Madison, "CSP changed the coding for Political Competition in the USA to Factional Competition." Then, in 2025, it downgraded the US from +8 to 0 on its polity index, reclassifying the country from a democracy to an anocracy, or partial democracy. It cited similar concerns to those identified by the V-Dem Institute and explicitly singled out the Supreme Court's decision to grant presidents broad immunity as a basis for its assessment that the US was undergoing a regime transition. CSP's announcement concluded: The USA is no longer considered a democracy and lies at the cusp of autocracy; it has experienced a Presidental [sic] Coup and an Adverse Regime Change event. … The CSP COUP dataset lists an "attempted coup" (COUP=2) for the USA on 6 January 2021 and a successful coup (COUP=1) on 20 January 2025.

As the V-Dem 2026 report puts it: "The scale and speed of autocratization under the Trump administration are unprecedented in modern times." That reclassification has implications beyond the health of American democracy. In How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them, American political scientist Barbara F. Walter identifies a nation's Polity score as the best predictor of instability, with peak risk occurring "smack in the middle of the zone — between -1 and +1." The US now sits at 0.

Wealth and income inequality have been expanding over the past five decades. The US has a Wealth Gini coefficient, measuring inequality, of 0.83 on a scale of 0 to 1, placing it fourth highest among the G20 — behind Russia, Brazil, and South Africa. More disturbing is the extreme concentration of wealth among the top 1% of Americans, who control 29% of total wealth (almost half of that held by the top 0.1%). In contrast, the bottom half of Americans control a mere 5.3% of wealth, about half of that in real estate (i.e., typically in primary residences).

Extreme concentrations of wealth coupled with weak campaign finance laws allow elites to translate economic power into political influence. More than a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt warned that government risked becoming the servant of capital. Elon Musk's role in the 2024 election provides a glaring contemporary example of this risk. The May 2026 Brennan Center for Justice Corruption Survey found that 56% of voters believe that all or most government officials prioritize the interests of

billionaires and big corporations over the interests of the public. Inevitably, this undermines democratic legitimacy.

Americans' discontent with the nation's trajectory is not just present in the surveys. It can be seen on the streets — in a series of "No Kings" protests held across the US since Trump's inauguration in January 2025 to rebuff what organizers described as executive overreach, authoritarianism and the militarization of government. The significance of these protests lies not only in their size but in what they reveal: Millions of Americans increasingly question the concentration of executive power — an anathema to the founding idea of America. The consent of the governed cannot be taken for granted.

Decaying democracy undermines America's international legitimacy

America's international legitimacy has been crucial to its economic success. Across his two terms, Trump has undercut many of the international institutions and agreements that underpinned the post-war international order and America's rise within it. These actions — and the capricious manner in which they have often been undertaken — have unsettled allies and raised questions about the reliability of the United States as a long-term trade and security partner. As international trust erodes, so, too, does America's international legitimacy.

Why should citizens care about America's international legitimacy?

One of the key benefits of America's rise as a "Goliath" has been the US dollar's adoption as the world's dominant trading and reserve currency. Approximately 50% of international payments are in US dollars — roughly twice the US's share of global GDP — and about 58% of the world's foreign exchange reserves are held in dollar-denominated assets. That increased international demand for dollar assets lowers borrowing costs for the US Treasury, the world's largest borrower with more than $40 trillion in total debt outstanding — about $117,600 per US resident (based on US Census data). Those benefits flow through the American economy in the form of cheaper mortgages, business loans, and consumer credit. International trust in America's institutions, rule of law, financial markets and democracy has tangible economic value.

What happens if trust in these American institutions continues to erode?

The dollar's privileged role in the global economy would gradually weaken as central banks and international investors continue to diversify away from dollar-denominated assets. This process is already underway; the dollar's share of global foreign-exchange reserves has declined by around 14 percentage points since the turn of the century. Over the same period, all three major credit-rating agencies downgraded the US sovereign credit rating from their highest grade — S&P in 2011, Fitch in 2023 and Moody's in 2025 — citing concerns that include persistent fiscal deficits, rising debt and an erosion of governance.

Weaker demand for US Treasuries would push up US dollar interest rates, increasing the government's borrowing costs. Those higher rates and costs would impact Americans in two ways: First, through reduced government programs and higher taxes to service the ballooning national debt. And, second, through higher interest rates on mortgages, business loans and consumer credit. That would hit financially vulnerable households the hardest, reinforcing the perception that the government isn't working for them, further undermining democratic legitimacy.

International and domestic legitimacy are not divorced; they are interconnected and mutually

reinforcing. A decaying democracy erodes America's international legitimacy. That leads to a decline in American prosperity, which further undermines democratic legitimacy. The question is whether that feedback loop can be broken.

America's inflection point

America and the world are in uncharted territory. Democracy is ebbing around the world. More countries are simultaneously autocratizing in today's "third wave of autocratization" than during any period of recorded history. In its 2026 study, the V-Dem Institute reports that "Nearly a quarter of the world's nations (44) are now on the list of autocratizers"; 41% of the world's population — about 3.4 billion people — now live in countries experiencing democratic decline.

America's trajectory is especially alarming. Its democratic decay stands out even among prominent autocratizers of the past quarter century — including Russia, Turkey and India — because of its speed. The V-Dem Institute's 2026 report notes its distinctive feature is that one party within a duopoly has embraced a "far-right, nationalist, and anti-pluralist agenda" while largely abdicating its constitutional responsibility to check the excesses of an increasingly unconstrained executive.

American democracy is decaying because its structural flaws have been exposed by the passage of time and by progress, allowing their exploitation to produce profoundly undemocratic outcomes. That has undermined trust in — and the legitimacy of — its democratic institutions.

The good news is that democracy possesses an advantage absent from most of the historical Goliaths Kemp studied: a peaceful mechanism for self-correction. Through free and fair elections (assuming they will be largely preserved), citizens can withdraw their consent, replace their representatives and change the trajectory of their nation.

With that in mind, where does America go from here? There are broadly three paths it could take:

The first path: democratic collapse

America continues on its present trajectory. The appurtenances of democracy may survive, as they have in other autocratic states such as Russia and Turkey, but election outcomes become increasingly hollow as legitimacy is further eroded. Executive power expands, dissent is suppressed and freedoms are progressively withdrawn. Political and economic power continues to concentrate around the leader and among compliant elites. This scenario may unfold rapidly if the assumption of free and fair elections no longer holds.

America's international legitimacy would also erode, accelerating the realignment of global trade and security partnerships already underway. America's stature as a global superpower would diminish. In time, so, too, would American prosperity. Ironically, globally mobile capital — and perhaps even some of the very elites who benefited most from America's rise and contributed to its demise — could relocate to more stable democracies. But, as the V-Dem Institute's Staffan Lindberg warns, "With the United States of America now turning into an autocracy, the future for remaining democracies is going to be challenging, to say the least."

The second path: a dysfunctional and unstable anocracy

Democratic decay is arrested, but the underlying flaws remain and continue to undermine legitimacy and public trust. Executive power remains consolidated at roughly present levels, distorting the functioning of the three branches of

government and permanently weakening Congress's oversight. Corruption becomes entrenched. Toxic polarization continues — potentially worsens.

America devolves into a dysfunctional and unstable anocracy, with an elevated vulnerability to political violence. The risk of renewed democratic decay remains ever-present.

This path also risks further erosion of America's international legitimacy and its role as a global superpower, coupled with protracted economic decline.

The third path: democratic reconstruction

America uses democracy's greatest strength — its capacity for self-correction. But a word of caution: a narrow electoral victory by a pro-democracy party would be insufficient; it would likely leave the country on the second path — a dysfunctional and unstable anocracy in which the structural flaws remain intact.

History suggests societies rarely recover by restoring yesterday's dysfunctional institutions. They recover by redesigning institutions that address today's realities and prepare for tomorrow's opportunities. If Americans — the governed — want to halt democratic decline, they would need to deliver a decisive electoral mandate for real change — one that gives representatives the democratic legitimacy and political authority to undertake the necessary reconstruction.

In the present American moment, one might be forgiven for believing that power and wealth will continue to centralize, that the arc of history bends towards autocracy, either through accelerated democratic collapse or a drawn-out descent. But that ignores the agency of the American citizen and their collective power to alter the country's trajectory. Democratic reconstruction is not self-executing; reform requires citizens willing to defend democratic institutions, demand structural change and hold those who govern accountable.

That will be a herculean undertaking. It requires confronting the institutional weaknesses that have endured through the first 250 years of the American experiment and reconstructing America's democratic architecture for the twenty-first century. That will take time. Trust and legitimacy are asymmetric: they can be lost in an instant but often take years — perhaps decades — to rebuild. America will need to stay the course.

How does America recover the consent of the governed?

At the outset, it was established that the consent of the governed must be continually renewed through institutions that are transparent, responsive, representative and worthy of public trust. Those same principles should therefore provide the framework for America's democratic reconstruction. They are also consistent with internationally recognized principles of democratic governance.

Rather than delving into the minutiae of specific policy and legal reforms, the focus here is on the principles necessary to bring about America's democratic reconstruction.

Restore representative government

Representative government requires citizens to believe that elections translate the will of the electorate into political outcomes that align with their expectations. That means restoring confidence that every citizen's vote carries meaningful and equal weight.

Every citizen should enjoy an equal opportunity to participate in free and fair elections without unreasonable barriers or discrimination.

Constitutional counter-majoritarian institutions should be reformed to uphold the democratic principle of political equality.

Electoral boundaries should be drawn independently of political actors to ensure that votes carry as close to equal weight as is practicable, promote competitive elections and produce representative outcomes rather than a predetermined partisan advantage. This responsibility, together with the oversight and administration of elections generally, should rest with independent electoral bodies to ensure impartiality and public confidence.

Electoral systems should encourage candidates to appeal beyond narrow partisan, ethnic or religious bases and reward coalition-building rather than political extremism while simultaneously ensuring that minorities are properly and equitably represented.

Restore responsive government

At the most fundamental level, representatives should be accountable to the citizens they serve rather than to concentrated economic interests. Their public fiduciary duty should include post-office restrictions to avoid any perception that public service is a pathway to private enrichment.

Campaign finance regulation should ensure that political influence reflects the democratic equality of citizens rather than disparities in wealth. Any permitted spending (including on public interest subjects) should be fully transparent so that citizens know who is seeking to influence them.

Digital platforms should be regulated to protect the integrity of the public square and restore civility. Their commercial incentives should not undermine democracy by rewarding outrage, deception or political extremism. Regulation should promote transparency regarding algorithmic recommendation systems, the provenance of AI-generated political content and the identity of those seeking to influence democratic debate while protecting freedom of expression without measuring it in dollars and cents.

Restore public trust

Restoring representative and responsive government will contribute meaningfully to restoring public trust in America's democratic system. But additional elements will be necessary to fully restore that trust and ensure impartial accountability.

Judicial independence is a foundational principle of a democratic society. Citizens must have confidence that everyone is subject to the same laws and that those laws are enforced in a fair, impartial, just and transparent manner. Judicial appointment, tenure and removal should therefore be structured to protect the judiciary from partisan control and ensure that the law can be applied without fear or favor.

Societies are guided, for better or worse, by the ethos of the apex and by the cadence of leadership. Restoring civility to America's political discourse must therefore begin with those who shape it. Codes of ethics and conduct should apply broadly to elected officials, public servants and the judiciary, establishing standards of behavior appropriate to public office.

That initiative should be paired with broad civic education to deepen citizens' understanding of how their government functions, their role within it and how reconstructed institutions make government more representative and responsive to them.

America is at an inflection point. Its citizens can choose to allow their democracy to continue its decay, arrest that decay while leaving its

underlying dysfunctions intact or invoke democracy's self-correcting mechanism to reconstruct American democracy for the twenty-first century. The third of these paths is by far the most difficult, and its success uncertain. But it is the only path leading to a renewal of the consent of the governed and restoration of trust in America's democratic institutions. And that is the only path that may lay the foundation for the next 250 years of American prosperity.

Americans will determine the fate of their democracy. But the consequences of their choice will reverberate far beyond America's shores. We all have a stake in America's success.

[Andrew Litz edited this piece.]



Duncan Ritchie is a former investment banker and author. Raised on a plantation in North Borneo, Duncan graduated from the University of Western Australia before spending thirty years advising governments and companies on energy and infrastructure transactions and policy across Asia, Europe and the Middle East. He has written extensively for multilateral agencies, including the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Environment Programme, recommending policy reforms to accelerate infrastructure development and investment in climate solutions. His extensive research into democratic fragility, authoritarianism and propaganda culminated in his debut novel, *The Truth Chamber*. Duncan lives in Tasmania, Australia.

A Moment of Truth for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Wider Horn of Africa

Martin Plaut
October 20, 2026

Ethiopian forces' recent advance to the Eritrean border raises fears of imminent invasion. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has long desired a Red Sea port to gain its own access to the outside world, and Eritrea's Massawa or Assab would do. But Eritreans fought for years to achieve their independence. They have international allies and would put up a ferocious resistance to any foreign aggression.

With Ethiopian forces having taken the northern town of Zalambessa, bordering on Eritrea, the region is at a crossroads. To put it simply: Will Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed send his troops, supported by the Tigray Peace Force (TPF), into the neighboring nation?

The decision is critical. If Ethiopia decides to invade Eritrea, as it did during the border war of 1998–2000, regional geopolitics will be threatened. Few doubt that the Ethiopians and their allies are capable of doing so. If they do invade, a number of key elements could come into play.

Eritrea has been an aggressive neighbor. Apart from its war with Ethiopia, the nation has involved itself in no fewer than six wars since independence in 1993.

Fifteen years ago, a UN Monitoring Group report alleged that Eritrean intelligence had planned an attack on the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in January 2011. The unrealized attack allegedly intended to disrupt the African Union summit.

The UN report claimed the plan involved:

A car bomb at the African Union headquarters Explosives near the Ethiopian prime minister's office and the Sheraton Hotel, where visiting leaders stayed An attack on the Merkato market And the use of Oromo Liberation Front operatives allegedly recruited, trained and directed by Eritrean intelligence.

The report concluded that Eritrea's government had "conceived, planned, organized and directed" the failed operation, which, if carried out, could have caused mass civilian casualties and disrupted the summit.

Given this history, it is hardly surprising that Ethiopia is wary of its neighbor. However, the Ethiopians also have aggressive intentions. Abiy has repeatedly indicated that he wishes to have access to the Red Sea, via Eritrean ports Massawa and Assab. The aim is to reestablish the Ethiopian navy. As long ago as 2018, the prime minister said that Ethiopia had "built one of the strongest ground and air force in Africa... we should build our naval force capacity in the future."

Unresolved tensions and a warning

The nations have not resolved these tensions. Eritrea and Ethiopia, who fought as allies during the 2020–2022 war in Tigray, are now at daggers drawn. The unresolved situation in Tigray exploded into full scale war on September 22, 2026, with drone attacks on Tigrayan towns. It now threatens to tip the region into conflict. With Ethiopian forces having advanced to the country's border with Eritrea, Abiy could drive deeper into Eritrea to seize the Red Sea port that he has so long desired.

Taking notice of the crisis, the Trump administration has warned Ethiopian and Eritrean troops not to cross their mutual border:

Increasing cross-border tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have the potential to affect the entire region. The Horn of Africa cannot sustain another military conflict and humanitarian crisis. A conflict jeopardizes ongoing U.S. collaboration on shared interests with both countries. We strongly urge Ethiopia and Eritrea to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their neighbors, exercise maximum restraint and return to dialogue and cooperation as agreed in their 2018 peace framework. Peace through dialogue is the only path toward sustainable security, economic growth, and prosperity.

What problems would an invasion of Eritrea pose for Ethiopia?

Any invasion would be illegal. Since 1993, the African Union and the United Nations have recognized Eritrea. Ethiopian President Meles visited its capital, Asmara, at the time, cementing Eritrea's recognition by Ethiopia. Of course, it is also true that Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has repeatedly interfered in Ethiopian affairs, arming dissidents and attempting to shape Ethiopia to Eritrea's will. But this would take matters to an entirely different level.

Abiy knows that even now, his supply lines are long and hard to maintain. Ethiopian forces would be stretched if they attempted to capture Eritrea (or parts of Eritrea) while facing attacks in their rear from the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), which remained loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation

Front. The TDF did not face defeat in Ethiopia's Mekelle, instead withdrawing to the mountains, as they had done before. They have hidden supplies and equipment and could easily mount a fierce guerrilla campaign against Ethiopian and TPF troops.

Eritrea's military is no match for the Ethiopian armed forces. Estimates say that Eritrea can field an army 350,000 strong, yet has just seven working aircraft and not a single operational fighter jet. Much of the rest of its kit dates from the 1998–2000 border war, and a $219 million defense budget only goes so far against a neighbor that has been acquiring, and even producing, the drones Eritrea lacks.

So far the Alliance for Survival the Tigrayans forged with Oromo, Amhara and other ethnic groups does not appear to have paid dividends. Attempts to establish a united military strategy to attack Ethiopian forces would not seem to have yielded results so far. It may be that this is, as was previously predicted, because of earlier problems of disunity. However, fighting is already taking place in several areas of Ethiopia away from Tigray and this could escalate, testing the Ethiopian military's ability to subjugate Eritrea, as well as Tigray.

How might Ethiopia's allies react? Abiy relies heavily on the United Arab Emirates for finances and equipment, in return allowing the Middle Eastern nation to supply its Rapid Support Forces (RSF) allies, the Janjaweed, in western Ethiopia. Equally, Ethiopia relies on Türkiye for the drones that it used to turn the last war with Tigray (2020–2022) in its favor. The French News Agency reported recently that "Ethiopia has been manufacturing drones at two factories since last year and is now thought to have a fleet of thousands, analysts say, giving the government an edge against its multiple insurgent enemies.

"Simultaneously, Eritrea has worked hard to win allies in Egypt and with the Sudanese Armed Forces, as well as mend fences with some of its Arab neighbors. US President Donald Trump, desperate to escape from the war that he launched against Iran, has moved to improve relations with Asmara. Reuters reported in May, citing an internal US government document, that Washington was preparing to lift the Eritrea sanctions amid renewed focus on the Red Sea and Eritrea's strategic location. Eritrea has powerful friends today, including Egypt and the Sudanese Armed Forces that now control Khartoum and much of eastern Sudan. These relations have been strengthened in recent months. Saudi Arabia, already fighting the Houthis in Yemen, is unlikely to wish to see further turmoil in the region. They are all likely to pressure Addis Ababa to not attempt to seize an Eritrean port, nor to overthrow the Eritrean regime.

Any invasion of Eritrea would unite the majority of its people behind President Isaias, in the country and the diaspora. Even his enemies would, for the most part, oppose an external threat to their nation.

What advantages might an invasion of Eritrea provide to Ethiopia?

Abiy wants a port on the Red Sea. He argued that it is an existential question for Ethiopia. Having its own port would secure Ethiopia's route to the outside world, instead of depending on Djibouti for its access to the sea. He explained that Ethiopia's rights and claims of access to the port are rooted in

geographic, historic, ethnic or economic realities. He has not ruled out taking a port by force.

Ethiopians have urged him to act, stating: "Ethiopia's modern naval history took shape in the aftermath of the Second World War. In 1948, the Imperial Ethiopian Navy was formally established, with its first naval base set up at the port of Massawa… Now, as Ethiopia seeks to strengthen its economic and strategic links with the Red Sea, the horizon is once again part of its national conversation. From Red Sea waters to a new strategic era, Ethiopia's maritime journey is increasingly becoming a story not only of recovering what was lost, but of building the capability and partnerships needed to shape what comes next.

"If Ethiopian forces could capture Asmara and take the remainder of Eritrea, new opportunities would open up for them. It would allow Abiy to settle once and for all which nation was supreme in the Horn of Africa. He could either establish a puppet government in Eritrea or (less likely) attempt to reverse its declaration of independence, and reabsorb Eritrea into Ethiopia. For someone with the ambitions of Abiy, both must appear tempting prospects. At the same time, he cannot ignore the fact that Eritreans fought 30 years for their independence. They would not roll over and accept Addis's rule.

Eliminating Eritrea as a competitor would leave the Ethiopian prime minister in a much more powerful position vis-à-vis Sudan. He could bolster his support for the RSF and turn the Sudanese civil war in their favor. Might the UAE be quietly egging him on for precisely this reason?

Hubris and religious beliefs should not be overlooked. Prime Minister Abiy considers that he is advised by God. There are reports that he has told fellow believers that God called him to become prime minister, and that he regards his leadership as divinely selected. During the Tigray conflict, a leaked recording reportedly captured a prophetess telling him that God wanted him to defeat the Tigrayan forces. Abiy's reported response was "Amen," though this demonstrates his receptiveness to such claims more clearly than it proves a systematic belief that God personally dictates every policy.

Other factors are, of course, in play. However, these are some that appear to be shaping this critical decision: to invade or not to invade. We will have to wait to see the outcome of Abiy's deliberations and ambitions.

[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.

Brazil's 2026 Elections: The Right Advances and Bolsonarism Endures

Helder Ferreira do Vale
October 22, 2026

Brazil's 2026 elections delivered more than an unexpected first-round lead for Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. Gains by the right across Congress and state governments suggest a broader political shift — and show that Bolsonarism has evolved beyond President Jair Bolsonaro into an increasingly institutionalized political force. The October 25 runoff will determine whether this rightward momentum translates into presidential control or leaves incumbent President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva facing a more conservative Congress regardless of the outcome.

Brazilians went to the polls on October 4 to elect a president, governors, members of the Chamber of Deputies and two-thirds of the Federal Senate. Only a few hours after polling stations closed, the election produced its biggest surprise. Contrary to major polls published in the final days of the campaign, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro of the Liberal Party (PL) finished the first round ahead of incumbent President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (PT). Bolsonaro received 47.03% of valid votes, or 56.1 million votes, against Lula's 45.16%, or 53.9 million — a difference of approximately 2.2 million votes. The two candidates will meet again in the runoff on October 25.

The result capped a campaign that had been marked by intense polarization but also considerable political fatigue. The two leading candidates concentrated heavily on mobilizing their respective bases, leaving increasingly little electoral space outside the two camps. Yet one in every five registered voters stayed home. Abstention reached 21.08% — approximately 33.4 million voters — the highest first-round abstention rate in a Brazilian presidential election since the return to direct elections in 1989, according to Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE) data. It continues a longer-term trend of declining electoral participation.

The campaign revolved principally around economic conditions, social policy, public security and corruption. Lula emphasized social programs, household economic pressures, environmental protection and measures against violence toward women, while Flávio stressed crime, corruption, fiscal discipline and a more market-oriented economic agenda. Foreign policy also acquired unusual prominence. Lula portrayed his resistance to tariffs and political pressure from the Trump administration as a defense of Brazilian sovereignty, while Flávio advocated closer relations with Washington and greater alignment with the conservative turn elsewhere in the Americas.

The first-round result nevertheless revealed something larger than an unexpectedly strong performance by a presidential challenger. Conservative candidates simultaneously advanced in congressional and gubernatorial elections. Markets responded positively, with the Ibovespa (the main performance indicator of stocks traded on B3 and a major index of the Brazilian capital market) jumping 7.7% and the real appreciating sharply. Investors appeared to welcome the prospect of a more market-oriented government, though other factors may also have contributed.

The broader message of October 4 was becoming clear: Brazil's political center of gravity

had moved further right, and Bolsonarism showed it could survive without President Jair Bolsonaro himself on the presidential ballot. Bolsonarism here refers to the political coalition, ideological discourse and institutional project associated with Bolsonaro but increasingly reproduced through other political actors and organizations.

Flávio Bolsonaro: the main winner

Flávio's first-place finish provided the clearest evidence of Bolsonarism's resilience. Rather than fragmenting in the absence of Jair Bolsonaro as a presidential candidate, the movement transferred much of its electoral strength to his son while simultaneously expanding its representation in Congress and state governments. Flávio's 47% marked the Bolsonarist/PL camp's strongest first-round performance in a presidential election.

His performance was particularly striking because he entered the final weeks of the campaign under the shadow of the Banco Master scandal. The investigation into the failed bank and its former owner, Daniel Vorcaro, exposed an extensive network of relationships involving political, business and judicial figures. Flávio himself came under investigation over alleged corruption connected to the case, accusations he denied. At the same time, revelations drew attention to personal and professional connections between Vorcaro's network and members of the Supreme Federal Court (STF).

Paradoxically, however, the scandal appears to have created greater political difficulties for Lula than for Flávio. Survey evidence shortly before the election suggested that voters initially associated the Banco Master affair more strongly with the left, despite the involvement of figures from across the political spectrum. The controversy surrounding STF members was especially consequential because some of these justices — most notably Alexandre de Moraes — had played prominent roles in proceedings against Jair Bolsonaro and his allies.

The scandal thus intersected with a narrative that Bolsonarism had cultivated for years: that the Supreme Court was politically biased and insufficiently accountable. Flávio's own exposure to the investigation did not prevent him from consolidating support among an electorate already strongly opposed to the PT and deeply critical of the STF.

A more conservative Congress

The congressional elections provide perhaps stronger evidence than the presidential vote that October 4 represented a broader rightward movement. The PL emerged as the largest political force in both houses of Congress. In the Chamber of Deputies, it won 121 seats, nearly one-quarter of the chamber and substantially more than the 99 seats it held previously. Two PL candidates — Nikolas Ferreira in Minas Gerais and Lucas Pavanato in São Paulo — each received more than three million votes, establishing extraordinary individual vote totals.

The shift was even more consequential in the Senate, where 54 of 81 seats were contested. The PL won 19 of them and will enter the new legislature with 28 senators — more than one-third of the chamber. The result gives the party considerable influence over the Senate's agenda and could reshape relations between Congress and the Supreme Court. Several successful right-wing candidates explicitly campaigned for stronger congressional checks on the STF, while some advocated impeachment proceedings against individual justices. The institutional consequences of the election may extend well beyond ordinary legislative politics.

With the new Congress, the center-right parties will control approximately 57% of the Chamber

and 62% of the Senate. In the latter, their combined 50 seats exceed the three-fifths threshold required to approve constitutional amendments by just one vote. These figures do not imply automatic legislative majorities, since parties remain fragmented and the political center continues to play a decisive role in coalition formation. Nevertheless, they suggest a more favorable congressional environment for fiscal restraint, administrative reform and market-oriented economic policies.

The right advances in the states

The gubernatorial elections reinforced the same tendency. Twenty governors were elected outright in the first round, and 12 belonged to right- or center-right parties. Conservative candidates performed particularly strongly in the South, Center-West and parts of the North. The PL won all three Southern governorships in the first round.

The results in Brazil's two largest electoral states were particularly relevant. In São Paulo, Tarcísio de Freitas was reelected with 62.65% of the vote, while Fernando Haddad received 36.42%. Haddad, Lula's finance minister during the past four years, had previously been the PT's presidential candidate against Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. In Minas Gerais, Cleitinho Azevedo won outright with about 55%, while the PT's Patrus Ananias received only around 26%.

Yet these results did not eliminate one of the most persistent features of Brazilian electoral politics: territorial polarization. Lula won all nine states of the Northeast, together with Amazonas, Pará and Amapá. Flávio won every state in the South, Southeast and Center-West, as well as the Federal District and four Northern states. Lula's strongest performance came in Piauí, where he received approximately 71%; Flávio reached a similar percentage in Roraima. Rather than disappearing, Brazil's familiar electoral geography was reproduced, although the right demonstrated strength across a larger portion of the national territory.

Polarization creates a difficult runoff for Lula

The presidential election also revealed the continuing erosion of a viable electoral center. Candidates outside the Lula-Bolsonaro contest collectively received less than 8% of valid votes. Augusto Cury received 2.89%, Renan Santos 2.24%, Ronaldo Caiado 2.18% and Romeu Zema only 0.27%. Together, Lula and Flávio captured more than 92% of valid votes, confirming the extraordinary resilience of the country's bipolar competition.

This creates an asymmetric strategic challenge in the runoff. Most defeated candidates and their electorates are ideologically closer to the right than to Lula, although their votes cannot simply be assumed to transfer to Flávio. Zema has already indicated his support for Bolsonaro, while Cury and Renan initially declined to endorse either finalist. Nevertheless, several of the defeated candidates competed primarily for conservative, center-right or anti-PT voters. Lula has no equivalent pool of organized center-left voters from which to draw substantial additional support.

The historical record adds another challenge for Lula. Since Brazil returned to direct presidential elections, no candidate who finished second in the first round has won the runoff. However, 2026 differs from previous contests in two important respects. The 1.87-percentage-point gap between Flávio and Lula is the smallest first-round margin between the two leading candidates since redemocratization, while about 33.4 million registered voters — 21.08% of the electorate — abstained. With such a narrow margin and such a large pool of non-voters whose participation could alter the electoral balance, historical precedent provides only a weak guide to the run. If Lula wins

on October 25, he will become the first second-place finisher in Brazil's contemporary democratic period to reverse the first-round ordering.

The first-round result also transformed perceptions of the race. Prediction markets moved sharply toward Flávio after his unexpected lead, with Polymarket prices at one point implying a probability above 80% for his victory and around 16% for Lula. Such prices are not opinion polls and should not be interpreted as Brazilian public opinion. They nevertheless illustrate how dramatically expectations changed after October 4.

The institutionalization of the radical right

The October 4 results ultimately suggest something broader than a presidential upset. Brazil moved further to the political right at several levels simultaneously. Flávio finished ahead of Lula; the PL substantially expanded its presence in both houses of Congress; and right and center-right candidates captured governorships across much of the South, Southeast, Center-West and North. Yet older patterns survived, particularly the territorial divide between the PT's stronghold in the Northeast and the predominantly conservative South and Center-West.

The more consequential development may be the consolidation of Bolsonarism as a political force capable of surviving beyond Jair Bolsonaro himself. Political movements organized around charismatic leaders frequently encounter problems of succession when their founders can no longer compete for office. So far, the 2026 election has provided little evidence of such fragmentation. Instead, much of Jair Bolsonaro's electorate transferred its support to his son, while candidates associated with the broader Bolsonarist camp strengthened their positions in Congress and state governments. Flávio's 47% is particularly significant because it exceeded his father's first-round performance in both 2018 and 2022.

This does not mean that Brazil has become uniformly right-wing, nor should every victory by a conventional center-right candidate be classified as Bolsonarist. Lula and the PT retain a formidable electoral constituency, particularly in the Northeast, and the presidential election remains unresolved. What October 4 demonstrated instead was a shift in the balance of political forces. The broader right has expanded its control of elected institutions, while its Bolsonarist wing now combines a mass electoral constituency with an increasingly substantial presence in Congress and state politics.

The election's relevance extends beyond who occupies the presidency after October 25. A Lula victory would leave him confronting a more conservative Congress, powerful right-wing governors and an opposition capable of mobilizing voters without Jair Bolsonaro at the top of the ticket. A Flávio victory would combine those institutional gains with control of the presidency. Whatever the runoff outcome, Bolsonarism can no longer be understood simply as Jair Bolsonaro's electoral vehicle. It has become an enduring and increasingly institutionalized component of Brazil's party system.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Helder Ferreira do Vale is a professor at the Catholic University of Brasília, Brazil. He was an associate professor at Xi'anJiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in China, at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in South Korea, and at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in Brazil. His research interests

include federalism, comparative politics and democratization. His works appear in several peer-reviewed journals. In the past, he also held academic positions at the University of Barcelona, University of Lisbon, University of Cape Town and the Institute of Advanced Studies Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK), among others. Also, he has worked for the Spanish Ministry of the Presidency, as well as for several international organizations including the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). He holds a PhD from the European University Institute — EUI (Florence, Italy), an MA from Johns Hopkins University (Washington, DC, USA), and a BA from Richmond American International University (London, UK).

From Import Dependency to the People's IPO: The Dangote Refinery Paradigm

Olawole Fajusigbe
October 27, 2026

Driven by an import substitution strategy, Aliko Dangote built a new megarefinery in Lekki, Nigeria, despite failing to acquire state refineries in the past. By mid-2026, the plant satisfied about 90% of domestic petrol needs, though pump prices continued to follow global crude benchmarks during market shocks. Dangote aims to double refining capacity while democratizing ownership, but the question remains whether private enterprise can even come close to undoing decades of public sector decay.

Aliko Dangote is Africa's richest man and stands among the top global business titans. My first encounter with his market influence dates back to the early 2000s, when my mother was involved in cement distribution. Over a remarkably short period, Dangote Cement evolved from a new entrant into a premier cement brand in South-West Nigeria, displacing long established market incumbents like Elephant cement.

From his initial trading ventures in 1977, Dangote expanded into flour, sugar, pasta, cement and salt. His boldest move, however, arrived with the establishment of the Dangote Petroleum Refinery in Lekki, Lagos State, Nigeria commissioned in 2023 and became fully operational in 2024. This venture sought to leverage structural gaps established by unproductive government-led projects.

Nigeria's structural paradox and a strategic reversal in 2007

Despite being Africa's largest crude oil producer, Nigeria spent decades trapped in a paradox. It relied almost entirely on imported refined petroleum due to the fact that its four state-owned refineries suffered from chronic underinvestment, poor maintenance and operational inefficiencies, remaining at near-zero capacity for years.

From the late 1990s through the 2020s, decades of systemic mismanagement eroded the operational integrity of the Port Harcourt, Warri, and Kaduna refineries. The state refinery operators repeatedly postponed Mandatory Turnaround Maintenance (TAM) cycles that are essential for replacing obsolete catalytic units and preventing

hardware corrosion in favor of costly emergency fixes. Despite multibillion-dollar rehabilitation expenditures and recurring government overhaul pledges, political patronage, contract inflation and supply chain disruptions left the state-refining infrastructure virtually dormant. Consequently, Africa's largest crude producer remained locked in a paradoxical reliance on foreign fuel imports for over a quarter of a century.

This dependency resulted in a crippling subsidy regime, a massive drain on foreign exchange and recurring fuel shortages. Economic necessity, systemic market failures and the private industrial vision of Aliko Dangote thus prompted the decision to construct the Dangote Refinery.

The journey to the present-day Dangote Refinery with a capacity to refine 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) was not without some setbacks. In May 2007, during the final days of the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a consortium led by the Dangote Group won a bid to acquire a controlling stake in two state-owned refineries (the Port Harcourt and Kaduna refineries) for $721 million. However, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua reversed the sale shortly after taking office under intense labor and political pressure, returning the assets to state control even while some reported that the consortium pulled out.

Undeterred by the reversal, Dangote pivoted from acquiring legacy assets to building a monumental greenfield refinery from scratch, applying a familiar strategic playbook that had served him well.

Executing the blueprint has not lowered gas prices

The Dangote Group's core strategy has always centered on import substitution, meaning it builds massive domestic capacity to displace foreign imports. Having successfully deployed this playbook in cement and sugar, the refinery applied it to energy.

Prior to 2024, Nigeria imported nearly all of its refined fuel. This trend reversed by mid-2026 as regulatory reports indicate that the refinery was supplying around 90% of domestic petrol needs. Furthermore, in the first half of 2026 alone, refined product exports generated approximately $750 million in foreign exchange for the country. This improved supply reliability has reduced panic buying, decreased productive time lost and eliminated long petrol queues.

Despite these operational wins, a major public expectation remains unfulfilled: cheaper fuel. The trend of importing petrol and other ancillary products had reversed, but to the common man, it bears scant consolation.

A fundamental economic reality drives this scene: earning foreign exchange in global trade does not automatically subsidize or lower domestic retail prices in a market-driven system. Following the removal of the petroleum subsidy in 2023, global market trends dictated local fuel prices. Even though Nigeria domestically refines petrol now, crude oil remains a globally priced commodity. Consequently, any surge in international crude prices, such as those triggered by geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, directly drives up domestic pump prices regardless of how much revenue the refinery generates overall.

The $750 million in H1 exports is therefore fundamentally export revenue, a welcome development that strengthens Nigeria's macroeconomy and boosts foreign exchange reserves, but one that has little direct bearing on retail prices at the pump.

As global energy corridors faced friction, such as disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz, European markets sought alternative jet fuel and diesel suppliers. The Dangote Refinery stepped in, shipping over 80,000 bpd of aviation fuel to Europe in Q2 2026. This led to a net profit of $1.82 billion in the first half of 2026, reversing its 2025 full-year loss. It also set the stage for the refinery's dramatically popular Initial Public Offering (IPO).

The "People's IPO"

The IPO of the Dangote Refinery represents one of the largest capital market transactions in African history. The offer opened on September 14, 2026, and was initially meant to end on October 13, but Dangote extended it until October 27.

The primary objectives of the proposed public listing include raising capital to increase refining capacity from the current 700,000 bpd to up to 1.4 million bpd. It also hopes to develop additional fuel storage, maritime transport logistics and regional distribution infrastructure across Africa.

Dangote has also marketed the IPO as an "IPO of the people," and a means to involve Nigerians in the success story of the refinery. Accordingly, the IPO's structure has an accessible entry threshold of 525 naira ($0.39) per share, with a minimum purchase restriction of ten shares. Dangote offers the opportunity for retail investors across Nigeria to own a stake in the refinery and also institute corporate governance and financial transparency. Many Nigerians showed enthusiasm over the offering, encouraged by the surging profitability of the company.

The social dimension

There is a human dimension that balance sheets do not capture. An estimated individual fortune of $35 billion and a six-month corporate profit of $1.82 billion exist side-by-side with higher petrol prices at local pumps.

Crucially, expecting a single private venture to solve systemic energy sector problems created by decades of state mismanagement, neglected infrastructure and policy failure is a gargantuan task. A commercial enterprise, operating in a market economy, must remain financially viable while navigating global supply shocks.

Nigerians feel justifiable pride seeing a home grown project supply energy to European nations. Simultaneously, however, many feel that domestic proximity ought to yield immediate economic relief at home. While both perspectives may be valid, there is a need to close the perception gap through transparent communication on how domestic pricing models operate alongside global benchmarks.

What lies ahead?

The Dangote Refinery has achieved a historic milestone decades in the making: transitioning Nigeria from a nation reliant on foreign imports to one capable of refining its own energy supply. Yet, expecting a single private enterprise to swiftly unravel complex economic imbalances built over decades of public sector neglect remains an extraordinary demand.

Ultimately, whether this industrial breakthrough yields tangible relief for the average citizen will depend less on initial high expectations than on sustained domestic supply, market driven price transparency and healthy commercial competition in the years ahead.

[Aliyah A. Omar edited this piece.]



Olawole Fajusigbe is a legal practitioner with over 15 years of experience navigating Nigeria's complex legal and regulatory landscape. His expertise spans corporate compliance, dispute resolution and human rights, underpinned by an LLM in International Human Rights from Birmingham City University, United Kingdom. In his brief career, he has consistently secured favorable client outcomes through strategic case management and strong advocacy. Mr. Fajusigbe's deep understanding of Nigerian law — from corporate governance and regulatory adherence to grassroots conflict resolution — provides a unique, rights-based perspective on national security challenges, policy development and the quest for social justice.

We Will Never Forget the Brazilians Who Did It, nor the Brazilians Who Supported Them

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
October 29, 2026

For 21 days, we Brazilians feared the worst for our country: that Flávio Bolsonaro would win the presidency. Though Lula da Silva's victory laid our worries to rest, Bolsonaro's voters are still among us — and they come in many terrible flavors. We won't forgive them; we hope they receive exactly the punishments they wanted for others.

For 21 days, we feared waking up to a Brazil that the citizenry handed over to our worst members. We narrowly escaped, not because there were too few people willing to push us over the edge, but despite them. And no one can claim they didn't know.

For 21 days, I lived with a knot of anxiety in my stomach. I began to understand something of what people must have felt during the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, when the world came close to nuclear war. On Sunday, October 25, millions of Brazilians must have woken up as I did, with the bitter thought that one of the worst possible Brazilians might have been elected president of the Republic.

Yes, if you voted for Flávio Bolsonaro, you had every democratic right to vote for a candidate whose record and public positions have been associated with racism, homophobia, corruption scandals and alleged ties to organized crime. That is the right democracy guarantees you. We already knew enough about the candidate. Now we know something about you, too: what you accept, what you are willing to tolerate and which other people's rights you consider negotiable when your own interests, prejudices or conveniences are at stake. You made your choice. I made mine, and it includes remembering yours.

For 21 days, I thought about what could happen to the people I love, including my children, and the country we live in. I have no obligation to grant you the benefit of forgetting, much less the automatic forgiveness so often demanded of people who have been threatened by those now eager to turn the page. You wanted this Brazil for us. I hope you get back, in full measure, everything you wished upon others.

May fiscal conservatives pay, corruption fighters lose

To the self-described fiscal conservatives who turned budget discipline into a matter of principle, I hope you pay every cent of the taxes you wanted to impose on the poor, without discounts, amnesties or privileges for your friends. May you experience the same austerity when the bill comes to your own door. It is easy to preach fiscal responsibility when somebody else is footing the bill.

To those who voted in the name of fighting corruption in the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), I hope you follow your political idols through every last consequence of the investigations and legal proceedings involving them. May your selective indignation cost you sleep, public embarrassment and difficult explanations to your children. May there be no shortage of cigarettes for anyone wishing to take them to their protégés in prison, when they are arrested, as so many Brazilians once said their political opponents deserved.

And may the cases involving Daniel Vorcaro, alleged fraud against retirees, rachadinhas, Bolsonaro's chocolate shop scandal and business dealings connected to the coastal town of Angra dos Reis receive the same attention that these people devoted to scandals involving the PT. (A rachadinha is a scheme in which public officials allegedly force staff members to return part of their salaries, diverting public money for private or political use.) These cases are not interchangeable, but corruption does not change its nature when it switches parties; only the face of the person trying to hide it changes.

May public security voters feel insecure

To those who voted in the name of public security, I hope you discover what it means to live under the power of people who turn the police into an instrument of political protection, maintain dangerous relationships with paramilitary criminal groups and treat violence as electoral entertainment. In Brazil, these groups are known as milícias: armed organizations often linked to current or former police officers, which exercise territorial control and profit from extortion and illegal services.

May the story of Adriano da Nóbrega, the conviction of murderer Ronnie Lessa and the tributes paid to dangerous militia figures keep you awake at night as often as you wished fear, suffering and violence upon residents of Brazil's urban peripheries. Lessa was convicted for his role in the 2018 assassination of Marielle Franco, a black, gay city councilwoman from Rio de Janeiro and prominent critic of police violence and militia power. Nóbrega, a former police officer accused of leading a criminal militia, was killed in 2020. His connections to members of the Bolsonaro family became a subject of public controversy.

May the victims' families spit at you the same outrage you displayed when you could attack your political opponents with tragedy. And may Ana Clara Gomes Machado's death never be forgotten by those who made public security their banner while ignoring their own candidates' contradictions. (Ana Clara, aged five, died by a rifle shot in 2021 in Rio de Janeiro, fired by a police officer. Flávio Bolsonaro defended the killer and attempted to get his trial dismissed.)

May Justice Moraes's opponents be judged

To those who spent years shouting against Brazil's Supreme Federal Court and treating Justice Alexandre de Moraes as the source of every national evil, I hope you get judged by the same standards you applied to your opponents, without protection from friends, without crimes being excused and without the sudden discovery that every accused person deserves a defense.

Moraes voted in favor of imprisoning President Lula da Silva, was appointed to the Supreme Court by former President Michel Temer and began his political career in a party associated with the former Mayor of São Paulo, Gilberto Kassab. You knew these things and still chose to demonize Moraes. But he became associated with Lula when he ordered the arrest of former President Jair Bolsonaro. And people hated him for that, despite him only doing so after it became known that Bolsonaro's supporters were plotting a coup d'état to kill him. Now let consistency keep you company when you have to assess the justices you like, including those whose conservative and religious rhetoric seems to function as an advance certificate of innocence. Especially the orgy enthusiasts and the "terribly evangelical" ones.

May science deniers be rejected, education destroyers be schooled

To those who supported the government responsible for the genocidal handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, I hope you experience the anguish of depending on authorities who despise science, make light of death and turn a public health emergency into an ideological battlefield. May you know the helplessness of waiting for an answer that never comes, the fear of losing someone dear and the rage of listening to excuses from authorities who were supposed to protect the population. You helped legitimize that policy. You knew what you were supporting.

To those who accepted the destruction of education and culture in the name of a supposed war against communism, I hope your children receive the same schooling you helped impose on other people's children. You'll have to explain why ministers and government officials were appointed despite their incompetence, why cultural production became a target of political persecution and why the Bible appeared in the same political landscape as gold bars, while members of the government echoed the rhetoric of Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler's propaganda chief. May the censorship, ignorance and obscurantism you championed for people you dislike fail to stop at your own front door.

May evangelicals choke on their hypocrisy

And to the evangelicals who blindly supported such a vile politician whose actions contradict the morality he publicly proclaims, I hope one day you have to answer to your own communities for the distance between the Gospel you preach and the political project you sustained.

You demonized Lula while offering moral protection to a man who found excuses for violence and authoritarianism. May the same severity you applied to your opponent fall upon your pastors, leaders and candidates. And may you be unable to use God's name as a hiding place for choices you can explain only through convenience.

Lula's governments lifted millions of Brazilians out of hunger, and the fight against poverty should carry weight in the judgment of anyone who claims to care about Christian values. Many of you preferred to turn poverty into a political weapon and treat the dignity of starving people as a minor detail compared with the fear of a government you could not control. I hope you never have to discover, at your own dinner table, what it means not to have enough food. But if that day comes, remember that you helped elect people who promised to deny others what you would demand for yourselves.

We will remember their fascism

There is an old saying: if ten people are sitting at a table and a fascist arrives, takes a seat, and nobody objects, there are not 11 people at the table. There are 11 fascists. In our case, there is an aggravating circumstance: Many people did not merely open

the door, pull up a chair and offer the newcomer coffee. They campaigned, spread lies, financed the propaganda machine and voted to put him in charge of the house. Then, when someone pointed out the fascism sitting among the guests, they were told that all opinions deserved respect.

No. The democratic right to vote does not make every choice morally neutral. You can vote for whomever you want, but you cannot ask that others forget what your vote means, especially when it helps threaten the rights, safety and freedom of millions.

I am not writing to persuade those who have already decided that their own convenience is worth more than democracy. I am writing to record that we saw what happened, understood what was at stake and will not accept the normalization of it all. Time may erase details, but it does not absolve choices.

It was 21 days. I will not forget who worked to put my children at risk, who wanted us to suffer and who justified voting for the intolerable. I will not forget the names, the statements, the lies or the smiles of those who treated other people's suffering as an acceptable price to pay.

You had the right to vote for Flávio Bolsonaro. I have the right to remember that you did. And when you come asking me to forget, you will find my memory sitting at the table, occupying precisely the chair you reserved for fascism.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Luiz Cesar Pimentel is a Brazilian journalist and writer, currently working at the intersection of AI and journalism. He has been in the communication field for 30 years, specializing in digital media, strategy and transmedia storytelling. Luiz led the Brazilian branches of MySpace, Jovem Pan and R7. His career includes roles as a reporter for Folha de S. Paulo and Carta Capital, editing the magazines Trip and Istoé and serving as an international correspondent in Asia. Luiz has also authored ten books on communication. He holds a postgraduate degree in international journalism from the Poynter Institute in Florida, a degree in artificial intelligence for communication from the University of California, Berkeley and a master's degree in Social Sciences (Religious Studies).

Lula's Historic Comeback in a Rightward-Shifting Brazil

Helder Ferreira do Vale
October 29, 2026

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva overturned an unprecedented first-round deficit to secure a fourth term. But his victory leaves Brazil with a political paradox: a left-wing president facing a more conservative Congress, powerful right-wing governors and a Bolsonarist opposition struggling to accept its defeat. Governing this divided country will require Lula to build unlikely coalitions and demonstrate that democratic cooperation remains possible across deep ideological divides.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has once again rewritten Brazil's electoral history. At 80, the historic leader of the Workers' Party (PT) has become the first Brazilian president to win four presidential elections. His October 25 victory was also unprecedented: Since Brazil's return to democracy, no presidential candidate who finished second in the first round has won the runoff.

Three weeks earlier, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, representing the Liberal Party (PL), had finished ahead of Lula by nearly two percentage points. Opinion polls and financial markets subsequently anticipated a highly competitive runoff, with expectations increasingly favoring Bolsonaro. Yet Lula staged a remarkable comeback, winning 51.79% of valid votes against Flávio's 48.21%. His 4.43 million-vote margin was substantially larger than the approximately 2.14 million votes by which he defeated Former President Jair Bolsonaro in 2022.

The result raises two relevant questions for Brazilian politics. How did Lula reverse an electoral disadvantage that few anticipated he could overcome? And what does his victory mean for a country whose congressional and gubernatorial elections had simultaneously shifted its political balance further to the right?

The anatomy of an electoral comeback

Lula's comeback was remarkable for its magnitude and geographical breadth. Between the two rounds, his vote total increased by 10.38 million, compared with 3.72 million for Flávio Bolsonaro. Nearly half of Lula's additional votes in the runoff came from the Southeast, the most populous region and where he had lost the first round. In Minas Gerais — the country's second-largest electoral state and a historical bellwether of presidential outcomes — he reversed the first-round result. His substantial gains across this state were critical to his national victory.

Altogether, Lula won the runoff in 2,874 of Brazil's 5,571 municipalities, and his vote-gain between the two rounds exceeded Flávio's in 5,228 municipalities. This demonstrates that his electoral recovery extended well beyond the Workers' Party's traditional strongholds in the Northeast, including many municipalities where Flávio ultimately remained ahead.

Voting patterns suggest both candidates retained about 98% of their first-round supporters. The difference lay in attracting voters beyond their original electoral bases. Lula appears to have won over a substantial majority of voters who had previously cast blank or invalid ballots. Perhaps more surprisingly, he also attracted most voters from eliminated presidential candidates who subsequently supported a finalist, despite the predominantly conservative orientation of several of those candidates.

The turnaround also reflected a change in campaign strategy. After his disappointing first-round performance, Lula shifted his emphasis to immediate socioeconomic concerns, including wages, pensions, social protection and working hours. His supporters simultaneously intensified street mobilization and digital campaigning, including a large WhatsApp network coordinated by Congressman André Janones. Although the precise electoral effects of these initiatives cannot be isolated, they formed part of a broader effort to mobilize previously disengaged voters and expand Lula's electoral appeal.

Lula also benefited from legislative developments during the runoff campaign. With cooperation from congressional leaders outside the left, the Senate approved a bill reducing the standard workweek from 44 to 40 hours and guaranteeing two weekly rest days. Beyond its

immediate electoral significance, the measure illustrated the possibility of building cross-party agreements on social policy — an ability that will be essential for governing a more conservative Congress.

The final televised debate also revealed contrasting campaign strategies. According to an analysis by DecideBrasil, Lula devoted 38% of his speaking time to defending his government's record and presented just eight promises, while Flávio Bolsonaro made 50. Lula also repeatedly invoked the political legacy of Jair Bolsonaro rather than confronting his son exclusively on policy proposals. This combination of retrospective economic appeals and criticism of Bolsonarism may have helped Lula reach voters beyond his traditional left-wing base, although the debate data alone cannot establish its electoral impact.

Lula's comeback was more than a triumph of traditional left-wing mobilization. It also depended on attracting voters beyond his original coalition and demonstrating that political cooperation remained possible across ideological divisions. His victory reveals both the resilience of Brazil's left and the challenges of governing a country whose political institutions have moved considerably to the right.

A victory amid electoral controversies

The runoff was also marked by disputes over digital campaigning and vote administration.

During October, Lula's campaign accused Meta — the parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp — of restricting the distribution of its political content and treating the two presidential campaigns unequally. Brazil's Superior Electoral Court (TSE) ordered the company to provide technical explanations about content moderation, algorithmic distribution and artificial intelligence. Meta denied deliberately favoring either candidate, attributing the incidents to technical problems and shortcomings in its systems.

The dispute illustrates a broader democratic challenge: Digital platforms have become central infrastructures of electoral competition, yet candidates, regulators and citizens still struggle to scrutinize the mechanisms that determine political visibility.

An even more contentious episode occurred on election day. Following reports of transportation disruptions and severe weather affecting voters, a Supreme Court justice extended voting hours by two hours. Both presidential campaigns requested the decision, but its late announcement created confusion because some polling stations had already closed.

Flávio Bolsonaro subsequently challenged the legitimacy of the result and announced his intention to seek its annulment. Yet the number of votes cast after the original closing time was only a tiny fraction (around 34,300 votes) of Lula's 4.43-million-vote margin. Electoral authorities maintained that the extension did not alter the outcome.

The controversy nevertheless reopened a familiar political conflict. Following Jair Bolsonaro's defeat in 2022, attacks on the electoral system escalated into efforts to overturn the democratic transfer of power, culminating in the events of January 8, 2023, when supporters invaded Brazil's principal democratic institutions. Jair Bolsonaro was subsequently convicted for his role in an attempted coup.

The comparison does not mean that the present situation will follow the same trajectory. It does, however, demonstrate why acceptance of electoral defeat remains a central question for Brazilian democracy.

The Bolsonarist camp has not responded uniformly to Lula's victory. While Flávio Bolsonaro initially contested the result, his own Liberal Party formally recognized Lula's reelection. The divisions have become more consequential following Flávio's departure for the United States on October 27, just two days after the runoff. He left Brazil despite a Supreme Court order prohibiting international travel and requiring him to surrender his passports. The order was issued in connection with an investigation into suspected money laundering.

Flávio has described the investigation as politically motivated, an allegation for which he has not presented substantiated evidence. In his first public appearance on US soil, in Washington, DC, he referred to himself as the "true elected president of Brazil." The episode creates a diplomatic dilemma for Washington, particularly as Lula has accused the Trump administration of interfering in Brazil's electoral process, an allegation the White House denies.

Flávio's departure has also introduced an international dimension to Brazil's post-election tensions. The Trump administration has confirmed that it will issue visas to him and his family, raising questions about Washington's potential involvement in a dispute between the Bolsonaro family and Brazil's judiciary.

His campaign had also promised amnesty for Jair Bolsonaro and allies convicted in connection with the attempted coup. Lula's victory removes the prospect of a Bolsonaro presidency advancing that agenda, but the family's confrontation with judicial institutions continues. Meanwhile, conservative leaders who accepted the election result face the challenge of defining a political future that may no longer depend exclusively on the Bolsonaro family.

A left-wing president in a more conservative Brazil

Lula's victory does not reverse the broader electoral transformation that occurred on October 4.

The PL emerged as the largest party in both houses of Congress, winning 121 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and securing a projected total of 28 senators. Right and center-right candidates also performed strongly in gubernatorial elections, consolidating conservative political influence across much of the South, Southeast and Center-West.

This creates an unusual political configuration in which a left-wing president with a strong personal mandate faces a considerably more conservative legislative environment. The challenge will be particularly acute in economic policy. Lula has promised to preserve and expand social protection while gradually adjusting public finances. Delivering on those commitments will require agreements with centrist and center-right parties, particularly on taxation, public expenditure and fiscal rules.

The financial markets' reaction to his victory revealed the magnitude of the challenge. On October 26, the Ibovespa (the main stock market performance indicator on B3 and a major index of Brazil's capital market) fell sharply, triggering a temporary trading suspension. The index lost nearly 14% by the close, after falling more than 17% at its lowest point during the session. The Brazilian real also depreciated significantly. The selloff reflected investors' reassessment of fiscal and economic policy expectations following a result that contradicted their prevailing assumptions.

Market uncertainty is compounded by a fragmented congressional landscape in which

centrist and conservative parties differ substantially in their economic priorities, regional interests and relationships with the presidency. Lula's ability to govern will depend on his capacity to construct legislative coalitions, an increasingly difficult task.

That is a familiar challenge for a politician whose earlier presidency was built around pragmatic alliances extending well beyond the left. The difference is that the political right now possesses a stronger electoral organization, greater representation in the Senate and a more consolidated political identity.

The paradox of Brazil's 2026 elections

Lula's presidential victory coincided with a conservative advance in Congress and state governments, illustrating how different electoral contests can produce divergent outcomes, particularly when a presidential runoff presents voters with a binary choice between two highly polarizing candidates.

These results reveal the coexistence of competing political forces: a resilient left capable of national mobilization, an increasingly institutionalized right and a political center whose legislative support remains indispensable. Despite Lula's remarkable political resilience, his next administration will confront institutional fragmentation, economic uncertainty and a polarized electorate. Governing under these conditions will require accommodating competing political preferences, potentially creating opportunities to reduce polarization.

This will be Lula's final presidential term. His most important legacy may depend on whether he can use this unexpected victory to reduce political hostility, rebuild confidence in democratic institutions and reconcile social inclusion with economic stability. Lula has won the presidency, but the more difficult task will be governing a Brazil that has moved to the right.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Helder Ferreira do Vale is a professor at the Catholic University of Brasília, Brazil. He was an associate professor at Xi'anJiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in China, at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in South Korea, and at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in Brazil. His research interests include federalism, comparative politics and democratization. His works appear in several peer-reviewed journals. In the past, he also held academic positions at the University of Barcelona, University of Lisbon, University of Cape Town and the Institute of Advanced Studies Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK), among others. Also, he has worked for the Spanish Ministry of the Presidency, as well as for several international organizations including the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Rubio's Greece Speech and the Relics of a Past That Never Was

Alfredo Toro Hardy
October 31, 2026

On October 7, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave a speech in Athens, championing Western power and sovereignty and directly challenging liberal internationalism's rules-

based order. It is important to trace Western civilization's fragile roots to understand the historical context of Rubio's call for an "unapologetic pursuit of national power." Rubio's vision risks reviving pre-1945 conflict, ignoring the postwar peace that defined modern stability.

On October 7, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered a civilizational speech about the West. The Athens Acropolis was in the background, emphasizing his words' meaning. Although Rubio's address represented a counterbalance to US Vice President JD Vance's Munich speech, which accused Europeans of betraying their own values, the difference lay more in tone than in substance. While extending an olive branch to Europe, Rubio nonetheless made a call for the continent to "emerge from its long slumber" and take part in a Western renewal built on power, industry and defense.

Liberal internationalism and the pursuit of national power

Rubio's message presented a vision centered on Western civilization's shared historical heritage, strength and the pursuit of power. His words challenged liberal internationalism on several fundamental grounds.

Firstly, by praising national sovereignty over the idea that states can advance their interests and manage common problems by accepting international rules, institutions and, in some cases, constraints on their unilateral freedom of action. Secondly, by attacking the notion that a country's international conduct should transcend national interest by also pursuing international law and international responsibilities. Thirdly, by emphasizing Western particularism over universal principles, which by extension includes universal liberal values. Fourthly, by calling for the "unapologetic pursuit of national power" as an instrument of renewed Western greatness, thus superseding a rules-based international order.

In order to contextualize Rubio's speech and his implisive dismissiveness of the international liberal order, an overview of Western civilization is needed. Such civilization resulted from the interweaving of the Classical tradition, meaning Greek and Roman civilizations, and the Judeo-Christian world. Several instances could have aborted the emergence of such a civilization or, once it existed, caused it to simply disappear.

Contrafactual history

The first such instance came with the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–479 BC. In British historian and writer Tom Holland's words:

As subjects of a foreign king, the Athenians would never have had the opportunity to develop their unique democratic culture. Much that made Greek civilization distinctive would have been aborted. The legacy Rome inherited and passed on to modern Europe would have been immeasurably impoverished. Not only would the West have lost its first struggle for independence and survival, but it is unlikely, had the Greeks succumbed to Xerxes' invasion, that there would ever have been such an entity as "the West" at all.

But the Roman part of the story could have been aborted as well if, instead of a "Carthago delenda est," there had been a "Roma delenda est." That is, if instead of Rome prevailing over Carthage in the Punic Wars of 264–164 BC, the opposite had happened, as it closely did. Meaning, a similar destruction but in the opposite direction, in which case there would have never been a Classical tradition.

Meanwhile, the Jews might have never returned from their imprisonment in Babylon in 538 BC and would not have established a temple-centric and national religion in Judea. Similarly, Christianity might never have become what it did if Saint Paul the Apostle had not converted to this new religion, transforming a localized Jewish sect into a universal religion. Nor would Christianity and the Roman Empire have merged if Emperor Constantine had not prevailed in the civil war that took place within the so-called Roman Tetrarchy and converted to Christianity upon winning the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in the Fourth Century AD.

Tons of so-called "contrafactual history" could be written in relation to this subject, where other "plausible worlds" could have emerged. In the end, though, a very particular mixture of traditions and knowledge survived against all odds and became the essence of Western Civilization.

The traumatic amalgamation of the West's building blocks

However, the amalgamation of these building blocks was traumatic, setting in motion, for the first time, what would become its main trait through history: fracture and conflict. Not only did its Judeo-Christian constituent elements enter into contention, but so did Christianity and Classical legacy (meaning, the Greco-Roman inheritance).

The fracture between Christianity and Judaism is one of the most consequential developments of Western civilization. Although Christianity emerged from Judaism, it evolved into a universal religion. After Saint Paul's decisive theological transformation, claims to truth and salvation no longer depended on belonging to the Jewish people or observing Jewish law. Moreover, in the second century AD explicit Christian claims that Jews collectively bore responsibility for Christ's death began to take shape, as so did the notion of deicide — the killing of God.

Emperor Constantine's support for Christianity, followed by Emperor Theodosius's establishment of Christianity as the Roman Empire's official religion in the fourth century, radically changed the balance of power between both religions. The universalizing impulse that enabled Christianity to transcend ethnic boundaries began coexisting with an increasingly exclusive claim to religious truth supported by the power of the State. Christian supremacy, indeed, could now be enforced through institutions and law, thus marginalizing and discriminating against Jews.

But this bitter contention between Christianity and Judaism was replicated by the one held between Christianity and the Classical World. Christian emperors and bishops tried their best to erase the pagan inheritance embedded in the Classical legacy. In British journalist and author Catherine Nixey's words:

This was a war. The struggle to convert the empire [into Christianity] was nothing less than a battle between good and evil, between the forces of darkness and those of light. It was a battle between God and Satan himself … This is a story of forced conversion and government persecution. It is a story in which great works of art are destroyed, buildings are defaced and liberties are removed. It is a story in which those who refused to convert where outlawed and, as the persecution deepened, were hounded and even executed by zealous authorities.

What little survived

Ironically enough, Christian monasteries in Western Europe became instrumental in preserving what remained of the Classical knowledge. In a world of illiterate warlords and populations, monks were expected to know how to read. Moreover,

according to the Benedictine rule, they were compelled to read to combat idleness, the enemy of the soul. This brought with it an extraordinary chain of consequences.

Reading required books and, as vestiges of book markets fell apart, monks had to copy those that they already possessed. Moreover, as papyrus makers had long vanished, the monks were forced to convert animal skins into writing surfaces. As a result, the contents of perishable papyri were copied into more durable parchments. So it was that, even abhorring pagan classical knowledge and seeing the process of copying as a low-class activity formerly carried out by slaves, the monks became the main preservers of the knowledge of antiquity within Western Europe. At least until between the sixth century and the middle of the eighth, when Greek and Latin classics ceased to be copied at all.

In the 15th century, the Renaissance came into being. As the word implies, it was a re-naissance of classical antiquity. However, what was left of the Classical legacy since the West came into being was not much. According to Nixey: "Only one percent of Latin literature survived the centuries. Ninety-nine percent was lost." American scholar Stephen Greenblatt, on his part, says:

Everything that has reached to us is a copy. And these copies represent only a small portion of the works of the most celebrated writers of antiquity. Of Aeschylus' eighty or ninety plays and the roughly hundred twenty by Sophocles, only seven each survived…At the end of the fifth century BC an ambitious literary editor known as Stobaeus compiled an anthology of prose and poetry by the ancient world's best authors: out of 1,430 quotations, 1,115 are from works that are now lost.

From chaos to Charlemagne's new Roman empire

However, fracture and conflict within the Western World not only encompassed its building blocks but also its subsequent history. The dissolution of Roman authority in the West, in the fifth century, translated into an age of chaos, political fragmentation and dynastic warfare. Although the Roman imperial ideal survived and the Christian Church provided a common religious framework, order became impossible to attain. This was because no single political authority was widely recognized, and military success was the only way to secure territory.

But then, something unexpected materialized. By the 790s, Charlemagne had been able to acquire and rule an empire that stretched from Barcelona to the Danube, and from Lombardy to the Baltic Sea. Only the British Isles and Muslim-controlled Spain remained beyond his control. In 800, when the Pope placed the imperial crown on Charlemagne's head, the Roman imperial ideal and the Christian Church's conferred legitimacy converged, restoring order, stability and common rules within Western Europe. Not surprisingly, his reign was baptized a "Roman" empire.

Had this Carolingian empire survived, Western history could have evolved differently. That is, much like China's unification under a centralized Empire during the Qin and Han dynasties in the second century BC. Again, another plausible world could have taken shape. However, under established Frankish inheritance practice, the realm had to be divided among the sons. And although Charlemagne had only one surviving son who received the realm intact, the latter was in turn succeeded by various sons. Hence, subsequent divisions upon divisions tore the West to pieces, dismembering what could have been a mighty and unified empire. Even though some time later German monarchs replicated this "Roman" imperial precedent, theirs would pale in comparison to Charlemagne's attainment.

Fracture and conflict

From then on, and for more than a millennium, fracture and conflict would remain unrestrained. Wars between Western powers became the norm. In broad strokes, this countless list ran from the Guelph-Ghibelline conflicts and the Anglo-French War of the high medieval age to the Hundred Years' War in the late Middle Ages. From the Italian Wars, the Wars of Reformation and the Eighty Years' War during the Renaissance, to the Thirty Years' War, the Franco-Dutch War and the Spanish Succession War in the 17th century. From the Austrian Succession War, the Seven Years' War and the French Revolutionary Wars in the 18th century, to the Napoleonic Wars and the European wars of national independence and unification in the 19th century. The 20th century brought national conflicts to a paroxysm with the First and Second World Wars. On top of that, European powers fought multiple colonial wars in the 17th and 18th centuries, including those between the Dutch and the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, and the British and the French. However, the complete list, as said before, is immensely larger.

In the pursuit of power maximization in its different forms, including dynastic and territorial expansion and, later, mercantilist and colonial gains, Western powers confronted one another repeatedly. As nationalism and the modern nation-state developed in the 19th century, the term "national interest" became an established political expression. This expression displaced older formulations with similar meanings, such as "the will of the Prince," "dynastic interest" or "raison d'état," all of which aimed to justify political and military actions on security and power grounds. As such, they often became catchwords for justifying war.

The longest sustained peace period

Suddenly, however, something extraordinary happened. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States and Western Europe were able to build an unprecedented system of political, economic and military cooperation. Bretton Woods, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the network of American alliances, European integration and the multilateral system helped create a cohesive Western community built around shared values and a rules-based international order.

Despite multiple serious challenges, this Liberal International Order survived for eight decades. During those 80 years, it preserved peace among its members. A kind of peace not simply resulting from a temporary balance of power, but from a substantive transformation in the political relationships among Western states, where former enemies were transformed into partners in the search for a common purpose. Actually, this became the longest sustained peace period among major Western powers in modern and recorded history.

Moreover, within that system the United States was able to attain a stage in which its supremacy over the Western community was overwhelmingly accepted as both benign (due to self-restraint in relation to other members of the community) and legitimate. In fact, it represents the most successful hegemonic project in history if we accept the following definition of hegemony: "The emphasis is on how a particular conception of world order is created and sustained through a myriad of agencies and organizations, and the incorporation of many different interests into an overreaching political project."

The relics of a past that never was

The long pre-1945 Western historical period is precisely the one that Rubio admires so much and praises when referring to shared historical heritage, strength and the pursuit of power. In contrast, there

is the derided Liberal International Order that Europe should get rid of by awakening "from its long slumber." His call for an "unapologetic pursuit of national power" as an instrument of renewed Western greatness is precisely the recipe that led to countless Western wars, including the two world wars of the 20th century.

Rubio's speech could have had a completely different meaning if it had included references to the 1215 Magna Carta, the 1628 Petition of Right, the 1689 Bill of Rights, the United States' Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights, or the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, among other similar fundamental Western documents where human dignity and the control of absolute power were highlighted. However, his words essentially extolled might and untamed power.

For countries outside the Western sphere, the Liberal International Order had much to criticize, but for those inside it, particularly the US, it represented a golden era. Through their emphasis on the "unapologetic pursuit of national power" or through actions such as legitimizing and seeking to empower Germany's ultra-right Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD), considered a neo-Nazi extremist organization, US President Donald Trump, Rubio and the rest are shortsightedly courting disaster. By seeking the relics of a past that never was, they may be turning back the clock of Western history to times of political fragmentation and warfare.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



Alfredo Toro Hardy is a Venezuelan retired diplomat, scholar and author. He has a PhD in International Relations from the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations (GSDIR), a Master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master's degree from the Central University of Venezuela and a Postgraduate degree from *École nationale d'administration* (ENA). Before resigning from his country's foreign service in protest for the authoritarian outreach of the government, he served as Ambassador to the US, the UK, Spain, Brazil, Ireland, Singapore and Chile, as well as Director of the Venezuelan Diplomatic Academy. Alfredo is a former Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor at Princeton University, as well as a two-time Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Resident Scholar. He is an Honorary Fellow of the GSDIR and a member of the Experts Review Panel of the Bellagio Center. He is the author of 21 books and the coauthor of 15 more on international affairs. His latest book was published in 2022 by Palgrave Macmillan.

Presidential Runoff in Bulgaria: What Is at Stake?

Sophia Beiter
October 31, 2026

Bulgarian President Iliana Yotova fell short of expectations in the first round of presidential elections, while challenger Andrey Gyurov secured a strong second place. Domestic discontent and rising geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea may have influenced voter preferences. The November 1 runoff will test the ruling majority's strength and its ability to mobilize voters.

On October 25, the first round of the presidential elections in Bulgaria took place. Incumbent President Iliana Yotova came first, supported by the governing Progressive Bulgaria party led by Prime Minister Rumen Radev. While she may have hoped for an absolute majority, with exit polls projecting 40%–47%, her result of 34.8% was considerably lower than expected.

Her main challenger, Andrey Gyurov, a former caretaker prime minister supported by the pro-European opposition parties We Continue the Change (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB), came a close second with 32%, compared to 26%–31% in the polls. The far right also gained slightly more ground than expected, with Vazrazhdane candidate Kostadin Kostadinov receiving 12.6%, compared to 10% in the polls. Turnout proved a historic low, with only 23% of eligible voters casting their ballots, compared to 38% in the first round of the 2021 presidential elections.

Beyond the candidates themselves, the results reflect political divisions over the government's performance and Bulgaria's positioning within the European Union and towards Russia.

Discontent and geopolitical tensions

Yotova's lower-than-expected result suggests that support for the government is declining after several months in office. While Radev secured a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections in April 2026, winning 44% of the vote and an absolute majority, his left-wing party now polls at 39%. The difference becomes even more apparent when looking at the number of voters: While 1.4 million people voted for Radev and Progressive Bulgaria in April, only around 500,000 voted for Yotova this past Sunday.

This points to possible growing dissatisfaction with the ruling majority. So far, Radev has failed to sufficiently demonstrate that he stands apart from the political establishment he pledged to fight. In particular, the rising cost of living and inflation remain major concerns for citizens.

Another factor that may have impacted the election even more is the growing tension in the Black Sea, following two drone attacks on cargo ships in Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone within just one week in October. Two ships sank, and crew members remain missing. These incidents brought the broader question of Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation and its relationship with Russia and Ukraine into sharper focus, with the two main candidates taking different positions.

Foreign policy as an electoral dividing line?

Gyurov takes a pro-European and pro-Ukrainian stance. During his time as caretaker prime minister, Bulgaria and Ukraine signed a security cooperation agreement. He also condemned the Black Sea drone attacks more forcefully, referring to European Council conclusions that pointed to Russian involvement. By contrast, both Radev and Yotova condemned the attacks but stopped short of directly accusing Russia, stating only that Russia could benefit from them.

This reflects Progressive Bulgaria's by now typical approach of pursuing an ambiguous or, in Radev's words, "pragmatic" foreign policy while asserting Bulgaria's national interests more strongly within the EU and NATO. Radev has announced that Bulgaria will not participate in the EU's new assistance measures for Ukraine. Both Radev and Yotova have stressed that peace in Ukraine needs to be achieved through negotiations rather than fighting, calling for dialogue with Russia.

This ambitious rhetoric may have lost Yotova support. Her positioning has made it difficult for

her to appeal to voters across the political spectrum, potentially leading more pro-European voters to turn to Gyurov and more pro-Russian voters to follow the far-right candidate. Compared with the parliamentary elections in April, both the PP-DB-backed candidate and the Vazrazhdane-nominated candidate more than doubled their parties' vote shares (12.6% for PP-DB and 4.3% for Vazrazhdane in April). While the figures are not directly comparable across the two elections, they nevertheless indicate voter shifts.

Another important factor is the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party's decision, for the first time in its 20-year history, not to nominate its own candidate or publicly endorse another's. Party leader Boyko Borissov argued that a GERB nomination could split the pro-European vote and ultimately benefit Yotova. Furthermore, he emphasized that his party wants to concentrate on the local elections in 2027 instead.

A test of political power

Yotova will face Gyurov in the second round on November 1. Although the Bulgarian president has limited formal powers, they can veto legislation, requiring the National Assembly to reconsider it. More importantly, Bulgaria's recent political instability has demonstrated how the presidency can gain political significance beyond its formal powers. Amid repeated parliamentary elections — eight in the last six years — and difficulties in forming stable governments, former President Radev appointed multiple caretaker governments between 2021 and 2025. The prolonged political crisis also allowed him to emerge as a stable political actor, paving the way for him to become prime minister.

A victory for Yotova on Sunday would mean a further concentration of power within the ruling majority. Conversely, Gyurov presents himself as a counterbalancing force. The outcome will depend on which candidate is better able to mobilize voters who supported the remaining candidates in the first round, as well as on overall voter turnout.

In the second round of Bulgaria's 2021 presidential election, turnout fell by six percentage points. If a similar decline occurs this time, it will raise worrying questions about voter engagement and democratic legitimacy.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Sophia Beiter is an German Research Associate at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) in Vienna, Austria. She coordinates Citizens for EU Enlargement (CitizEn), which advances informed public debate and societal readiness for future accessions. Her work spans European integration, EU enlargement, democratic participation and EU reform, with regional expertise in Bulgaria, the Black Sea region and Russia. As a Charlemagne Prize Academy Fellow in 2024 and 2025, she developed research on citizen-driven enlargement. She earned her Master of Arts degree at the University of Vienna.

Fair Observer°

Independence, Diversity, Debate