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Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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The Truth About Why I Voted for Narendra Modi

Banarsi Babu
June 02, 2024

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has his flaws but he has delivered tangible benefits to hundreds of millions and stands head and shoulders above opposition leaders, most of whom are dynastic, corrupt and incompetent. Even an anglicized upper crust Brahmin like me has voted for lower caste Modi because I believe him to be the best option in our 2024 elections.

I have a lot in common with Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Like him, I went to a highly elitist school, and the only language I am really comfortable in is English. Like Indian National Congress (INC) leader Mani Shankar Aiyar, I am a Brahmin of high birth and almost an upper-class Englishman. I like my beef, I like my wine and I am an atheist. I simply cannot believe that a chap called Rama is a god. Myth and legend have morphed great kings or charismatic personalities into gods before, and Rama is no exception. Note that I do prefer the myth of Rama to the stories of Jesus or Muhammad. The idea that one book — the Bible or the Quran — could be the only word of god seems too fanatical, authoritarian and repulsive to my modern mind.

If you are reading me in Washington, New York or London, you will probably be shocked to read that I voted for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is gunning for a third term. How could a beef-eating, wine-drinking atheist vote for the Hindu fascist or, worse, Hindu supremacist Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is

purportedly planning a final solution to India's Muslim problem?

After numerous conversations with my Indian American granddaughter, who is addicted to The New York Times, and is protesting in favor of poor Palestinians in Gaza, I have finally decided to explain why.

Yes, Modi is deeply flawed...

Today, mania has gripped India. Modi has millions of bhakts (devotees). In fact, "Modi Bhakt" is now a bona fide term in Hindi, India's national language. Of course, bhakti (devotion) is not a new phenomenon in India. It goes back centuries. When I was young, India was in the grip of Indira mania. Indira bhakts ruled the roost. I hate to confess, but even I was a minor bhakt of India's first woman prime minister. Yet people like me felt Indira mania had gone too far when her lackey Dev Kant Barooah said, "Indira is India and India is Indira."

Today, I feel Modi mania has gone too far. If you say something critical of our prime minister, millions of Twitter warriors give you rank abuse. This is partly because of our national character. Indians tend to have a weakness for personality cults. They easily become bhakts not only of politicians but also film stars, cricketers and even boring bureaucrats. These bhakts forget that their heroes are human and start treating them as gods.

Let us take the case of the late Jayaram Jayalalithaa. She became chief minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu because, as per rumor, she was the mistress of the charismatic film star-turned-politician Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran. This Brahmin lady incongruously led an anti-upper caste populist party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and Tamils treated her as amma (mother).

If Jayalalithaa was the mother of the Tamils, Modi is now the paterfamilias of over one billion Indians. This father figure Modi is certainly autocratic. A chap in Fair Observer recently published an attack piece on Modi that claimed that the prime minister was worse than Indira Gandhi. This author is wrong, but he has a point. Before I carry on, I must point out that this wealthy gentleman was living in the US and making money during the Indira years. In contrast, I was very much in India and had to live through the Indira years. I can attest on oath that they were much worse than current times.

While Modi may not be as bad as Indira, he is charismatic, paranoid and likes to keep a tight grip on the helm of the state. Hence, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has expanded dramatically, ministers have become courtiers and Modi's face decorates hoardings across the length and breadth of the nation. I know from friends and relatives in the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's parent organization, that Modi has sidelined every leader with a mass base in his own party. This is exactly what Indira did to the INC. Such top-heavy personality cults are certainly not healthy for democracy but are part and parcel of Indian political culture.

There is truth to the argument that Modi is a divisive leader. Indians inside and outside of the country have deeply conflicting views about him. For millions, the prime minister is almost a god. He has rebuilt the Rama Temple in Ayodhya, which was smashed to smithereens by an invading Muslim army five centuries ago, and restored Hindu pride. Yet for people like my granddaughter and many in India's anglicized elite, lower caste Gujarati and Hindi speaking Modi is the devil incarnate. They argue that he climbed to power on the corpses of thousands of Muslims who died under his watch during the 2002 Gujarat riots. For such self-identified secular Indians, Modi is

uncouth, uncultured and uncivilized. More importantly, they see the former roadside tea seller as antithetical to the values of the Indian constitution.

If the defenestrated elites do not view Modi kindly, Muslims view him most unkindly. Maulana Syed Arshad Madani believes that Modi follows a majoritarian agenda, targets Muslims and triggers riots. Madani is the leader of the legendary Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind — a seminary in Deoband which our enlightened friends in the Taliban follow — and he believes that women and men should not study together. He takes the view that women playing sports is not a good idea. This learned Islamic scholar and many others less doctrinaire than him believe that Modi's Islamophobic strategy helps the BJP win Hindu votes.

Even if we discount Madani's trenchant criticism of Modi given his obvious bias, the prime minister has some obvious flaws. Like Indira before him, Modi is also arbitrary and autocratic. In 2016, the prime minister announced demonetization — the withdrawal of large-denomination banknotes — with little notice and no planning, leading to the death of thousands of small businesses. India's GDP contracted and millions of jobs vanished. Arguably, this contributed to the unemployment crisis that plagues India today.

Under Modi, the Income Tax (IT) Department, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) have run a reign of terror. Together, they are now called ICE and, as per rumor, they are running an extortion racket in the name of their political master. These so-called loyal bloodhounds of the prime minister target opponents, harass them and even lock them up.

Sure, India is corrupt. Major politicians often have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars. So,

ED, CBI and IT should certainly target the corrupt. The thought of ICE turning the heat on rapacious thieves robbing the country is highly seductive. However, the ICE gang only seems to target opposition politicians. Furthermore, when these politicians ditch their parties and join the BJP, their corruption charges magically disappear. The opposition calls this the washing machine effect, and they have a point. Note that the opposition behaves no differently when it controls the apparatus of India's colonial state. Under Indira, every opposition leader and troublesome journalist was simply locked away in a dark cellar.

Those who live in nice neighborhoods in the West like my bleeding heart liberal granddaughter have to realize an important fact. For centuries, India has functioned through rule by law, not rule of law. Modi offers India more of the same: an Indira-light beer.

...but he has some real achievements

Now that we have gone through some flaws of the Modi-led BJP government, we have to examine some of its virtues, too. Are hundreds of millions voting for Modi simply illiterate and indoctrinated? Are they, in the words of John Stuart Mill, "not in the maturity of their faculties" and hence are making bad choices? Doesn't this logic sound just a touch undemocratic, patronizing or even colonial?

Even an upper-crust Brahmin like me does not believe that most people are stupid. The reality is that hundreds of millions of Indians are not idiots. They are voting because the prime minister has racked up solid achievements. Above all, the Modi government has pulled off a significant reduction in poverty. It has achieved this by successfully rolling out a national biometric identification system called Aadhaar. The INC does deserve credit for conceiving this system, but it is the

Modi-led BJP that implemented Aadhaar with vigor since taking charge in 2014.

Aadhaar enabled the government to open millions of bank accounts for poor people and deliver direct cash benefits to over 900 million individuals. In the past, an INC prime minister named Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira and the father of the current leader Rahul, admitted that only 15% of the allocated funds reached the beneficiaries. By cutting out the middlemen and streamlining the delivery of benefits, Modi has made a tangible difference to the lives of the poor.

The prime minister has focused on low-income households and provided them with public services for the first time in India's history. More than 800 million Indian citizens get five kilograms (11 pounds) of wheat or rice every month. By 2019, the Modi government had already built well over 100 million toilets. Millions, especially women, now no longer have to relieve themselves in the open, and they feel a lot safer as a result.

In addition, the government has distributed cooking gas to poor households. The percentage of households with access to cooking gas rose from 61.9% as of April 1, 2016, to 99.5% as of January 1, 2021. Cooking with firewood and dried cow dung is labor-intensive, not to mention terrible for women's eyes and lungs. Cooking gas makes kitchen work a lot less onerous for women and extends their lives. As Christopher Roper Schell explained in 2022, distributing these gas cylinders and implementing other welfare schemes has made Modi popular with female voters.

In 2014, 88% of villages in India had access to electricity. By 2021, 99.6% did. Under Modi, power generation has increased dramatically. The prime minister has also bet big on solar power. India is now the third-largest producer of solar energy in the world. Modi's government has cut the red tape for installing rooftop solar and is

making a big push to increase solar power production dramatically.

The Modi government has also supplied piped water to millions of homes and built no less than 25 million homes since 2016. While the government has fallen short of its goal to provide clean drinking water to all villages, it has made commendable progress. Building homes, providing piped water, constructing toilets, supplying cooking gas cylinders and distributing food grains have won Modi the support of the poor.

There is one bold act for which Modi does not get enough credit. Speaking from the ramparts of the historic Red Fort on August 15, 2020, India's Independence Day, Modi broke a big taboo by highlighting menstrual hygiene. He announced a scheme to start 6,000 centers to distribute more than 50 million sanitary napkins for just one rupee (₹1 = \$0.01, so just one cent). India has had many women leaders, but no politician before Modi demonstrated the empathy or the courage to publicly address this issue. For centuries, millions of Indians have regarded menstruation and menstruating women as unclean. By making this issue a priority, Modi demonstrated great political courage and moved Indian society in the right direction.

Modi has not only succeeded in what Fair Observer's Editor-in-Chief Atul Singh and geopolitical guru Manu Sharma call Sanatan Socialism — traditional Hindus like to call their religion Sanatan Dharma, the “eternal order” — but also followed decent policies on national security and the economy. The Modi government has acted more robustly against Pakistan and managed to control domestic terrorism so far. It has also delivered robust economic growth and built infrastructure at a record pace.

Even opposition leader Shashi Tharoor, a handsome devil rumored to have murdered one of

his wives, has given Modi his due on the infrastructure front. In an op-ed for Project Syndicate, Tharoor lauded the Modi government for “the rapid construction of much-needed infrastructure, including new airports, ports, and highways, enabled by streamlined procedures, quick approvals, and extensive reliance on private contractors.” He went on to say that Modi's “infrastructure boom has changed the face of many parts of India, and the work continues, with large new investments in modernizing India's railway network.”

The Modi government has also won praise from American software gurus. I was struck by Wes Kussmaul's piece in Fair Observer which lauded Indian achievements in building the “India Stack,” an indigenous set of technologies for the digital age. If you live in Europe, you are now living as a serf in what Yanis Varoufakis calls the era of technofeudalism. You search for everything via Google, use Google Maps to get from one place to another, buy your stuff off Amazon, post images on Instagram, send messages on WhatsApp and perhaps love your fancy iPhone. You operate very much within the system created by American tech giants who make your life convenient but squeeze every cent out of you for the privilege of doing so. In India, we are also living under the same technofeudalism, but at least we are trying to revolt.

India's Unified Payment Interface (UPI) enables me, my driver and my vegetable vendor to buy everything from train tickets to onions using our phones. In our daily lives, we barely use cash anymore. Kussmaul tells us that India has been able to leapfrog Western economies and gone from cash to digital payment systems at extraordinary speed. In June 2016, UPI had no transactions. Fast forward to April 2024 and it recorded over 13 billion transactions in the month. Since 2021, India is the leader in the global real-time payment market followed by China and South Korea.

The Modi government is trying to develop BharOS, an operating system for use in government and public systems. In addition, it has been developing digital infrastructure called the India Stack. As per the International Monetary Fund (IMF), “the India Stack is revolutionizing access to finance.” The IMF estimates that 1.2 out of 1.4 billion Indians, nearly 90% of the population, have signed up for Aadhaar. Bank accounts are linked to this digital identity, enabling direct cash transfers to the poor. Payments through UPI enable the poor to engage in daily digital transactions using their phones.

Developers are building Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) based on the India Stack to solve many hard problems. This combination of public digital infrastructure and private entrepreneurship is unique in the world. The US has handed over its digital infrastructure to modern-day robber barons like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. As stated earlier, Europeans are serfs to American tech barons and Europe is a digital dinosaur. The Modi government has shown great vision in implementing Aadhaar, UPI and the India Stack as well as pushing for BharOS.

There is really no alternative

When Indira was the de facto queen of India, many said that she benefited from the “there is no alternative” (TINA) factor. In fact, they had a point. Indians had high hopes when Morarji Desai replaced Indira in 1977, becoming the first non-INC prime minister of the nation. However, Desai turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Well-meaning but narrowminded, this doctrinaire Brahmin sold the Research and Analysis Wing down the river because he suspected India’s premier intelligence agency to be a touch too loyal to Indira.

For good reason, Pakistan awarded this useful idiot its highest award: the Nishan-e-Pakistan. A

late relative told me the story of Desai’s stupidity in the sort of gory detail that you do not get on Wikipedia or any online source. Sadly, we Indians do not put things into writing, and a lot of my relative’s knowledge is lost. Suffice to say, Desai was a dunce. His successor Charan Singh was worse. Unsurprisingly, Indira stormed back to power in the 1980 elections, barely three years after losing to Desai, Singh & Co, despite her god-awful track record during the Emergency.

Like Indira, Modi benefits from the poverty of credible parties and competent personalities in Indian politics. The INC is no longer the party of Mahatma Gandhi. It is a fiefdom of the Nehru dynasty. The remarkably handsome Rahul Gandhi, Indira’s half-Italian grandson, is the big boss of the INC. He has walked from the south to the north of the country, and this fit hunk is probably well-meaning too. Yet Rahul is wedded to the socialism his family imposed on India and is proposing what Atul Singh calls “Latin America-style populism” in India. Rahul is promising jobs for everyone, free cash every month to the poor and more. To pay for these freebies, his adviser Sam Pitroda is threatening an inheritance tax that is terrifying the middle class but would still cover a mere fraction of the lavish expenses the INC is proposing. In fact, Rahul’s promises threaten to make India a South Asian Argentina and send shivers down my spine.

There is also another tiny matter that bothers even a Brahmin like me. I see excessive dynasticism as the bane of Indian culture. It is rampant not only in politics but also law, business and Bollywood. Atul has incessantly mocked me for supposedly having higher status than him per our caste system. For far too long, caste was defined by janma (birth), not karma (deed). This caste mentality has led to the extraordinary power of the “lucky sperm club” in India. Rahul is the shiningest star of this club. Indira’s grandson may not be stupid, but he lacks real intelligence,

judgment and experience. Surrounded by sycophants, Rahul has no dirt under his fingernails. He is the boss of the INC only because he belongs to the Nehru dynasty. This dynasticism afflicts politics in all of South Asia, not just India. In large part, I voted for Modi to keep Rahul out of power because I have had enough of the Nehru dynasty for one lifetime.

Apart from the BJP and the INC, we do not have national parties. Let us take a look at South India. Kerala, a state of over 34 million people on the southwestern tip of India, is ruled by communists. They have succeeded in increasing literacy and improved the state's ranking in the Human Development Index (HDI). However, businesses find it tough to operate in Kerala, and jobs are hard to find. Malayalees, Kerala's skilled people, work around the country and abroad, especially in the Persian Gulf. Fundamentally, the land known as "god's own country" lives off tourism and remittances. Hence, communism sort of works. Elsewhere in India, communist parties are now practically extinct.

Tamil Nadu, a state of over 81 million people on the southeastern tip of India, is ruled by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The party traces its roots to a social equality and social justice movement that was rightly tired of discrimination by snooty Brahmins. Even as a Brahmin, I can see the appeal of DMK's early subaltern philosophy. Ironically, the DMK is no longer a champion of equality or justice. Just as North Korean communists have installed a Kim monarchy, the DMK is in thrall to the Karunanidhi family.

Muthuvel Karunanidhi served as chief minister of Tamil Nadu for over five terms between 1969 to 2011. He was a gifted writer and canny politician. As early as 1937 (ten years before independence), he became a student leader opposing the imposition of Hindi as India's national language. In a spectacularly successful career, Karunanidhi

ruled Tamil Nadu for almost 20 years. His political rival was the once slim and then portly Jayalalithaa, whom I described above. Her party, the AIADMK, is now a spent force. In contrast, the DMK is still ruling Tamil Nadu and its leader is none other than Karunanidhi's son. Believe it or not, his name is Muthuvel Karunanidhi Stalin, named after none other than the murderous Soviet tyrant Joseph Stalin.

M.K. Stalin is certainly not bloodthirsty like his namesake. However, the choice of the name reveals his dynasty's preferences. To be fair, Tamil Nadu is a state that has done well in educating its people, boosting its industrial production and developing a decent economy. However, I have a nagging suspicion that Stalin is far too happy to flirt with Tamil nationalism to win votes. In 2022, he met with a Tamil extremist convicted of killing Rajiv Gandhi, the good-looking father of the handsome Rahul Gandhi, causing much disquiet among old Rajiv loyalists. Yet in 2024, Rahul called Stalin his "elder brother," and both are part of the 28-party INDIA alliance seeking to topple the Modi-led BJP. Politics makes strange bedfellows indeed.

North of Tamil Nadu lies Andhra Pradesh (54 million people) where Yeduguri Sandinti Jagan Mohan Reddy rules as chief minister. Like Rahul and Stalin, Reddy is yet another member of the lucky sperm club where members inherit top political jobs from their fathers. From my fellow Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers in Andhra Pradesh, I have heard many juicy tales about the Reddy clan's corruption. Apparently, their Christian faith has not given these Reddys any sense of sin, and they fail to avoid the temptation of self-enrichment at the cost of taxpayers.

The other two southern states of Telangana (nearly 40 million) and Karnataka (over 64 million) are ruled by INC. In fact, there is only one

other INC chief minister in the country, and he rules the northern Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh (less than seven million) on the China border. All three INC chief ministers hail from humble backgrounds, but they are regional satraps who pay obeisance to Rahul just like Mughal governors did in the 18th century. The fact that the INC rules only three out of the 28 states of India is telling of how far the grand old party has fallen since 1947.

The space vacated by the INC has been filled by regional parties around the country. A full list of them would make this long piece even longer. So, I will highlight two parties that have a strong support base and will give you a flavor of India.

The first is the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) founded by Mamata Banerjee in 1998. This ex-INC leader became the first woman chief minister of West Bengal in 2011 and continues to rule this state of over 100 million people. Didi (elder sister), as Banerjee is called, is a feisty and charismatic politician. Yet she is a regional leader with no appeal outside of her home state, just like M.K. Stalin. The Didi-led TMC defenestrated the communists who had been in power for many decades. Yet she has not been able to either increase per capita income or living standards during her time in office. My IAS friends tell me that her goons beat up her opponents more thoroughly than the infamous communist cadres. Didi yells at some of these friends from time to time.

If Modi has cultivated the Hindu vote, Didi has wooed the Muslim vote. In fact, some TMC Muslim leaders are said to be criminals. In February, party leader Arabul Islam was arrested in a murder case. Later that month, another leader named Sheikh Shahjahan was arrested as well. Villagers of his native Sandeshkhali accused him of land grab and sexual assault, and celebrations broke out in the village on news of his arrest. A

Bengali soldier in the Indian Army personally told me that Shahjahan had taken over his land. As per his account, this Muslim mafia boss had been taking over the land of serving soldiers in the defense and paramilitary forces. Our soldier went on to tell me that the TMC had been turning a blind eye to Shahjahan's criminal activities because he delivered the local Muslim vote to Didi.

For all its faults, the TMC is a powerhouse that dominates West Bengal. So, the party has little incentive to play second fiddle to anyone in its backyard. Thus, forming an alliance with the imperial INC, which she quit to form the TMC, becomes difficult. Formally, the TMC is a part of the left-leaning alliance. However, Banerjee claimed that the INC proved unreasonable and so the TMC had "decided to go it alone in Bengal." Although Didi is a Brahmin, she is self-made and has no intention of kowtowing to Rahul, demonstrating the superficiality and brittleness of the INDIA alliance.

It is time for me to shine the light on the second party: Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Kejriwal emerged as one of the leaders of the anti-corruption movement against the INC, catching the fancy of many middle-class Indians. He began the AAP on the tailwinds of the movement and signaled national ambition from day one. In 2014, he ran for the Lok Sabha (House of the People) — the lower house of the Indian parliament — against none other than Modi. The BJP leader trounced the AAP leader in Varanasi, the temple town Mark Twain called "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend."

A year later, Kejriwal became chief minister of Delhi for the second time, winning 67 out of 70 seats. In 2022, the AAP won the Punjab elections as well. To some it seemed that the AAP would emerge as the national alternative to the BJP,

replacing the moribund Nehru family-led INC. Instead, the AAP is embroiled in a scandal involving liquor licenses. Supporters argue that the BJP is stitching their leaders up in a politically motivated investigation. Another scandal, which has nothing to do with the BJP, is far more damaging.

AAP leader Swati Maliwal has accused Kejriwal's aide of beating her in the AAP leader's own home. From 2015 to 2024, Maliwal headed the Delhi Commission for Women. In January, she entered the Rajya Sabha (the Council of States) — the upper house of the Indian parliament — representing Delhi. Rumor has it that she was Kejriwal's mistress and the AAP leader's wife got the aide to give Maliwal a thrashing. That rumor may be entirely untrue, but it damages Kejriwal's reputation as Mister Clean Anti-Corruption Crusader.

I have another more fundamental problem with the AAP. It is a populist party bereft of principle. The party has definitely improved Delhi's schools; it has delivered some primary healthcare, and it has resuscitated Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on local democracy. Remember elected mayors in India still lack any power. Unelected 30ish-year-old IAS officers rule cities, towns and districts like feudal lords with no accountability. They answer upwards to their chief ministers, not downwards to the voters. By championing local democracy, the AAP has done one good deed. Yet the party does not practice what it preaches. Kejriwal has purged the party of many of its founders, cut all the tall poppies and created such a personality cult in the AAP that makes Modi look good by comparison.

In a nutshell, Indians do not really have an alternative to the Modi-led BJP in these elections. The INDIA alliance is a polyamorous marriage that would dissolve immediately into infighting in the unlikely event it won power. Too many of the alliance's leaders are corrupt, populist and

incompetent dynasts. Democracy is always imperfect, as Americans know too well. As of now, they face a choice between a convicted felon and a doddering 81-year-old losing his mind. Indian voters have better options. Like me, they prefer the scruffy street dog to the palace poodles.



Banarsi Babu is a retired officer of what Fair Observer's Editor-in-Chief Atul Singh calls the heaven-born Indian Administrative Service (IAS). He hails from the same

ancestral city as Atul and has put up with this not-so-young man's acerbic wit for many decades. Banarsi is a caricature of a stereotype. He is a Brahmin, a member of the highest caste which traditionally performed priestly functions like the Cohens among the Jews.

Limited Options for South Africa's ANC After a Devastating Election

Martin Plaut
June 04, 2024

Since the end of apartheid, the African National Congress party has dominated South Africa. On May 29, for the first time, it received less than 50% of votes. It must now form a coalition. Prospects of a grand coalition with the liberal Democratic Alliance party or of alliances with third parties are both dubious.

It is difficult to overestimate just how significant the May 29 election has been for South Africans. The deluge swept away old certainties and revealed a new political landscape. The Election Commission declared the result free and fair, and so it was.

At its most basic, the election repeated lessons from abroad: Over time, parties that lead nations in their fight against colonialism lose their gloss. The Indian National Congress or the Kenyan African National Union are cases in point. When the reality of running a country comes home to roost, voters gradually become disillusioned.

In South Africa, the proportional representation system exacerbated this disillusionment. Voters elect national lists and are deprived of someone to represent their own suburbs, towns and villages in parliament. Further, the low vote threshold allowed dozens of tiny parties to emerge, eroding the vote shares of the once mighty African National Congress (ANC).

South African voters are unhappy, and only 58.6% of them turned out to vote this year, down from 66% in 2019. Still more dramatically, the ruling ANC dropped to 40.2% from 57.5%. This is the first time that the ANC has failed to win a majority since the implementation of universal suffrage in 1994.

“Doomsday coalition”

The ANC can no longer rule alone. What should it do now? The party has rejected suggestions that President Cyril Ramaphosa fall on his sword and resign — at least for the moment. Ramaphosa and other party higher-ups have been locked in meetings all weekend. The National Working Committee of the ANC met on Monday, followed by the National Executive Committee meeting today.

The choices the party faces are stark. One path would lead to an alliance with the new party of former President Jacob Zuma, uMkhonto weSizwe (MK). The party is so new and so dependent on Zuma’s charisma that it could hardly forge a stable relationship with the ANC. It is also deeply critical of the judiciary and the constitution.

The other possibility for the ANC would be to seek a relationship with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) of Julius Malema. They are sometimes described as “radical,” but in reality, they combine xenophobia against Africans from the rest of the continent with demands for the seizure of land and wealth.

Either alliance would see an acceleration of capital flight, combined with an exodus of skilled South Africans, black and white.

“The reality is if we do end up with an ANC-EFF or ANC-MK (coalition) there will be initial market jitters,” said Mandisa Zavala, head of asset allocation at financial firm Alexforbes in Johannesburg. Zavala predicted that this could spark an outflow from government bonds and pressure on the currency. The official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA), described a potential alliance ANC-EFF alliance as a “doomsday coalition.”

A government of national unity?

Alternatively, the ANC could take a completely different direction. Dr. Frans Cronje, chair of the Social Research Foundation, argues that the ANC really has only one alternative: to seek an alliance with the DA. This would require both parties eating a good deal of humble pie, since they have engaged in vitriolic attacks on each other.

The ANC is strongly statist, arguing that only the government can really run major institutions and redistribute jobs and wealth to the black

majority. In reality, this has meant redistributing wealth to the ANC elite, in gross corruption that was termed “state capture” by an official enquiry. The DA — which has been holding its own meetings — takes exactly the opposite approach. While it believes in state payments to lift the poor out of poverty, it is strongly free-market in its economics. It is difficult to see how the approaches can be reconciled.

Perhaps the DA could offer the ANC a “confidence and supply” arrangement. It would allow the ANC to hold the presidency, but would possibly take the influential position of speaker of parliament in return for guaranteeing that the ANC get its budget adopted. Still, the DA would seek other assurances. Many measures would be negotiated bill by bill as they came up for debate.

Such an arrangement could provide South Africa with a degree of stability and a generally centrist governance. This would be in line with the views of the majority, who are mostly Christian and conservative in outlook.

Instead of a confidence and supply arrangement, it is not impossible for the ANC and DA to form a full national unity coalition. However, the DA, as the potential smaller partner, is wary of being forced to compromise too greatly.

The situation is anything but clear. Many options could be considered before the dust settles. South Africans, along with their neighbors who rely so heavily on their regional economic strength, will be looking on nervously.



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A Sociologist's Perspective on the Olympics and EURO2024 as Protest Platforms

Ellis Cashmore
June 07, 2024

Despite the common belief that they should remain separate, sports and politics have always been intertwined. Major sports events often become platforms for political and anti-war protests. Germany will host EURO2024 from June 14, and France will host the Olympics in Paris this summer. Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza create the potential for protests. Throughout history, sports have served as tools for political expression and symbolic demonstrations, although their effectiveness in achieving concrete political outcomes remains debatable.

For as long as anyone can remember, the only certainty about sports and politics is that they should not mix — yet they do. The subject provokes piousness from traditionalists who argue for sports’ purity of spirit and all the neutrality this implies. But it also excites the rebel imagination. What better showcase for a cause than a major sports event?

On June 14, Germany will host one of the two biggest sports tournaments of 2024. EURO2024, as it's called, is association football's second biggest men's event after the quadrennial FIFA World Cup. In July, the Paris Olympics will follow. In the absence of a *deus ex machina*, both tournaments will take place while military conflict rages in Ukraine and Gaza. Will either or both sports events become platforms for protest against the wars?

The wars have prompted almost continuous remonstrations of one kind or another, primarily in support of a ceasefire, around the world. University campuses, embassies and streets have been sites of protest. The recent Eurovision Song Contest in Malmö, Sweden, provided an attractive showcase. On the day of the competition's grand final, 10,000–12,000 protesters gathered on the central Stortorget square of the Swedish host city before marching toward the contest venue, waving Palestinian flags and shouting "Eurovision united by genocide" — a play on the contest's official slogan, "United by music." Earlier, there had been a more modest pro-Israel demonstration. Neither side missed the golden opportunity for widespread publicity.

Eurovision draws a formidable 162 million TV viewers, who will have been aware of the railing. But this figure is eclipsed by the viewers who watch football. 5.23 billion cumulatively watched the 2022 edition of the European Football Championship, according to the Union of European Football Associations — that's nearly 122 times the combined population of Ukraine, Israel and Palestine. Any march, blockade, sit-down or exhibition is likely to be seen worldwide.

Sports and politics have a long history together

Despite sports administrators' refusal to acknowledge it, the affinity between sports and politics is undeniable. A political ideal inspired the

modern Olympic games: Their creator, Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937), reimagined the ancient Greek religious, literary, musical and athletic festival as stripped down — a good-natured competition between nations and one with substantial symbolic value. Having witnessed the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), the rise of nationalism and militarism, colonial conflicts and the events that would eventually lead to World War I, de Coubertin suspected a multi-sports event could bring nations together. So, a large part of the games' remit was to counterbalance the gathering forces in late nineteenth-century Europe.

The 1900 Paris Olympics, integrated into Exposition Universelle, an international event showcasing technological and cultural achievements, would have encouraged De Coubertin, an enthusiastic propagandist for world peace. He was less encouraged by the 1936 Berlin games in the year before his death. The Berlin tournament was an effective showcase for Nazis' administrative expertise and competence: It staged arguably the most successful sports tournament up to that point in history, featuring 49 nations. The games were also intended to promote the destructive ideology of an "Aryan race."

Sports has also been deployed as a conduit of opposition and, at times, at least appeared to influence social and political change. Many people credit the international sporting boycott of apartheid-era South Africa (from 1964 to 1992) with helping to end segregation and bring about the rise of the African National Congress (ANC) led by Nelson Mandela in 1994.

In 1977, Commonwealth nations agreed to exclude South Africa from international competition in Gleneagles, Scotland. The ban effectively froze South Africa out of major sports and turned it into a pariah state. Teams and individuals refrained from visiting or competing

against the country, although not all observed the ban.

It is satisfying to believe sports, activities that ostensibly promote unity of action and feeling, played a part in ending a regime based on racist separation and abominable inequality. But there's no hard evidence to corroborate this unless we rely on conjecture and inference. On the other hand, the boycott certainly did not harm the anti-apartheid movement.

Dramatic protests by athletes

Disruption and mayhem can catalyze new friendships and insights, like breaking eggs to make omelets. At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, two African American athletes dramatically revealed their disdain for the US by bowing their heads and raising their gloved fists defiantly while on the victory rostrum. Tommie Smith and John Carlos are now hailed as fearless pioneers who changed the world's perception of the American Dream. However, they were condemned and expelled from the games at the time.

Cultural rehabilitation came slowly and the "black power salute," as it became known, is now regarded as a totemic moment in the history of modern USA. It's tempting to exaggerate its impact, but the symbolic demonstration of resistance has become critical over the decades. Smith and Carlos captured the rebellious mood of the 1960s when much of the USA was affected by civil uprising.

Similarly, Colin Kaepernick's motion in 2016 engaged a nation horrified by the deaths of two black men on consecutive days in July in different parts of the USA. Police officers fatally shot both Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the former in Louisiana and the latter in Minnesota. In August, Kaepernick, then playing for the National Football League's (NFL's) San Francisco 49ers, refused to

stand during the playing of the American national anthem. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media in 2016. He dramatized his stand further when he dropped to one knee during the anthem. It synced perfectly with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that had emerged three years earlier and set off a chain reaction.

Sports brings many benefits — is world peace one of them?

Over the following years, European football embraced the knee gesture and encouraged observance before games. Other sports were not so keen. Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee, warned athletes against political protests, calling on them to avoid "divisive" statements that could overshadow the world's biggest sporting event. "The podium and the medal ceremonies are not made ... for a political or other demonstration," Bach said prior to the Covid-delayed Tokyo games in 2021.

US shot-putter Raven Saunders, who is queer, fashioned her own protest as she collected her silver medal, crossing her arms representing, in her words, "the intersection of where all people who are oppressed meet." 11 other Formula One drivers joined Lewis Hamilton as he took a knee before the start of the Styrian Grand Prix in Austria.

Just Stop Oil, a British environmentalist group that opposes the use of fossil fuels, spectacularly ambushed the World Snooker Championships in Sheffield, England, in 2023, leaping on the baize-covered tables and releasing a cloud of orange powder that disrupted the competition and provided impressively colorful images for the media. The same group staged a less publicized demonstration at Wimbledon in the same year. Earlier this year, hundreds marched to the World Athletics Indoor Championships venue in

Glasgow, Scotland, to protest the Gaza conflict. Palestine players wore keffiyehs (Bedouin Arab headdresses) when they entered the field against Australia in November 2023.

The toxin of the Ukraine and Gaza has by now envenomed the political atmosphere in much of the world and opposition to the wars manifests in rallies and marches somewhere practically every day. In this cultural climate, it would be unusual if EURO2024 and the Olympics' Stade de France did not become protest sites. No one would be caught by surprise. Almost everyone can foresee at least one disruption to the competition. Most fans won't encourage it, but these are exceptional circumstances in which to pursue what are, after all, trivialities. What's a trophy or a medal in the context of widespread bloodshed?

Sports have no real reason to exist at all. They won't save the planet, cure chronic disease, end social inequality or deliver peace on earth. Only fantasists believe campaigners for world peace can bring an end to the two military conflicts. Even concerted demonstrations from fans, players, teams and even organizers are unlikely to make impressions on the perpetrators of war. Like most political protests, their impact would be, at best, part of a cumulative dissent. And, at worst, futile. But is futility such a bad thing? Isn't any form of protest better than no protest at all?

[Ellis Cashmore is a co-researcher of the report "Will EURO2024 struggle to keep war protests out of football?" published in Soccer & Society.]

[[Liam Roman](#) edited this piece.]



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Contradictory Strategies for Achieving Sovereignty and Stability in Lebanon

Jean AbiNader
June 14, 2024

From political disarray to economic crisis, and substandard human rights to alarming border violence, chaos proliferates in Lebanon. Key security policies, such as the UN's SCR 1701 and Taif Accords, are mired in contradiction and rendered inadequate by US inaction and external strain. Lebanon must take action from within in order to save the jeopardized country.

In 2019, a Ponzi scheme, operated for years by Lebanon's Central Bank, commercial banks, and politicians, triggered economic collapse. Since then, Lebanon has grappled with a profound recession. More than half of the population is below the poverty line. The state is not equipped to assist the poor, and most go without aid. Essential services like electricity and education are deteriorating. In 2020, 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored improperly in a warehouse in the capital, Beirut, exploded, killing over 200 people. The blast literally rocked the entire country, but the authorities have still not identified those responsible.

Citizens are angry, and in response, the state has cracked down on free expression, using criminal defamation laws to punish those who complain. Meanwhile, the government is in a state of paralysis. Twelve sessions of voting in parliament have failed to elect a new president since Michel Aoun's mandate expired in 2022.

To make matters worse, war is brewing to the south. Ever since the Israel– Hamas war started in October 2023, hostilities along the border between Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have mounted.

To make a long matter short, Lebanon is in crisis, and something must be done.

Current prescriptions for Lebanon

Everyone, of course, is full of ideas on how to solve the crisis. Few realize how many contradictions their recommendations involve. “Sovereignty and stability” are the watchwords.

Nearly everyone agrees there must be détente between the various, sometimes warring, political factions in Lebanon in order to elect a new president and make the accompanying government changes. They further agree on the United Nations' 1989 Taif Accords and the UN's 2006 Security Council Resolution 1701. These two diplomatic documents aim to promote order in Lebanon by detailing power-sharing among various factions and outlining the responsibility of the Lebanese Army (LAF) and the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) to maintain security and secure Lebanon's borders. In April 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) added another plan for recovery when it reached a staff-level agreement for economic reform with Lebanon. Yet despite the consensus, efforts have been fruitless.

It is not clear that effective efforts are even possible. The situation on the Israeli border is

rapidly deteriorating, with over 90,000 people internally displaced. It is not likely that internal reforms are on the government's agenda at all when Lebanon's territorial integrity and state functionality are in question.

External relations with the US, Hezbollah and Israel

Externally, Lebanon is unable to control or even positively influence its relationships with the many outside powers who seek to influence Lebanese policy. Chief among those actors are Iran and the US. Iranian and American influence on Lebanon, whether good or ill-intentioned, has not caused any palpable improvement in Lebanon's situation.

Many Lebanese ascribe Lebanon's ills to the machinations of Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist political party and militant group, and its patron, Iran. The recent cross-border violence between Hezbollah and Israel is seen as an existential threat to Lebanon, and some believe Lebanon may consequently become a victim of the “cleansing” Israel is visiting upon Palestinians. Furthermore, Lebanese believe that Israel, thanks to US support, faces little opposition to its posture of deterrence through preponderant destruction in Lebanon.

Then there is the US, which is cast as both the savior and tormentor of Lebanon. Through its relationships with the LAF and ISF, the US has affirmed and worked to bolster their status as the first defenders of Lebanon. Unfortunately, US reluctance to act to rein in the excesses of the IDF, violent settlers, and the extremist cabinet of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu tars the US as the abettor of Lebanon's looming potential destruction. Additionally, the US seems to be shirking some of its ability to aid Lebanon by using SCR 1701 to place unworkable responsibility on the LAF.

On the one hand, voices in the US Congress and government remind the Lebanese that SCR 1701 places relatively clear guidelines on the central role of the LAF in stabilizing Lebanon. They raise the topic whenever appropriations are allocated or the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is annually renewed. On the other hand, the US insists that the LAF follow civilian leadership and respect Lebanon's laws. This requirement severely undermines the LAF's power because that same civilian leadership obstructs it from maintaining borders and ensuring peace. Whether the theater is violence on the Lebanon-Israel border or dealing with armed militias, the LAF and ISF are routinely barred from carrying out their increasingly complex responsibilities.

Despite the inconsistencies in America's role, many Lebanese believe that only the US holds the power to keep Lebanon together. Just this week, LAF commander General Joseph Aoun visited the US to meet with senior Pentagon officials and discuss possible solutions to the border violence. Aoun's visit reinforced the perception that US support is critical. Still, while the intentions behind the talks were good, it remains to be seen whether the US will take action.

Military leadership and complex foreign dynamics

Many Lebanese are calling for the LAF to corral Hezbollah in order to avoid provoking Israel. The Quintet (the US, Qatar, France, Saudi Arabia and Egypt), too, is pushing for the LAF to keep a short leash on Hezbollah pursuant to SCR 1701. (For example, just this June, French President Emmanuel Macron called for the implementation of SCR 1701 in order to temper escalations on the Lebanese-Israeli border.)

Iran, on the other hand, wants Hezbollah to put pressure on Israel. Could the West and Iran be pushing the LAF and Hezbollah into a civil war —

one in which the LAF is outgunned? How far will the US go to support Israel?

How does one balance the Abraham Accords — a US declaration affirming the importance of cooperatively maintaining peace in the Middle East — with the deterioration in US public support for a solution that sidelines Palestine?

How long can Saudi Arabia and others tolerate rogue behavior by Israel that may affect their regional priorities?

The dynamics of this region are as fraught as ever, and divided Lebanon seems to be caught in the middle of it all. Amid the turmoil, Lebanon might turn to a military leader. Officers have taken presidential office four times since 1958. Lebanon tends to rely on the military when no political consensus emerges. An article in *Al Majalla* last year detailed how each case of general-turned-president was in response to a particular crisis or crises.

Currently, there is a buzz about electing Aoun as president. To many, he seems the only option left as politicians who lack the motivation to sacrifice their personal agendas for Lebanon's sake fail to compromise.

This presidential crisis is nearly two years old now. The rest of the region has better things to do than abet a continuation of dysfunctional Lebanese politics. While members of the Quintet, particularly the US and France, have made recent proposals to cease hostilities in Lebanon, they have more urgent business than holding Beirut by the hand. Clashes on the Lebanese-Israeli border continue to escalate. Lebanon must take the lead.

[[India Wenner](#) edited this piece]



Jean AbiNader has been working internationally since he finished his post-graduate education in intercultural affairs and went off to Europe as a road manager for a rock ‘n’ roll tour. Getting back to business, he eventually worked in 40 countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa at the intersection of international marketing, organizational change, cross-cultural communications and workforce development.

A New Documentary Highlights China's Expansion Into Ethiopia

Mehret Ayalew Mandefro
June 16, 2024

A new documentary examines Ethiopia’s rapid development — bankrolled by China. On paper, the numbers are going up; on the ground, things are more complicated. The film looks at industrialization through the eyes of three women: a factory worker, a local farmer and a Chinese factory director.

This Sunday, *Made in Ethiopia* premieres at the DC/DOX documentary festival in Washington, DC. This film rejects simplistic narratives and explores Ethiopia’s burgeoning industrial sector and partnership with China through three individuals’ perspectives.

Ethiopia is the most populous nation in East Africa. In the 20th century, it faced economic troubles and civil war between communist and non-communist forces. Today, it is quickly developing, building infrastructure and factories.

Much of the capital for this development comes from foreign partners, especially China, whose ambitious Belt and Road Initiative has focused on this core of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia’s industrial sector now employs millions of people, and Ethiopians are growing more prosperous. Yet it is not rosy for everyone; indeed, any development this large and fast will have uneven effects on the human lives involved in it.

Three women, three lives

It is easy to misunderstand industrialization in Ethiopia and China’s growing involvement. *Made in Ethiopia* takes a look at these developments through the lives of three women: a factory worker, a local farmer and a Chinese factory director who is charged with filling no fewer than 30,000 jobs.

The documentary takes a close and long look at the period between 2019 and 2023. It raises profound questions about what is fair and for whom in Ethiopia’s growing factory towns. These characters struggle to defend their own wellbeing in a rapidly changing, chaotic world. The trade-offs materialize in the concrete struggles of people’s lives. Still, people fight and they persevere.

Watching the characters navigate tricky terrain inevitably makes you reflect on how challenging it is to build prosperity for all.

Making a film in a tumultuous time

I am an Emmy-nominated Ethiopian American anthropologist and filmmaker. I served as an executive producer of the documentary along with Anna Godas, Oli Harbottle, Susan Jakes and Roger Graef.

First-time directors Xinyan Yu and Max Duncan shot the film over the course of four years, through

both the pandemic and a civil war. I was living in Ethiopia when this film was shot and remember when Max and Xinyan started this journey. Ethiopia was in a very different place than it is now. The directors captured a particularly dynamic few years and indeed the pandemonium of a country that is rapidly accelerating towards the future.

The filmmakers had unprecedented access to the Eastern Industrial Zone (EIZ) in Dukem, Ethiopia. Dukem is a farming town that is home to the largest and first Chinese industrial park in Ethiopia. Located 40 kilometers outside of Addis Ababa, the EIZ is considered the benchmark for the development of industrial parks in Ethiopia and was established to accelerate the process of industrialization and job creation financed by Chinese investors.

Made in Ethiopia screens today in Washington, DC, which is home to the largest population of Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia. There, the film finds its largest Ethiopian audience yet and hopefully an even larger audience of global development policymakers.

Breaking through conventional thinking

The film reminds me that the power of cinema lies in its ability to take an audience into your mind's eye. The film calls on all who see it to consider what lies beyond the binaries of technocratic frameworks.

Recently, The New York Times published the headlines "Why It Seems Everything We Think We Knew About the Global Economy is No Longer True." People are coming to understand the limits of conventional thinking in policy circles. We need new perspectives on growth, development and the global economy. Long-form storytelling enables us to delve deep into local communities' experiences. Everyday people on the

ground understand things that Washington- and London-based think tanks and international institutions easily ignore.

To be sure, this is not the first time we have realized that reality is complicated. Chimamanda Adichei warned us about the danger of a single story and Michel-Rolph Trouillot highlighted how perception can distort reality in his tour de force *Silencing the Past*. Yet we need many reminders because it is so easy to get stuck in lazy thinking, stereotypes, soundbites and echo chambers.

Made in Ethiopia invites audiences to practice perceiving the more complicated layers of China's expansion into Ethiopia. The film aims to give the viewer a more rounded understanding of what is going on and what exactly might make for a better life for ordinary Ethiopians.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]



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Can Venezuela Suddenly Transition to Democracy? Its People Hope So.

Leonardo Vivas
June 17, 2024

Venezuela morphed from democracy to dictatorship over the past 25 years. The people, rallying around María Corina Machado and the opposition, can vote for change in the July 28 presidential election. However, Nicolás Maduro's corrupt government could undercut its opponent with sneaky tactics. Can Venezuela really transition to democracy?

In the last 25 years, the possibility of a re-democratization in Venezuela has never come closer than it is now. Under the late Hugo Chávez and now Nicolás Maduro, the country transitioned from a full-blown democracy to a hybrid regime (or what some scholars dubbed “competitive authoritarianism”), to end up in a classic dictatorship. However, it is currently going through complex circumstances that have opened a certain possibility for a democratic comeback.

There have been other occasions where re-democratization came within reach. In 2002, the massive demonstrations and failed coup brought it closer, as well as the oil strike and recall referendum that followed. Then in 2013, Henrique Capriles Radonski lost the presidential election by a slim margin — allegedly, a number of irregularities caused this loss. Finally, in 2015, the government lost the National Assembly and the opposition coalition obtained a two-thirds majority, making it even more possible. All those cases brought opportunities for a transition.

But re-democratization was deterred by four main factors. The first was timing. In 2002-2003, the Bolivarian Revolution had momentum on its side, with a domestic followership majority and the beginning of the pink tide — Latin America's turn to left-wing governments. In 2015, while internal support had dwindled, the government still had strong organization, authority and control of other levers of power (judiciary, executive). Moreover, the opposition squandered the political capital gained.

The second factor was oil. During the three prior moments, high oil rents were crucial to delivering social goods: primary health care, expansion of government jobs and a long list of subsidies. The third was internal cohesion. In the prior situations, internal cohesion and strength were solid despite the purges of high-level bureaucrats such as Jorge Giordani and Rafael Ramírez. The fourth was the opposition misreading the need to negotiate and come to a minimum understanding with the reality of Chavista forces — followers of Chávez and his ideology — on the ground. In all cases, there was little disposition on the part of the opposition to recognize the inevitable weight of Chavismo in the country's political life despite the brutal power asymmetry between the two sides.

This time, however, the circumstances for re-democratization are stronger. There has been economic collapse. Chávez, the founder of his self-proclaimed “Socialism of the 21st Century,” died in 2013. His successor, Maduro, inherited a very sick economy. Despite having experienced the largest windfall of oil revenues in its history, the economy collapsed due to the destruction of the state-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela, SA (PDVSA)* oil company. Corruption ran amok, costing an estimated \$68-350 trillion. Mismanagement of the economy and most state activities — like electricity and water provision, and widespread nationalizations — also contributed.

This all led to hyperinflation and a drastic drop in people's access to food and medicine. This brought on a complex humanitarian crisis; most Venezuelans lost their normal livelihoods and started voting with their feet, abandoning the country in droves. Since around 2015, approximately 7 million additional Venezuelans have fled the country. Many have walked to neighboring countries like Colombia and Ecuador in freezing temperatures. Others have traveled the jungle and swampy region of the Darien between Colombia and Panama, before continuing their difficult trek to the United States Southern border.

Additionally, the nature of the regime has evolved from a hybrid regime to an open dictatorship. This fundamental change brought many terrible consequences: the persecution and banning of political opponents, the politicization of justice, repression of peaceful demonstrations, torture of political prisoners and even assassinations. These have all been strongly documented by United Nations agencies, and lately the intervention of the International Criminal Court. The latter ratified its decision to investigate the Venezuelan government for crimes against humanity.

Understandably, Chavismo as a political movement began shrinking, and its popular support is currently at its lowest. The latest purges, especially that of Tarek El Aissami (former Vice-President and CEO of PDVSA) rather than bringing greater coherence, have internally weakened the regime. It is also isolated in the international arena, with some of its primary allies in the region becoming critical of it or becoming weary of the regime's political posturing.

Historical accidents can be costly

Venezuela's dictatorship did not arise without a fight. In fact, ever since the new elite came to power, the opposition has tried almost every

strategy to overturn it. They've used democratic means like normal elections and recall referenda, as well as mass mobilization, including military coup attempts.

The last attempt to unseat the Chavista government ended in resounding defeat. It involved a cumbersome combination of the appointment of an interim president supported by a wide international coalition, who would then isolate, pressure and sanction the government. However, the interim government collapsed and the coalition dispersed, leaving all democratic forces in disarray. All along the government and opposition have held conversations, but have failed to reach a working political agreement. Evidently, the government had little to gain from them.

A new situation began taking shape in October 2023, during a negotiation attempt on the Caribbean Island of Barbados. Maduro's government had been holding separate conversations with the Venezuelan opposition and the US, seeking gains in two areas. On the one side, it aimed to reduce or even eliminate drastic personal and financial sanctions, with the latter mainly affecting the oil business. On the other, it sought to regain political legitimacy and international recognition, which fell off a cliff in the last decade. Maduro and his allies believed the time was ripe for presidential elections to take place. The opposition, divided into moderates and radicals, could participate under better conditions, but the government would still have the upper hand. No one could have anticipated that the odds would turn out so differently.

The main point agreed upon in Barbados was allowing the opposition to select their candidate with no disturbances. This led the US to lift a swathe of sanctions regarding oil production and distribution. Beginning in 2023, the main segment of the opposition, organized under the Platform of the Democratic Union (PUD), decided to run open

primaries to select a presidential candidate; anyone identified with rejecting Maduro could participate.

The National Commission for the Primaries ultimately decided to hold them on October 22, 2023, independently of the National Electoral Council (CNE). When these were first announced, Venezuelan morale for political participation was so low that the government felt confident the primaries would fail spectacularly for the opposition.

Everyone was in for a surprise. At her first opportunity, María Corina Machado, once the most radical and right-wing oriented of opposition leaders, shot to the top of the preferences. This began a cycle of mass mobilizations that has electrified the country ever since. Some opposition leaders, like Manuel Rosales, the moderate governor of the state of Zulia who previously ran against Chávez in the 2006 presidential election, opted not to run. Others, like two-time presidential candidate Capriles, initially participated but later abandoned the race. When the primaries date arrived, Machado earned roughly 93% of the vote. She became the presidential nominee and the undisputed leader of the reinvigorated opposition overnight.

Despite claims that she would call for abstention when facing disqualification — which occurred soon after — Machado has shown resilience and clarity in garnering support to the cause of re-democratization. While becoming a beacon of real change, she slowly let go of the more radical postures without abandoning her central theme (“Until the End!”), showing high tact and maneuver capacity.

Problems seldom occur in isolation

Since Machado began leading the polls, things have gone awry for Miraflores — Venezuela’s presidential palace. Against all odds and many

governmental maneuvers, the 2.4 million participants who voted in the primaries startled the governing coalition. To counter the impact, the government found the perfect excuse. Given a long-lasting dispute with neighboring Guyana over an important part of its territory, the government began a campaign rejecting any intervention by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). On December 3, 2023, it also organized a referendum to gain internal legitimacy, while mobilizing troops and building infrastructure on the Venezuelan side of the border.

The classic ruse of creating an international conflict to garner support at home was unsuccessful. Not only did the referendum end up failing, pulling fewer than 1.5 million voters (results were never officially published), but the government became more internationally isolated than ever. Recently elected Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who was an unquestionable ally of Maduro, reacted against the Venezuelan claim. He even mobilized Brazilian troops to the northern border with the two neighboring countries. The US profited from the occasion to offer Guyana its support, conducting joint operations with its military shortly after.

Worse, even Cuba, Venezuela’s staunchest regional ally, urged caution. Information from confidential Cuban sources indicates that Venezuela’s international move was internally rejected and that those at the helm recommended Maduro keep it only as a rhetorical, contentious issue. Itamaraty, the Brazilian foreign service, pressed both Venezuela and Guyana to meet face-to-face in Brasília on January 25, 2024.

Internally, things have not gone according to plan, either. Once the government disqualified Machado from running, it moved all its pawns to ensure that the final configuration, especially regarding who could run, would grant Maduro a guaranteed victory. According to most opinion

polls, Machado would beat Maduro 70% to 20%, and even a candidate chosen by her could beat him. So, when Machado chose as a surrogate Corina Yoris, a scholar who had participated as a member of the electoral commission for the primaries, the CNE blocked the online mechanism to prevent her from registering.

Only three candidates from the mainstream opposition were allowed to register. Governor Rosales stood as the only leader with a lower preference from the electorate than Maduro. Enrique Márquez, a former directive of the CNE, with a preference under 1%, was also allowed to run. Finally, Edmundo González Urrutia, a seasoned diplomat who had even served a few years under Chávez, ended up filling up the last slot. In the cumbersome Venezuelan electoral system, the latter played the role of caretaker of one of the three political parties duly registered, in case a different person was selected to run in his stead.

In the end, there was no consensus around Rosales — he was perceived to be a weak candidate by most organizations, not to mention the electorate at large. Instead of choosing an alternate candidate, the PUD unanimously agreed upon González Urrutia, a perfect stranger in Venezuela's politics. To everyone's shock, only a few days after being selected, González jumped to the top of the electorate's preferences.

Shuffling around potential scenarios

Transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes are tricky business. They tend to follow very original scripts. In Venezuela, the chances for a democratic opening are only beginning to bear fruit. They seem to begin with whatever happens on the election's voting day: July 28.

Up to this point, Machado remains the main political force in the opposition. She and the PUD

have continued campaigning with her at the helm, despite her not being a candidate. She instead calls constituents to vote for González Urrutia.

This odd circumstance responds to an odd election. Her displacements around the country have mobilized tens of thousands of diehard followers, whose cheers of support seem more akin to those of rockstar fans. But there is also organization behind the cheering. As Machado tours Venezuela, she stimulates the creation of local committees to support the coming activities on July 28, especially granting that the votes are duly processed despite government pressure.

With less than two months remaining before the final vote, the government is politically challenged. Electoral projections show no clear legal path for it to secure a win. It is also highly unlikely that Maduro will substantially increase his popularity among voters, which has created unease within the regime. However, there have been no conversations between the government and opposition to look ahead of election day. This is despite the fact that the Maduro-allied Colombian and Brazilian governments have formally suggested running a special referendum, which would provide full security for the losing party.

So, what could the Venezuelan government do to avoid handing its foes an electoral victory? There are several options:

It could disqualify González Urrutia's candidacy or the participation of the party behind it. Until now, the regime has used the Electoral Court of the Supreme Justice Tribunal to arbitrarily intervene in political parties and subject them to the Executive's domination, or to disqualify candidates. Despite prior disqualifications, there seems to have been strong international pressure in the case of the opposition's candidate.

It could take drastic measures against opposition leaders to stifle their operations in the campaign's final weeks. Machado could be accused of violating electoral laws by campaigning outside the legal time. Judging by what the government has done to her entourage — imprisoning several collaborators and forcing others to seek asylum — those actions might have been a dry run of a more drastic action against her.

It could manipulate as many as 2,000 polling centers stationed in isolated places or locations from which government organizations operate. This could amount to massive fraud to reduce the opposition candidate's advantage. Alternatively, the government could manipulate the high number of people registered to vote but living abroad, producing fraud that way.

Finally, it could postpone the election due to a border incident with Guyana, likely related to oil exploitation in the disputed zone or any other reason. This would not eliminate the risk of losing the election, but it could buy the government time to find a new solution. It could as well use a combination of all of the above.

What if the opposition wins?

If the opposition wins this election, there will be a drastic change in current trends, opening the door for a potential transition out of dictatorial rule. For now, despite the apparent nervousness among the governing elite, there are no signs that it is willing to relinquish power.

Such stubbornness does not merely reflect the classic power addiction, or hubris, exacerbated in authoritarian regimes. It also involves the high exit costs for Maduro and his close allies were they to leave power. They would not only have to abandon access to myriad business deals and the privilege to impose their will on an entire country; they may face sanctions from the US and European

countries. Even worse, some could risk prosecution from the International Criminal Court.

Losing the election would abruptly interrupt decades of them enjoying quasi-absolute power. At the same time, continuing in power is not devoid of costs. These include the responsibility to oversee an economically ravaged country; being isolated from those parts of the world where oil counts and being pressured to deliver to internal — legal and illegal — constituents, even if coffers are empty.

Regardless, there is a six-month gap between July 28 and Inauguration Day, which is scheduled for January 10, 2025. Even if González Urrutia is allowed to run and wins the election, there is a long period during which negotiations will take place as a matter of survival for both parties.

What could the rest of the year look like for Venezuela? Scenarios may vary depending on several factors. The vote totals obtained by González Urrutia and Maduro are crucial. If the difference between them is great, their respective leverage will vary. Naturally, this depends on the specific response by factions of the governing alliance, such as the military. On two prior occasions — when Chávez lost the referendum in 2007 and after the opposition legislative landslide occurred in 2015 — the military forced the acceptance of both results. Assuming that the difference between the two political camps is important but not too large, hard negotiations will probably begin over how to grant governance in a divided country.

It is still too early to assess how things might evolve. But regarding a potential negotiation, some positives and negatives are apparent. There are at least three noteworthy positives. First, there is a negotiating mechanism: the Barbados Agreement team. Though not without its faults, it has allowed for continued conversations. A clue in the

agreement is its coordinator from the opposition, Gerardo Blyde, a constitutional lawyer who is highly respected in the government.

Second, there is the sheer complexity of the domination exercised by the Chavista elite. It controls more than just the Executive; its tentacles reach the judiciary, the high command of the armed forces, the National Assembly and most governors and mayors. There have been hints at the local level that Venezuela's changing political mood is affecting the allegiance of public officials, judges, military officers etc. Allegedly, it is difficult for the regime's higher echelons to retain strict control of how most people will act.

Third, the role played by each segment of power differs. The president and his entourage of high-command officers might be actively in favor of retaining power. Meanwhile, other organs like judges or justices in the Supreme Justice Tribunal, as well as myriad state institutions, are more akin to blackmail victims. For example, in May 2024, CNE President Elvis Amoroso rejected the European Commission's decision to revoke sanctions imposed on directives of the Electoral Council. He argued that it was an attempt to buy his conscience. Information leaked soon after that the passports of the CNE directives were invalidated.

There are two negatives. First, all levels of government are mired in unprecedented degrees of corruption. The number of officials who have something to lose is probably massive. Second, if and when they abandon power, the likelihood of backlash and violence against them is also high. These factors seriously complicate negotiations. For these reasons, it makes sense why Colombian President Gustavo Petro suggested his aforementioned security referendum.

No matter what, we must wait for the final results on July 28, if the election does indeed take

place on that date. One thing is clear: If the opposition wins and a transition to democracy begins taking place in Venezuela, it could affect the balance of authoritarianism vs democracy in the world. After all, Chávez's election in 1998 represented the emergence of what later became the typical hybrid regime, copied and pasted in every continent. Can Venezuela really transition to democracy?

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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Post-Raisi Iran: A New Chapter in Iranian Politics

Reza Parchizadeh
June 18, 2024

Ebrahim Raisi's death can significantly alter the future leadership and direction of the Iranian regime. However, the regime's grip holds strong, with an uncertain future shaped by the tug of war between authoritarian and democratic forces.

The sudden death of Ebrahim Raisi, the Iranian regime's president, in a suspicious helicopter crash will disrupt the constructed succession plan for the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This disruption will not necessarily favor Khamenei's son Mojtaba Khamenei, as many might assume, but will instead create opportunities for Khamenei's adversaries, specifically the Reformists/Moderates and certain factions within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to influence or steer the succession process.

How Khamenei rose to power in Iran

Succession has occurred only once in the history of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900–1989), the first Supreme Leader of Iran, did not settle the issue of his succession while still alive for several reasons. First, as the supreme spiritual leader, he deemed it beneath himself to engage in a matter that would appear as political factionalism. Second, for a long time, nearly everyone accepted Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, a prominent cleric, as Khomeini's de facto successor. Third, towards the end of his life, Khomeini suffered from rapidly worsening cancer, which likely cut short any last-minute plans.

A close-knit group of three — Ahmad Khomeini, the supreme leader's son and confidant, Khamenei the president, and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of parliament — took charge of managing the succession issue. They plotted to rule together in a power-sharing arrangement, with Khamenei at the helm as leader, Rafsanjani as president and Ahmad carrying the torch of his father's legacy. However, the trio eventually fractured, and in a real-life cloak-and-dagger drama filled with hidden agendas and maneuvering, Khamenei outsmarted and eliminated his rivals, solidifying his position as the supreme and unchallenged leader.

Raisi's rise and fall reflects Khamenei's strategic planning

Khamenei has long tried to prevent his progeny and legacy from suffering the same fate that befell his predecessor's. To achieve this, he purged potential disruptors and handpicked loyalists years in advance to ensure a smooth succession.

Raisi's rise from obscurity wasn't about him becoming Supreme Leader. The establishment positioned him, not to succeed Khamenei specifically, but to guarantee the continuation of Khamenei's ideology, regardless of the next leader. Charisma wasn't Raisi's strong suit; in fact, he was utterly bland. But what he lacked in personality, he made up for tenfold in devotion to the regime and Khamenei. Therefore, if Mojtaba were to be groomed for leadership, Raisi would serve as his facilitator, not his competitor.

The death of Raisi disrupted Khamenei's plan. Speculation abounds as to who benefits from this, but those subjected to rounds of purges and consigned to the regime's margins are the most likely candidates, namely the so-called Reformists/Moderates and the disaffected parts of the IRGC.

In the first decade after the 1979 revolution, the future Reformists were among Ayatollah Khomeini's closest allies. They even called themselves the "Line of the Imam" in his honor. However, Ali Khamenei and his faction sidelined them starting in 1989. Their influence further diminished after the suspicious death of Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2017. Out of power, they pragmatically adopted the label "Reformist" and began to rebuild relations with the West.

Decades of exile haven't dimmed the ambitions of Iranian Reformists/Moderates. Based in Europe and North America, they haven't given up hope. They dream of replacing Khamenei with Western

backing and transforming the Islamist regime into a "moderate" version of itself. These figures remain active and any hiccups in Khamenei's succession plan could be their golden opportunity.

Within the Revolutionary Guards exists a shadowy contingent I call the Shadow Guards. Not all Guards are Khamenei loyalists. Some commanders have even challenged his authority or shown disapproval. These dissenters, if not eliminated, now operate on the regime's fringes. Khamenei further disrupts potential power grabs by rotating commanders. This creates an amorphous entity within the IRGC. Their loyalty isn't necessarily to Khamenei, but to the regime's core ideology. However, they see an opportunity to gain power when the leadership changes, and have reportedly begun making connections with former adversaries overseas.

The Reformists/Moderates and the Shadow Guards are finding common ground as the Iranian regime weakens. Both sides aim to preserve Iran as an authoritarian oligarchy, albeit through different tactics. The Reformists/Moderates cloak themselves in a liberal/leftist mask, while the Shadow Guards embrace ultranationalism. They both wield extensive media influence and strong lobbying power in the West. Their strategy is to co-opt elements of the monarchist opposition and establish a new elite to secure their control.

Iran's authoritarian grip endures

Post-Khamenei Iran will see Islam remain the foundation of the regime, with nationalism acting as a façade masking its Islamist core. Already, some monarchists advocate for Iran to revert from Alavid Shiism with revolutionary clerical rule to Safavid Shiism, where a Shah presides over a Shiite establishment. This regime will continue to exclude most people and parties from political participation. Followers of minority religions can expect continued poor treatment, if not outright

persecution. The regime's foreign policy and relationships with its neighbors and the West will remain a mystery in a box.

The democratic world must be on high alert. To derail Khamenei's criminal plans is undeniably attractive, but we cannot lose sight of the regime's systemic corruption. Simply removing the top leadership won't halt the tide of radicalism overflowing from Iran. It's a trap — just like replacing communists with nationalist remnants of the Soviet regime didn't solve its problems. Only a transition to a liberal democracy can normalize Iran and prevent future threats to its own people, its neighbors, and the global community.

[[Ali Omar Forozish](#) edited this piece]



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One Long Pratfall — Is Rish! Trying to Lose?

Pooka MacPhellimey
June 18, 2024

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has had an embarrassing campaign for the UK's July 4 election. He's made a lengthy list of blunders, like being drenched in his announcement speech and caught in a public lie. This multi-millionaire is even convinced he had a deprived childhood! He's trying to lose, right?

A pratfall is falling “flat on one's ass” for comic effect. This is a mainstay of slapstick comedy, much used by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, and notably the Keystone Kops, who became a byword for comic incompetence. The exclamation mark in the Rish! leadership campaign slogan has been redeployed to the “Oh, ****! What's he done now?” consternation of hapless Tory MPs, who hope desperately not to be unemployed in three weeks at Sunak's latest campaign efforts.

As one centrist conservative commentator, Henry Hill, put it: “Grassroots Conservatives will have their time to assess the disaster that is this campaign. They must be unsparing... Speaking to Conservative candidates and activists out in the country, it is hard to find one with a good word to say about the central campaign... The old cliché about lions being led by donkeys might have been a slander on Lord Kitchener, but it seems like a fair description of the 2024 Tory campaign.”

There's also somewhat of a theme to Rish!'s serial gaffes, a sense that he's not as clever as he and his advisors think he is — and they are, too.

Further, the press and public are far from as stupid as presumed.

It's hard to have much sympathy for those MPs — the survivors or beneficiaries of the Conservatives' purge of those who failed to be enthusiastic Brexshitters. They are broadly incompetent, mendacious or delusional. Most Brits (closer to the story than US enthusiasts) today regard Brexit as an utter fiasco, with as many as 61% thinking it a mistake and only 28% a good idea. As many as 56% are in favor of the UK rejoining the EU and a similar 28% are opposed.

Well before the Brexit referendum, Rish! was a proponent of leaving the EU — or rather, like a fantasy girlfriend, the EU of tabloid (and Boris Johnson) myth, not reality. But the “Get Brexit Done!” election of 2019 was such a massive victory for the Tories that, at the time, there were widespread predictions of unassailable Conservative majorities for a decade or more, two or even three election cycles into the future. They reckoned without the spectacular incompetence and provocative clumsiness of the three successive Tory Prime Ministers. Sunak was supposed to be a safe pair of hands after Liz Truss famously failed to outlast a lettuce — but will still manage the third-shortest premiership in modern history.

To be fair to Rish!, the prognosticators of 2019 ignored many things. Like that decades of underinvestment in the UK economy had left it in a parlous state. Or that the austerity policies of previous Tory governments had failed to shrink UK deficits, because they shrank growth faster than any reduction in spending. Or that the Brexit referendum result was heavily a protest vote against the social and economic consequences of that austerity, which Sunak as Chancellor mostly continued.

Tory privatization has turned into a long-term fiasco, too. One example is privatized water and

water treatment, which has resulted in 83% of British rivers flowing with, well, shit! The National Health Service, as close to a secular religion in Britain was and is similarly afflicted by underfunding and a dearth and exodus of EU citizen healthcare professionals as a result of Brexit. They also ignored what a talentless clique those Conservatives willing to enthuse about Brexit were. Post-2016 cabinets have been largely stuffed with buffoons, ignoramuses and toxic personalities. Moreover, Brexit and its predicted adverse consequences (aka “Project Fear”) have increasingly come true. It is, as many UK commentators note, the central campaign issue neither Tories nor Labour will mention.

But is Rish! trying to lose?

However, dealt a bad hand, Sunak has played it with a level of incompetence that leaves many wondering if he’s actively trying to lose. Start with the announcement: Despite having a new, large, plush and scandalously expensive press briefing room available to him, Sunak strode out to a lectern in the street outside Number 10 to announce the 4th of July election date. Oblivious to the umbrellas the gathered press hacks were huddling under, he was doused by a near-biblical downpour as his words were drowned out by a protestor with a loudspeaker playing Labour’s 1997 election anthem: “THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER!” Most of his cabinet had only been informed moments before. Though his parliamentary private secretary, Craig Williams MP, appears to have known that date for three days, allegedly using that insider knowledge just in time to place a winning bet with bookmaker Ladbrokes on it. If he did, it’s a crime under British law.

But the fiasco wasn’t over. He followed it with a fear-mongering speech — he mentioned “security” eight times — at London’s Excel conference center, which was forcibly attended by around 100

drafted Tory political aides and advisors. But not before a reporter from the usually Conservative-leaning Sky News had been unceremoniously ejected from the event!

The next day, at a warehouse rally, he took softball questions from two Tory white-collar councilors posing as manual workers — to be promptly found out by the local press — then traveled on to Belfast’s Titanic Quarter. This invited inevitable comparisons and questions as to whether he was captaining a sinking ship. But in pursuit of what? The Conservatives have no candidates in Northern Ireland!

Rish! then briefly appeared to recover in a TV debate with Labour leader Kier Starmer, where he repeatedly accused Labour of planning a tax rise of £2,000 per family. He smugly insisted on its veracity as independently costed and verified by the UK Civil Service. The glow lasted until the next morning, when a letter from the head of the Civil Service was released, stating that the number was by no means independent. There’s no kind way to put this: Sunak was caught loudly lying. Compounding the misery, the UK’s independent statistics agency is now investigating the Tory claims.

A perk of competent premiers seeking re-election is the opportunity to pose as a statesman bestriding the world stage. Rish! was afforded a golden opportunity: the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Normandy invasion. This wasn’t foregone by Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron, the newly crowned Charles III — even Volodymyr Zelenskyy and many others. Moreover, it offered perhaps the last opportunity to pose with centenarian survivors of one of the most pivotal moments of World War II, to borrow their honor for a moment. Sunak, though, found better things to do: Rish!ng away in a helicopter, he gave a pre-recorded interview to Sky News that he wouldn’t postpone. He left his opponent, Starmer, the photo-ops with Presidents

Biden and Macron, German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the President of the EU Council and 15 other national leaders, not to mention his new King. The next day, Rish! and the cabinet were forced on an apology tour for the disrespectful gaffe.

Rish!’s wealth doesn’t help

Could it get worse? Yes! Although his elders were Asian immigrants, essentially economic refugees from East Africa — rendering Sunak’s enthusiasm for deporting more modern migrants to Rwanda ironic — his parents were well-off. They were a doctor and pharmacy-owner, and his grandfathers were an accountant and a UK tax official awarded the MBE. They sent him to the expensive Public (i.e. private) School Winchester, a more discrete version of Eton, where he was “head-boy.” In the pre-recorded Sky interview that showed a week later, Sunak made efforts to suggest he had a deprived childhood. When an example was sought, the best he could come up with is that his parents denied him a Sky satellite television subscription! The suffering!

Additionally, the adult Rish!, a former Goldman banker and hedge funder, has a personal fortune north of \$100 million. Combine that with the value of his Infosys heiress wife, and his family worth is nearly \$1 billion. He regularly uses it to finance expensive commuting by helicopter to the family’s country mansion, supplemented by a large penthouse in Santa Monica with views of the famous pier. (It is widely rumored that the Sunaks plan to decamp here after losing the elections.)

Rish!’s by far the richest member of the UK Parliament. His denials are not helped by widespread rumors that the Sunak daughters are already enrolled for the fall semester in an expensive private school in California, coming from an eye-wateringly expensive school in England. People are suspicious that Sunak chose

not to wait until the last possible election date so the family could be safely installed before school started.

In a strange way, though, Rish! may be rescuing the Tories by inviting an even huger defeat. The biggest long-term electoral threat is a less than total Labour victory; the Liberal Democrats’ price for a coalition would be electoral reform and proportional representation, which most political analysts anticipate would doom the Conservatives as currently composed in future elections. Of course, those prognosticators may be ignoring the desperate state of the UK’s finances and economy Labour will likely inherit, or how long they can blame the Tories for that mess.

There is also little room for Labour complacency about its long term electoral prospects. Recent polling shows that though likely to win, both the “Tories and Labour [are] on course for [the] lowest share of the vote since 1945.” Labour may win a large majority, but like the Conservatives in recent elections, with a minority of the vote. Proportional representation would be hard on traditional Labour, too, for this reason is opposed by its left wing.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Pooka MacPhellimey (pseudonym) is a member of the devil class. He sits in a hut in the middle of a firwood, meditating on the nature of numerals. He reflects: “Answers do not matter so much as questions... A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question.”

Great Compassion Shines in Brazil Following Its Horrific Floods

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
June 19, 2024

Faced with its largest catastrophe, Brazil is uniting thousands of volunteers to help the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, which has suffered greatly. Solidarity between the victims, volunteers, NGOs and government is essential to aid over two million people suffering in the aftermath of severe flooding.

Terrible flooding engulfed the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, with record rainfall starting in late April and concluding in early May 2024. The data for the catastrophe are superlative. Flooding has killed over 100 people and affected 90% of the state's municipalities. Over two million inhabitants have been impacted — one in every 20 has had to move. Brazil's recovery bill is estimated to cost tens of billions of dollars and will last years. Additionally, the water has not yet fully receded. This is the country's largest territorial disaster.

But a huge positive development has occurred. A network of spontaneous solidarity has arisen in Brazil's other 25 states and the Federal District, forming the largest mobilization of donations and volunteerism in the country's history. In the month since the floods began, the Civil Defense has collected 2,000 tons of donations. The Services for the Underserved (S:US) volunteer bank has registered 70,000 records. These numbers showcase the virtuous circle of aid that has united the country.

Brazilians have proven to be generous during serious situations before. In the world solidarity ranking, the World Giving Index (2022), the country ranked 18th out of 119 nations for their contributions to helping strangers, donating money and volunteering. The figure reflected a time when the world was emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, a calamity that severely impacted Brazil. In the next year, 2023, political uncertainty and the population's impoverishment majorly reduced the country's giving; it fell to 89th place in the index.

“This contributed to a decrease in the population's participation in donations,” said Paula Iabiani, CEO of Integrated Disbursement and Information System (IDIS). Her company represents the ranking. At the current rate of collaboration in recent days, it is likely that the country will return to the top positions in 2024.

“We are being profoundly impacted by the experiences of other human beings. Cognitive and also emotional impact, linked to our ability to let ourselves be sensitized by what others experience. It touches on our affections and unconscious identifications. This is the primordial impulse for solidarity action,” said psychoanalyst Maria Homem.

As Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva celebrated on Twitter, this is the “largest movement of donations recorded in the history” of Brazil. Further, the chain that formed is multidisciplinary, going beyond the expected crisis professionals: doctors, firefighters, social workers and health professionals.

NGOs and volunteers show solidarity

One unexpected resource is SOS Rio Grande do Sul. This platform connects and updates the needs and availability of over 400 shelters across the state. A total of 1,300 volunteers work to meet the

flood victims' demands. They update the day-to-day life of the shelters, provide care for the children and collect and distribute supplies.

“The first few days were focused on rescues. But everything changes very quickly,” said Pedro Schanzer, a founder of the Porto Alegre-based operation. “I was putting donations in trucks, rescuing people in the floods, until I noticed that at each point I arrived, the desperation was so great that there was no single coordination. We set up a team that has adapted our actions according to the needs of each day.”

For the roughly 100,000 children displaced by the floods, the treatment must be different. Many have not only lost their homes, but dear things as well, like toys and pets. World Vision Brazil, a child care non-governmental organization based in São Paulo, has helped by putting together 15,000 “tenderness kits.” These kits aim to restore children’s emotional well-being by stimulating them with activities. They include a toy, coloring books, colored pencils and crayons, educational games, modeling clay and snacks. The organization has also assembled food baskets, hygiene kits and basic necessities.

“Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in the midst of crises, and often have no idea of the magnitude of the events they are experiencing. They find themselves away from home, family and friends, and are likely to be psychologically impacted by this crisis. Without an appropriate intervention, these events could leave lasting scars. We must respond now to ensure that they get the support they desperately need,” said Thiago Crucciti, director of World Vision Brazil.

Another group was created to provide care for a specific group. In the Cristo Redentor neighborhood of Rio Grande do Sul, the Solidarity Kitchen prepares meals in a shelter for pregnant and postpartum women. The volunteers receive

donations, buy supplies, assemble menus and organize the space. “We work with donations of food or by PIX,” said founder and publicist Kaká Cerutti.

In the city of Porto Alegre, the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) and Popular Youth Uprising collaboratively run the Azenha Solidarity Kitchen. Every day 60 volunteers use 22 stoves to prepare and distribute around 3,000 meals.

Solidarity transcends geographical boundaries and socioeconomic conditions. The Rio-founded Central Única das Favelas (CUFA) organization proves it; it promotes integration and social inclusion in Brazilian communities, as well as 15 other countries. It mobilized a humanitarian operation that in two weeks collected 20,000 cleaning kits; 25,000 personal hygiene kits; 20,000 liters of water; five carts of food; 30,000 bath kits and 30,000 mattresses.

Individuals can make a difference, too. Firefighter Robinson Luiz Jobim Rosa did an extraordinary service; while his own house was flooded in São Leopoldo, he evacuated 200 people stranded at the Canoas Emergency Hospital. “Saving people in their time of need and distress is part of our routine. I keep working because that’s our mission,” he said.

Jobim Rosa still doesn’t know how he’ll recover from the flood. Fortunately, his three children and their mother were elsewhere when the water flowed into their home. “The only one at home at the time was my dog, who was rescued by a neighbor,” he mentioned.

A similar story involved police officer Roberto Kaminski in Lajeado. When he saw the water rushing into his apartment on the second floor, he went to rescue an elderly couple on the third floor.

With the help of a neighbor, he took what he could carry to two empty apartments on the fourth floor. “I must have climbed about 150 times. By the end I was exhausted. I didn’t manage to rescue everything I wanted in time,” he explained.

In Santa Cruz do Sul, police officer Everton Toillier prioritized saving items belonging to his one-year-old daughter. When he heard a neighbor’s call for help, he immediately swam out and rescued a lady who was clinging to a tree, and saved her dog as well. “I managed to get them both to a boat and went back home to try and rescue my daughter’s belongings,” he stated.

Many helpful volunteers started out with one mission and ended up on another, like Edu Leporo, founder of the NGO Moradores de Rua e Seus Cães (MRSC). Based in São Paulo, the photographer and activist traveled to the South to assist animals during the floods. “You see whole families on the streets, not knowing where to go. The problem will get worse when the water recedes and people want to go back to their homes and start again,” he stated. “We went ahead: we bought a trailer, a truck, squeegees, brooms, shovels, detergent, disinfectant and floor cloths to help.”

In Porto Alegre, Leporo relies on the NGO’s volunteer veterinarian Audrei de Oliveira Souza. The assistance forces rescued 11,500 animals by midweek, including the symbol of the resistance: a horse named Caramelo. “The rescue team is exhausted, tired and cold. Some are getting sick. But they remain tireless in their search for human and animal survivors,” Leporo described.

Christian Kristensen, the coordinator of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS) Center for Studies and Research into Trauma and Stress, helped the rescuers. He identified several cases of burnout, the physical and emotional exhaustion caused by work

situations, among them. “Some because they’ve been overworked, even physically, others because of the emotional overload in the face of so much suffering. Even compassion fatigue, a term we use for this moment,” he explained.

Artists unite to help

Technological resources have helped mitigate the nightmare. “How can the hyperconnection of mobility and communication be used favorably? How can we solve global problems with specific regional effects?” Maria Homem asked. “The awareness that we are one people and one species mobilizes us in an unprecedented way.”

Artists and public figures are some of the most adept at navigating networks and platforms. In the disaster’s first days, Lucas Silveira, lead singer of the Brazilian band Fresno, led his colleagues in a solidarity concert. He was born in Ceará but raised in Porto Alegre, making this tragedy personal to him. In just a few hours, he raised 2.5 million reais (\$460,000).

“What’s happening is something of unprecedented proportions. I saw my neighborhood on TV and a guy passing in front of my house in a boat. It’s mind-boggling,” Silveira stated, thinking about the next steps. “There’s a task force that’s going to get thousands of volunteers to clean the houses. We’ve bought more than a hundred pressure washers at cost, which will be very useful for cleaning up when the water recedes.”

Other big names in music have announced actions to help. On July 7 and 9, Chitãozinho & Xororó, Zezé Di Camargo & Luciano and Leonardo & Luísa Sonza will host their classes at Allianz Parque in São Paulo. The proceeds will go toward repairing the damage. “Helping is urgent and meeting basic needs is the least we need right

now. Today, regardless of where we are, we want to save the South,” Sonza said.

Another benefit concert was held on May 22 at Vivo Rio, in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro. It brought together singers Paula Toller, Ney Matogrosso, Rogério Flausino, Milton Guedes, Fernanda Abreu, Leo Jaime and Kleiton & Kleidir, as well as the rock band Barão Vermelho.

During the first week of rain, comedian and presenter Fabio Porchat started a collection campaign. He gathered tons of drinking water, bed and bath linen and warm clothes to distribute in the South. “Donating should be the norm, not the exception,” he told ISTOÉ. “It’s worth donating time, money, image, whatever. If we want a functioning community, we need to do our bit to help others.”

The mobilization to help the Brazilian South has crossed borders and reached some of the world’s leading artists. Beyoncé’s foundation BeyGOOD, which supports some Brazilian initiatives, has stepped up its work to encourage collaboration. The band Metallica donated \$100,000 (about 514,000 reais) to the victims. The band Guns N’ Roses has been promoting Brazil Found’s Light Alliance Emergency Fund for donations.

The Brazilian government plans a solution

During the second week of flooding, the people of Rio Grande do Sul received good news from the Brazilian capital of Brasília. On his third visit to Porto Alegre, President Lula announced the creation of the Ministry to Support the Reconstruction of Rio Grande do Sul. It will be headed by Paulo Pimenta, who was the Minister of the Social Communication Secretariat. The ministry’s mission will be to define the state’s reconstruction plan, distributing tasks to other ministries and demanding results.

The minister of the Civil House, Rui Costa, explained that the Brazilian government will expand the Minha Casa, Minha Vida (“My Home, My Life”) program — which provides a swath of affordable housing units to Brazilians — in the affected cities with the purchase of properties. The government will also direct others that were going to be auctioned by Caixa and Banco do Brasil to replace those that the floods destroy.

The National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM) estimates that 102,000 homes were affected by the floods — 93,000 damaged and 9,000 destroyed. Many families will need help buying basic goods, such as a stove, fridge and bed. To this end, the government proposes financial aid of 5,000 reais (\$920) for 100,000 families. The homeless who lost their income in the floods are to be included in the Bolsa Família income transfer program, with average monthly aid of 672 reais (\$123).

The state’s debt to the federal government has been suspended for three years, which will generate savings of 23 billion reais (\$4.2 billion), including monthly payments and interest for the period. The Porto Alegre city government plans to build a temporary city for homeless families close to the city center. Located in the Porto Seco neighborhood, it will have capacity for 10,000 people. This city will have accommodations, a communal kitchen, toilets, garbage collection and a leisure area, to receive people assisted in the current shelters. Canoas, Guaíba and São Leopoldo will receive similar facilities.

The initiative is inspired by a recovery project that helped the US state of Louisiana recover from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The consulting firm Alvarez & Marsal, which specializes in the reconstruction of damage caused by extreme events, was hired after the hurricane to draw up an assistance plan. Former president Dilma Rousseff, who is from Minas Gerais but built her political

career in Rio Grande do Sul, is currently in charge of the New Development Bank, known as the BRICS Bank. She opened a 5.75-billion-real funding line for the state's reconstruction work.

During the week, the plenary of the Federal Senate fast-tracked the approval of a bill that creates guidelines for drawing up climate change adaptation plans. The intention is to adopt measures to reduce environmental, social and economic vulnerability in episodes of climate upheaval. "In addition to actions and public policies that affect real life, we need to improve the mental health support network, because we are discovering that psychic life is just as important and can have just as many effects on reality as concrete life," Maria Homem recalled. "Solidarity is the most important good at this time and should be deepened if we want a fairer, more developed and interesting country."

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Luiz Cesar Pimentel is the editor of the weekly magazine *Istoé*, the second largest in Brazil. He has worked in communications for 25 years, focusing on digital, strategy and transmedia storytelling. Luiz led the Brazilian operations of MySpace, Jovem Pan and R7. His career has seen him work as a reporter for Folha de S. Paulo, Carta Capital and TRIP magazine, as well as the manager of UOL and an international correspondent in Asia.

Tribunals Challenge Climate Peril and Can Really Aid Activists

Nafees Ahmad
June 20, 2024

Climate rights activists are a vital part of the international community. Recently, they have secured a historic opinion on greenhouse gases from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and opinions from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice are coming down the pipeline. Yet these activists are too often subjected to intimidation, legal harassment and even violence.

The most critical problem of today is disaster-driven human displacement (DHD) caused by the climate.

Climate change catastrophically impacts every place on Earth. It exacerbates the degradation of ecosystems, natural catastrophes, harsh weather, rising sea levels, droughts, the spread of disease, land grabs, human displacement and climate conflict. These global effects jeopardize our complete enjoyment of many human rights, such as the rights to life, food, shelter, health care, safe drinking water, culture, employment and development.

We have reached a turning point in the history of DHD. Climate activists have launched several promising legal actions globally, including numerous requests for advisory opinions from international and regional courts and tribunals.

Understanding advisory opinions

The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have all been asked for their advisory judgments about states' obligations in light of the climate emergency.

The three mechanisms are fully operational. On May 21, 2024, ITLOS published an advisory opinion. It declared that because greenhouse gas emissions contaminate the seas, states have to take all necessary steps to avoid, reduce and limit them. In December 2023, as part of its advisory opinion process, the IACtHR held in-person public hearings and accepted hundreds of amicus papers, and final hearings took place on May 20. Finally, states and international organizations have submitted written comments to the ICJ ahead of its June 24 deadline.

These are historic initiatives. The world looks to these tribunals for direction on what states should do to address the climate disaster. Furthermore, these processes offer a critical chance to strengthen environmental defenders' safeguards.

Climate protection activism: vital yet targeted

Climate rights activists defend our world from catastrophe in various ways. They peacefully oppose extractive industries, conventional agricultural methods, media, legislation, land management and other strategies. They help us adapt and mitigate climate change through their endeavors.

One study reveals that activists who employ multiple strategies have a higher success rate of up to 27%. Those who use only one tactic “[contribute] to halt environmentally destructive and socially conflictive projects, defending the

environment and livelihoods” in 11% of climate conflicts.

Climate rights activists defend human rights in addition to the Earth. “Human rights defenders in environmental matters [strengthen] democracy, access rights and sustainable development,” acknowledged by the Escazú Agreement.

Unfortunately, this valuable service is often met with heinous opposition. These activists are the most frequently targeted climate rights defenders. They suffer many attacks, which often go unreported. These include assault, criminalization, smear campaigns, forced evictions and displacement, intimidation and judicial harassment. Opponents even employ strategic lawsuits against public participation to discourage their activism, or silence them through murder.

These threats inhibit climate rights activists from continuing their brave mission of addressing global warming. The hostile atmosphere opposes international legal norms on free speech and assembly rights. We need states to safeguard these people so they can uphold their commitments to climate change mitigation and human rights protection. Further, we need laws that require states to grant climate rights activists more protection.

To address the unique challenges experienced by climate activists who belong to marginalized groups — namely women, indigenous peoples, the African and Asian diasporas and rural agricultural communities — states should adopt an intersectional or “compartmentalized” approach to these laws. According to Michel Forst, the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders of the Aarhus Convention, this entails “acknowledging that defenders are interconnected.”

Defending the defenders

Fortunately, some members of the international community are defending these activists and their civic space. Lawyers from Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights (RFKHR) group and several international organizations wrote a submission to the ICJ and an amicus brief to the with the goal of advancing the protection and analysis of climate defenders. During the IACtHR proceedings in Manaus, Sofía Jaramillo, the senior staff attorney for Civic Space, gave a presentation to emphasize the connection between environmental defenders and the states' duties on human rights and the environment. The American legal team petitioned the IACtHR asking the Department of Justice to look into the 2023 murder of climate activist Manuel Esteban "Tortuguita" Páez Terán through legal representation.

RFKHR has co-hosted several events, including a virtual side event on the IACtHR advisory opinion procedure and a webinar on climate defenders. On May 3, World Press Freedom Day, RFKHR highlighted climate journalists' risks on social media and specific incidents involving climate defenders on the Civic Space Case-Tracker. The tracker has brought attention to the continuous persecution of Ugandans who are participating in protests against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP).

The ICJ and IACtHR processes are still underway. The oral hearings are scheduled for late 2024 or early 2025. After concluding its public hearings on the advisory opinion, the IACtHR is anticipated to release its conclusion next year.

Through these actions, the tribunals and courts will have an unmatched opportunity to advance their jurisprudence in this area, fortify the safeguards for climate defenders and confront the global warming emergency. These rulings will do more than just elucidate the responsibility of states

concerning climate change and human rights. The precedent they set will shape public policy and climate litigation for posterity.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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FO° Crucible: Money Matters in a Multipolar World, Part 5

Peter Isackson, Alex Gloy, Edward Quince
June 21, 2024

We continue Fair Observer's new feature focused on the shifting landscape of international payments and one of the major dramas of this decade: dedollarization. It began as a private dialogue between members of our team and experts in our circle who are keenly tuned into the mysteries of our monetary and banking systems. Our dialogue that began in April continued with a new contribution from Alex.

As has become clearer in recent months, any discussion of the dollar and its place in the history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century must take into account a curious entity that emerged exactly 50 years ago: the petrodollar. Alex opened the debate with the following message:

Shortly after our email exchange I came across the chart below, and it led to an epiphany. Iranian Oil production over the past 3 years. Let me explain.

Over a short time period, Iranian crude oil production increased by roughly 50%, from around two to around three million barrels per day (mbpd) — which is not much in the big scheme of global oil (estimated at 103 mbpd). But the oil market is extremely sensitive to small imbalances between supply and demand.

Why? Oil is a toxic substance. Once it's out of the ground, it needs to be stored or transported. Oil storage is expensive relative to its value. Salt caverns are the cheapest means of storage, around \$0.50 per barrel per month. In periods of oversupply, those fill up first. Then it's above-ground storage, \$0.50–\$1.50 per month. Then it's storage “at sea” (on oil tankers), which can be up to \$2.50 per month. Just when there is too much oil, storage gets expensive. So you could see oil trading at \$40, and annual storage cost at $12 \times \$2 = 24$. It eats up more than HALF of the value of your oil! In one year!

That's why there is no limit to how low the price of oil can fall (even turning negative briefly during COVID). The place of delivery for West Texas Intermediate crude oil futures is Cushing, Oklahoma, a landlocked place far away from any ocean. If you bought one crude oil futures contract at a negative price, you'd think this would be a great thing. But no. You now have to take delivery of 1,000 barrels (159,000 liters) of a toxic

substance in Cushing. All the above-ground oil storage bins (seen here from space) are full, and so are the pipelines. You now have a huge problem.

Supply does not react quickly to price swings. A \$1 billion offshore rig requires a bunch of highly skilled engineers, often making \$200,000 a year. If you shut that rig down, you lay off those engineers. You might never be able to get them back once production is projected to restart. That's why you just keep producing, no matter what.

The same applies to demand. After oil in storage has been depleted, prices rise. Are you going to stop driving to work because gasoline prices went up 50 cents? Who will choose to take cold showers or not fly to that conference? Maybe you will begin to consider carpooling if gasoline prices double or triple. A huge price move is needed before demand destruction can begin. That's why oil prices are so volatile. Supply and demand are quite inelastic.

Because demand is so hard to control, it's important to control supply. The Saudis can reportedly produce at \$2 a barrel. US shale is profitable only above \$40–\$60. To become a major oil producer, and, recently, major exporter of hydrocarbons, the US requires a high oil price. How do you ensure a high oil price? You need to suppress other countries' production to prevent imbalances.

It is therefore no surprise that countries with the largest oil reserves in the world (Venezuela, Russia) are heavily sanctioned. Venezuela is sitting on the largest oil reserves in the world! Yes (almost) none of it gets extracted!

The Saudis are exempted. They are our “friends.” They play the role of safety valve whenever there is an oil shortage. For this privilege, they (rather, the royal family) are loyal to the US. They pay for this privilege by

purchasing large amounts of US weapons/fighter jets, etc., and by accommodating Israel.

Iran and Iraq have the potential to produce six million barrels per day. This would upset the apple cart. It needs to be prevented. A war between these two countries (1980–1988), if it could happen once again, would be the “easiest” way. (Of course, it won’t happen again). Which brings us back to Iran and its recent increase in oil production. The US needed a reason to go after Iran’s oil industry. Nuclear must go, too. Probably less out of fear of nuclear armament than the fact that nuclear power plants would decrease domestic consumption of hydrocarbons and therefore increase Iran’s export potential.

The US didn’t want to bomb Iran directly, probably out of fear of retaliation. Hence it got Israel to do it. Israel needed a pretext, hence the (unprovoked) attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus. It was clear that Iran would have to respond. The provocation was intended. In exchange for attacking Iran, Israel gets a free hand in Gaza. The twisting and turning of the US press secretary, Admiral John Kirby, as he deflects any criticism of Israel’s actions speaks volumes.

It’s about the oil. Always has been, always will be. Contrary to common belief, the US does not want a low oil price. It needs a high oil price. It needs it first of all to make domestic production possible, and second, to force non-US oil importers to purchase dollars — to pay for oil, which is traded in US dollars (USD). This is the only way to run large twin deficits (fiscal and trade) without killing the currency.

Alex has taken us into the thick of things, revealing a deeper logic about why the US needs to defend the dollar’s pre-eminent position in global markets. He thus reminds us that there is one market that is still literally the lubricant of all

markets and the international payments system as a whole.

Ed Quince responded to Alex a few days later, noting that the poker game around oil does indeed occupy the central position, which leads him to question Washington’s style of play. If it is truly interested in maintaining the dollar’s dominance over time, logic would require that it change that style. He offers some practical advice to the decision-makers in Washington, which probably will not be followed. Even if it were, he sees the projected lifespan of the “almighty dollar” as just ten more years at best.

Just one point to watch: If the folks in power in the USA are truly responsible and want the dollar to retain its reserve currency status a little longer, Russian, Chinese, Iranian and Venezuelan banks should be invited, lured, pulled, coerced or forced back into USD-denominated energy trade.

Doing so will probably buy the dollar another decade, give or take — it’s hard to tell exactly. Not doing so intensifies the ongoing and accelerating flight to other currencies.

At this point, only a complete rollback of all unilateral (and therefore illegal) economic sanctions and the de-weaponization of the Western financial system can save the USD. A law or, better yet, a constitutional amendment comprehensively prohibiting the use of the dollar and finance as a weapon is needed to achieve this goal. Since this is extremely unlikely, the end of the dollar’s dominant position is something we will unfortunately witness in our lifetime.

One could argue that the fundamental factor upholding the dollar’s status — namely, trust in American, British and European finance — has eroded. Run.

Alex responded to Ed's pessimism by reminding him that he had in his possession a book from the 1970s with the title *The End of the Dollar*. He added these thoughts:

Doesn't mean it won't eventually happen. Just saying that the USD has been declared dead for a long time.

He agreed with Ed that the propensity of the masters in Washington to confiscate USD reserves can only increase the motivation of BRICS+ countries to search for alternatives. But he insists that any alternative will encounter some serious obstacles.

Somebody has to supply a reserve currency (RC) to other countries. This can happen in 3 ways:

1. Country with RC runs a trade deficit, hence "exports" RC in exchange for goods and services received from other countries. This leads to indebtedness of the RC-supplying country over longer periods of time and, usually, financial ruin. This is now happening in the case of the US.
2. Foreign countries purchase assets (real estate, stocks, bonds) of RC-supplying country, receiving RC in exchange (this is also happening in the US).
3. Foreign countries just "create" RC in the private banking sector. For example, the Eurodollar, or even dollars created by Ecuador (which has officially dollarized). The problem: Those dollars have no lender of last resort. The banks are dependent on "real" dollar swap lines by Fed. But those only extend to "friendly" countries. Ecuador was not among them, and, consequently, went bankrupt.

The dollar is, of course, being weaponized, but it remains an extremely convenient means of exchange for so many participants in the world economy.

Pricing commodities in currencies other than USD would be a first step. Still, that leaves the problem of supplying whatever new currency would serve as RC. China, as a net exporter, has a trade surplus, which makes it difficult to export its currency. With a relatively closed capital account, it is very unlikely to attract financial flows.

The Eurozone has an open capital account, but is also a surplus area.

I don't see any other currency that exists today to be able to serve as an alternative to the USD.

An "artificial" currency, like the IMF's Special Drawing Rights, or something partially backed by gold might work, but it would, of course, require a broad consensus among trading partners (which might fail because of the US veto).

Join the debate

The debate rages on. This is not simply about which choice of payment is more attractive or more efficient. As both Alex and Ed demonstrate, the geopolitical dimension will continue to play a determining role. When it comes to the way the world works, Bill Clinton's adviser James Carville is wrong: It isn't "the economy"; it's the geopolitics, "stupid!" Or, rather, as Alex and Ed have pointed out, it's the place where economics and geopolitics meet.

Money Matters..., is dedicated to developing this discussion and involving all interested parties.

We invite all of you who have something to contribute to send us your reflections at dialogue@fairobserver.com. We will integrate

your insights into the ongoing debate. We will publish them as articles or as part of the ongoing dialogue.

*[Fair Observer’s “Crucible of Collaboration” is meant to be a space in which multiple voices can be heard, comparing and contrasting their opinions and insights in the interest of deepening and broadening our understanding of complex topics.]



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Is Mainstream Tourism a Good Way to Save Helpless Antarctica?

Lorena del Castillo, Reinier van Oorsouw
June 24, 2024

On our tour of Antarctica, we learned the importance of conservation efforts. Climate change catastrophically affects the continent’s wildlife and climatic phenomena, which play major roles globally. Though imperfect, these tours open visitors’ eyes to Antarctica’s beauty. Can they spread the news about the continent’s dire situation?

Departing from Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in South America, we embarked on an Abercrombie & Kent (A&K) cruise to Antarctica. With us was a crew of experts in their fields — research scientists, marine biologists and seasoned Antarctic guides. What unfolded was no mere travel experience, but a stark confrontation with the effects of global warming in one of Earth’s most remote, pristine environments.

In this piece, we delve into three critical aspects of the impacts of climate change in Antarctica’s landscape: the rising temperatures of the Southern Ocean, the diminishing capacity of the Antarctic ecosystem in mitigating carbon dioxide levels and the warming ocean’s impact on fauna populations. Despite the urgency of these issues, public awareness remains disturbingly low. Scientists sound the alarm, urging for greater attention and

action. They recognize that the changes occurring in Antarctica have far-reaching consequences that are affecting communities across the world, and could become global disasters.

We also address the potential of conscious tourism as a powerful tool for conservation efforts. While the industry can introduce hazards to the Antarctic ecosystem, it offers promising opportunities for scientific research and public awareness. These should be considered in the endeavor to save the continent.

Navigating climate change in Antarctica's warming waters

We found ourselves cruising in the Southern Ocean, also known as the Antarctic Ocean. We were eager to experience the pure beauty of Antarctica firsthand. These expeditions primarily take place during Antarctica's summer season, from December to February, when the weather is warmest and ice sheets don't block ships. As we braved the ocean, a dramatic shift occurred around 60° South latitude. This is the Drake Passage, a narrow stretch of water between Cape Horn, Chile and the Antarctic Peninsula. Here, we entered the area known as the Antarctic Convergence Zone, which functions as a natural boundary for wildlife. In this zone, the Antarctic Circumpolar Current (ACC) meets the waters of the Pacific, Atlantic and Southern Oceans.

Amidst this natural spectacle lies a troubling reality. Each summer reveals rising temperatures in Antarctica, highlighting the urgent need to combat climate change. Antarctic research stations have recorded unprecedented temperature highs in recent years. In 2020, Argentina's Esperanza station marked a record high of 18.3° C (64.94° F). In 2022, the Concordia station, which is jointly operated by France and Italy, observed an alarming temperature peak of 47° C (116.6° F). These temperature fluctuations underscore the disturbing

meteorological anomalies that are occurring in Antarctica.

The temperature peaks are disrupting the ACC, altering the exchange of carbon dioxide between the oceans and the atmosphere. This amplifies the warming and changes oceanic patterns. Moreover, as temperatures continue to rise, ice sheets in Antarctica melt rapidly. Since 2023, a substantial portion of Antarctic ice — equivalent to the size of Greenland — has melted away.

Antarctica's global warming mitigation is in jeopardy

The melting of ice sheets is primarily attributed to the warming of the ocean. This sets off a series of immediate consequences with significant cause-and-effect for the global weather. One effect is the decrease in the Earth's overall albedo — its surface reflectivity. Essentially, when sunlight hits ice sheets, a large portion of it is bounced back into space, contributing to cooling. However, as ice coverage in Antarctica decreases, the ice loses its ability to reflect solar radiation effectively. This results in less cooling and more solar energy being absorbed directly by the ocean, further warming it.

Ice sheets act as a protective barrier, insulating the cooler environment beneath and aiding in temperature regulation. Their presence enhances this reflective quality, fostering cooler temperatures and supporting crucial algae growth vital to the Antarctic ecosystem. The declining sea ice coverage diminishes the environment that supports algae development, resulting in a decline in algae growth. This decline negatively impacts the ocean's capacity to absorb greenhouse gasses. Algae serves as a primary food source for krill, so its decrease reduces the krill population.

Beyond their significance to the Antarctic ecosystem, krill also play an invaluable role in mitigating climate change. After consuming algae

that have absorbed atmospheric carbon dioxide at the sea surface, vast swarms of krill migrate to deeper waters. There they excrete waste, effectively sequestering tremendous amounts of carbon in the ocean depths. This process plays an essential role in combating rising temperatures.

Another serious concern arising from climate change is ocean acidification, often referred to as the “stepchild of global warming.” Approximately 30% of the carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere eventually enters the oceans, boosting acidity levels. The cold waters of the Southern Ocean facilitate this process by absorbing a vast amount of carbon dioxide, intensifying the acidification process. This gravely threatens krill, as it hampers their ability to complete their growth cycle.

Additionally, acidic oceans present challenges for corals and mollusks in constructing and maintaining their structures. This affects marine food webs, which impacts a variety of wildlife.

The shifting landscape for Antarctica’s wildlife

The looming specter of climate change was impossible to ignore while sailing through the Southern Ocean. Though we took our journey during the Antarctic summer, the temperatures during our visit ranged from 0°-5° C (41° F). This is akin to any other autumn day in our native Netherlands. We could not help but ponder how this milder weather affects the inhabitants of this environment.

Two days after setting sail from Ushuaia, we made our first landfall at Brown Bluff beach, one of Antarctica’s northernmost points. Following a disinfectant bath that ensured no organic material from our clothes would reach the Antarctic Peninsula, we hopped on a Zodiac boat and rode to the beach. A fierce wind bit our skin, but we

pressed on. Through the mist, we had our first penguin sightings.

Our arrival on the continent was immediately rewarding. We landed amidst a colony of Adélie penguins and ice rocks on the beach. The birds waddled past, seemingly indifferent to our presence. As we continued exploring the wonders of Antarctica, encounters with its unique wildlife, such as whales, seals and birds, punctuated our trip. Following the Adélie penguin colony discovery at Brown Bluff, we spotted elephant seals on President’s Head at Snow Island and witnessed a Gentoo penguin colony in Neko Harbor.

The scientific experts on our expedition explained to us the profound impact global warming has on these Antarctic species. Despite appearing indifferent to our presence at Brown Bluff, Adélie penguins are exceptionally vulnerable to these environmental shifts. Between 2012 and 2022, their population declined by 40%, highlighting the urgency of their situation. The warming temperatures that melt sea ice gravely endanger their survival.

Adélie penguins are not alone in facing these challenges. Emperor penguins, also adapted to colder climates, have encountered significant setbacks in recent years. With diminishing ice cover, penguins are forced to venture farther into the sea in search of prey, expending precious energy in the process. This leads to reduced food intake for themselves and their chicks, exacerbating the problem of hunger and chick mortality. Furthermore, warmer weather brings increased snowfall, burying penguin eggs and making chicks vulnerable to hypothermia. The loss of suitable nesting sites due to melting ice reduces their chance of successfully breeding.

Antarctic marine mammals are also challenged by climate change. As ocean temperatures rise,

their food sources are impacted. For instance, whales, heavily reliant on krill for sustenance, are particularly vulnerable to these changes. Any disruptions in krill population or behavior cascades throughout the ecosystem, jeopardizing the entire Antarctic food chain.

Luciana Motta, a marine mammal expert and ecologist who joined our expedition cruise, shed light on the profound difficulties these animals encounter in adapting to shifting hunting grounds and habitats. Not only is global warming a factor, but increasing fishing activities and competition for food resources also threaten the broader marine ecosystem. This can potentially lead to the extinction of certain species.

With global warming increasing Antarctic temperatures, critical food sources such as krill are dwindling. This places species like the Weddell seal, leopard seal and minke whale at risk. Motta emphasized, “Effective communication of research findings is crucial to convey the urgency of conservation efforts and advocate for policy changes aimed at mitigating the impacts of climate change on Antarctic biodiversity.”

Climate change’s reach from the southern continent to our doorstep

Changes unfolding in Antarctica hold severe implications for communities worldwide. Despite this, awareness of these realities remains limited. James McClintock, a senior researcher at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) who has participated in over 30 Antarctic expedition cruises, described this disconnect: “People in the United States and elsewhere are often disconnected from the realities of Antarctica, resulting in a lack of interest. Consequently, there is widespread ignorance regarding the importance of this continent in maintaining the environmental balance for the rest of the planet. The general public is largely unaware that the developments in

Antarctica today are already impacting the rest of the world.”

Low-lying island nations already grappling with limited resources are especially vulnerable to the consequences. Rising sea levels relentlessly encroach upon their shores, eroding land and menacing communities. Traditional practices like subsistence hunting, observed in regions such as Alaska and Greenland, are challenged as animals adapt to changing migration routes.

Coastal areas like Bangladesh experience intensified salinity — water saltiness — levels due to rising sea levels, which impedes agricultural productivity. Erratic weather patterns influenced by the rising temperatures in the Southern Ocean include heavy rainfall, prolonged droughts and destructive floods. These present an obstacle for farmers and worsen food insecurity.

From Alaska to Alabama, communities confront the specter of famine, relocation and erosion precipitated by these changes.

Conscious tourists can advocate for Antarctica

The surge in tourism to Antarctica has sparked concerns about its environmental impact. According to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), over 100,000 people visited Antarctica between December 2023 and March 2024. This comprised approximately 32,000 cruise tourists and 71,000 landing visitors. This number represents a 42% increase from the previous season of 2022-2023 and prompts scrutiny of its potential impacts on the Antarctic ecosystem.

IAATO stands as a beacon for responsible tourism in Antarctica. Founded in 1991 by a consortium of private tour operators, its mission is clear: to regulate and guide tourism activities in a manner that safeguards the continent’s fragile

ecosystem. However, despite its noble intentions, IAATO's guidelines remain voluntary rather than mandatory. While many adhere to its principles, some choose to operate independently. They could compromise the continent's environment for commercial gain.

A 2022 study revealed alarming findings, indicating elevated concentrations of black carbon in the snow around popular tourist sites. This soot, originating from tourism activities, accelerates snow melting, worsening the effects of global warming. Additionally, the accidental introduction of non-native species and pathogens by tourists threatens Antarctica's endemic flora and fauna. This occurred in 2023, when the continent experienced its first ever avian flu outbreak.

However, tourism could contribute to the conservation of Antarctica. When travelers experience the region's breathtaking beauty and recognize its vulnerability firsthand, they become more acutely aware of the need to protect it. According to James McClintock, the experiences of passengers in expedition cruise ships serve as powerful catalysts for environmental activism; they could promote a drive for sustainable tourism practices.

Furthermore, collaboration between tourism companies and scientists amplifies the positive outcomes that the industry can have on conservation efforts. Cruise operators aid scientific research in their travels, as they enable scientists to inexpensively access remote locations that would otherwise be financially prohibitive. Additionally, the repetitive boat visits to certain sites enables them to collect longitudinal data, which offers valuable insights into the evolving state of Antarctica's ecosystem over time.

By forming partnerships between tourism entities and researchers, Antarctica becomes more accessible for scientific study and conservation

initiatives. Companies like Viking exemplify this collaborative spirit, providing a platform for scientists to conduct groundbreaking research on the continent. For example, in February 2023, its scientific team published the first paper following observations of the giant phantom jellyfish, a rarely encountered species found during one of their journeys.

Expedition cruises, such as those offered by the Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic collaboration and A&K, host researchers aboard their vessels. These partnerships enable scientists to not only research fields like marine biology, climate science and oceanography, but to discuss their results with passengers. Similarly, companies like Swoop hold citizen science initiatives, engaging tourists in data collection and environmental monitoring. Passengers participate in projects ranging from tracking whale migrations to monitoring water quality, contributing valuable data to scientific understanding.

While tourism holds immense potential for assisting Antarctica's conservation efforts, there is much work to be done. Tourism companies must prioritize plans for achieving net-zero carbon emissions to mitigate their environmental impact. They must also implement stringent controls on landings to prevent invasive species and diseases from infiltrating Antarctica.

It is imperative that tourist operators adhere to the regulations set forth by IAATO to ensure responsible and sustainable tourism practices. They must place limits on the number of tourists and landings permitted each day. Ultimately, no activity in Antarctica can be left unregulated if we are to preserve this environment for future generations.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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What We Know About Monarch Migration: The Amazing “Last Mile”

Stephen M. D. Day
June 25, 2024

Entomologists have long puzzled over how American monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico for the winter. Researchers know their brains contain light and temperature sensors and a magnetic compass. However, these discoveries do not explain how the East Coast butterflies locate their specific oyamel fir trees in the journey’s “last mile.” My hypothesis posits that monarchs’ antennae detect the chemicals oyamel firs produce, which guide them to their wintering habitat.

How does the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) navigate the so-called “last mile,” or final stretch, of its migration? The precision with which these little insects home in on their target destination is nothing short of astounding. The question has foxed entomologists over the years. Scientists agree that monarchs use a complex group of sensors, mainly on their antennae, to determine when and where to migrate. Many years ago, I spoke with an entomologist specializing in monarch studies. I asked him what exactly would happen to the butterflies’ migration capabilities if their antennae were removed one at a time. “Well, of course, they couldn’t migrate, feed on nectar [or] lay their eggs on milkweed plants to reproduce. It’s their antennae, stupid,” he answered brazenly.

Scientists have since peeled the proverbial onion and located light and temperature sensors in a monarch’s antenna, which recognize the time of day and the sun’s position in the sky. Another section of the brain comprising iron molecules uses this information to act as a GPS-like magnetic compass. These all are connected to the monarch’s stereoscopic antennae sensors. These functions explain how the East and West Coast monarch species know when to initiate migration, and how they can find their cardinal directions, and specific roosting sites.

Now the question becomes: How do East Coast monarchs manage to migrate several thousand miles to the same small area — a few acres of high-altitude oyamel fir trees (*Abies religiosa*) in Mexico — when most are making their journey for the first time? The fact that an insect brain tiny enough to be smeared on a human thumb nail can conquer this exquisite conundrum is a natural wonder.

As Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* novels might have pondered, this gets “curiouser and curiouser.”

Are the butterflies sniffing their way home?

My working hypothesis is that the monarch's genes provide extraordinary sensors to deal with long-distance migration and the last mile. Hypothetically, the sensors would especially help with overwintering migration and the return journey to breed on alkaloid milkweed plants.

An excellent study published in February 2024 gave my hypothesis a tantalizing clue. This article from The New York Times highlighted the damaging effect pollution can have on a tobacco hawk moth's attraction to pale evening primroses. Dr. Joel Thornton, an atmospheric chemist, led the study.

"A flower's scent is a complex olfactory bouquet that contains many chemical compounds. To identify the ingredients in the signature primrose scent, the scientists fastened plastic bags over the blooms, capturing samples of the fragrant air. When the team analyzed these samples in the lab, it identified 22 distinct chemical components," Thornton wrote. Naturally, his "olfactory bouquet" comment applies to a fir's scent also.

Without getting too technical, the moths' antennae seem specifically adapted to detect monoterpenes (C₁₀H₁₆), dimers of isoprene. These can be divided into acyclic, monocyclic, bicyclic and tricyclic compounds. Monoterpene derivatives that typically contain oxygen or nitrogen atoms are known as monoterpenoids. These monoterpenes give firs their distinctive aroma. According to my hypothesis, oyamel firs provide the distinctive airborne chemical signature that East Coast monarchs use to locate their overwintering destination in Mexico.

Here is a hypothesis about the last mile of the East Coast monarch's wintering migration. It follows the Occam's razor principle — the

assumption that a simple solution is more likely to be correct than a complicated one.

The monarch's antennae contain monoterpenoid receptors. Evolution has fine-tuned these receptors to detect specific complex chemicals at the molecular level. In this case, they detect chemicals from oyamel firs for East Coast monarch butterflies to allow them to overwinter in a sufficiently favorable climate.

As East coast monarchs approach the North Mexico border area in a southwesterly direction, they use their hypersensitive antennae to detect airborne chemical monoterpenes at a few parts per billion. This is analogous to the read-only memory (ROM) once used in our computing technology. As the concentration of airborne monoterpenes specific to oyamel firs increases, the chemical "ROM" on the antennae guides the monarch to its specific wintering habitat. Hundreds of thousands of monarchs gather here, all guided by the same function.

Concluding thoughts on other monarchs

Monarch butterflies have other overwintering migration routes, including the West Coast of North America, continental Europe, Asia and Africa. I observed the latter during my youth, in fact. As a young butterfly collector, I spent summer months witnessing monarchs at Zamalek Park in Cairo, Egypt. The African monarch (*Danaus chrysippus*) is widespread in Africa and Asia.

The US Forest Service explains the migration habitation of American West Coast monarchs: "Monarchs living west of the Rocky Mountain range in North America overwinter in California along the Pacific coast near Santa Cruz and San Diego. Here microclimatic conditions are very similar to that in central Mexico. Monarchs roost

in eucalyptus, Monterey pines, and Monterey cypresses in California.”

Perhaps not just *D. plexippus* but all geographic groups of monarchs use adapted monoterpenes for last mile navigation and migration when climatic factors require overwintering at a specific low temperature range.

Like Thornton’s tobacco hawk moth study, my hypothesis requires confirmation.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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The Heart of America Must Now Become an Official State

Ankit Jain
June 27, 2024

Washington, DC, is practically a colony on American soil. Its citizens lack proper voting rights, and the federal government can eliminate its local government at any time. This injustice has caused a severe spike in crime, seedy marijuana distribution and a lack of support for abortion services. To fix this, DC needs statehood.

When we think of America’s sordid history of colonization, we envision far-away islands and people of different histories and cultures. However, one of our longest-existing colonies is located right at the heart of the nation. I am talking about our very capital.

Washington, DC, is treated essentially as a colony by our federal government. The people here have no voting representation in the federal legislature. Congress has allowed it to establish a local government. However, because DC is entirely federal land, the legislature can and regularly does overturn our local laws. In fact, Congress could completely abolish DC’s local government at any time if it wanted to. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has called for that if he wins the election this November.

What Washington is currently enduring is taxation without representation. This is exactly what our founding fathers fought a revolution to end. There are almost 700,000 tax-paying residents in our nation’s capital, all of whom are denied the right to vote in federal elections. That is more than the voting populations of Vermont or Wyoming and about the same as that of Alaska.

This lack of voting rights is a grave injustice. And it is not just an abstract democratic concern. There are real consequences to Washingtonians’ everyday lives due to our colonial status, including to public safety, marijuana regulation and abortion services.

DC’s colonial status increases our crime rate

The most visible consequence is DC’s high crime rate compared to many other large cities. Because we are a district and not a state, we do not control our criminal justice system. All adult felonies —

which are the vast majority of serious crimes committed in DC — are prosecuted by the federal US Attorney for the District of Columbia. The head of that office is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. DC residents have no control over this official. All local crimes are brought before judges also appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. DC controls only our police department and the prosecution of adult misdemeanors and juvenile crimes.

Because our chief prosecutor — currently Matthew Graves — is not accountable to the people, there is little pressure on him to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law. Maybe that is why he charged only 33% of arrestees in 2022 with crimes. In any other jurisdiction, a chief prosecutor who did this during a crime spike would have been kicked from office at the next election or fired by a mayor who was worried about her own job. Alas, we do not have that option in DC.

Perhaps Graves deserves some leeway, though, because he is not working under a system designed for success. Having the prosecutor answer to the president and the police department answer to the mayor is a recipe for poor coordination. That is exactly what we've concocted.

Graves insists that the low charging rate is at least partly due to the DC police's inability to legally secure admissible evidence, thus preventing the prosecutor from proving arrestees guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law. The police respond that the prosecutor is using this as an excuse to avoid doing his job. Regardless of who is correct, the two sides clearly do not work well together. If both were working under the same government, there would be far fewer coordination challenges.

In addition to this failure, there is a long-running judicial vacancy crisis occurring in DC.

Confirming judges for the local court is the Senate's last priority, regardless of which party controls it. We have gone years at a time without being able to fill vacancies. In 2022, this issue became so severe that DC's local court wrote a letter to the Senate urging the confirmation of more judges, lest the system completely break down.

While things have improved slightly since then, DC still has a vast number of vacancies. As a result, trials take longer to complete here than in any other jurisdiction in the country. When Washingtonians complain that suspects are arrested but rarely face consequences, this is often what they are seeing: criminal suspects being released pending trial while their case waits years for a trial date.

All of this drives DC's high crime rate. If criminals know they may be arrested but are not likely to be prosecuted, it stands to reason that they will be more likely to commit crimes. Hundreds of people are killed in homicide cases every year, and countless more are injured and traumatized.

If DC became a state, we would get full control of our criminal justice system and could eliminate these inefficiencies and structural problems. We could better address this problem if only our government had that kind of autonomy.

Marijuana unregulated and abortions unsubsidized

DC's colonial status has impacted peoples' everyday lives in other ways. For one, in 2014, Congress prohibited DC from legalizing the sale of marijuana after voters passed a ballot measure for its legalization. Because Congress could not stop DC from legalizing the possession or use of it, we now see abundant "gifting" shops around the city. These retailers "gift" marijuana to customers after they buy another item.

These shops are unregulated, so buyers do not know what they are going to get from their purchase. They sometimes end up with a much stronger product than they expected. Further, because of their gray market status the government cannot issue proper safety regulations for these shops, which have become targets of crime that impacts the whole community. Finally, because marijuana is treated like a free commodity and not taxed, our local government loses out on the millions of dollars that could come from district-wide sales.

In another consequence of colonialism, since 2011, Congress has prevented DC from using own local tax dollars to subsidize abortions for low-income women. A 2013 report by the Guttmacher Institute estimates that 70% of pregnancies here are unintended. Without access to government support for low-income women receiving abortions, thousands of unwanted pregnancies persist.

Ending America's last mainland colony

The list of injustices goes on. To rectify these and improve the quality of life for Washingtonians, we need statehood. This is not a radical or unprecedented demand. Every other democracy in the world has had to consider what status its capital's residents should have. Nearly every one has granted voting rights in both the regional and national legislature to those citizens. If other countries have made these rights for residents of their capital city work, there is no reason America could not.

Fortunately, this problem has a relatively easy solution: Congress could pass a bill making Washington DC an official state, and the president should then sign it into law. This would not involve abolishing the federal district. Congress would simply restrict the federal district to a much smaller area, while creating a new state out of the

federal land where the vast majority of Washingtonians live — something that is perfectly within its ordinary power to do. No constitutional amendment would be required; just a regular bill, like the legislature passes dozens of times each year.

This bill is currently under consideration in Congress. It carves out the National Mall area plus a few blocks surrounding it and keeps that zone under the federal government's control. So the federal government would still exercise full control over the Capitol, the White House, the national memorials, many offices for federal workers and almost every Smithsonian Museum. The rest of our current District of Columbia would become the state of "Washington, Douglass Commonwealth," named after famous abolitionist and DC resident Frederick Douglass.

DC residents deserve the same representation as any American. These are inalienable rights, something the Declaration of Independence insists we all share — for "all men are created equal." And though many Americans have not truly enjoyed identical rights across our nation's history, our story is one of continual progress toward the realization of this ideal.

The colonial status of our capital city is one of the most glaring areas where our nation still fails to live up to its founding creed. We must continue the fundamentally American task of closing the gaps between reality and equality by granting statehood and full voting rights to the almost 700,000 residents living here. We must end colonial injustice, allowing Washingtonians to claim their proper representation and become America's 51st state.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Ankit Jain is a voting rights attorney and resident of the District of Columbia's Ward 2. He has fought for a stronger democracy, environment and gun laws his entire life. On June 6, 2024, he won the Democratic primary for Shadow Senator in Washington, DC, for which he is pushing statehood. Ankit grew up in Fairfax County, Virginia as the son of Indian immigrants.

New AI Is Fun, Attractive and Hazardous for Women

Elizabeth Tate
June 29, 2024

ChatGPT's latest model has made the long-imagined "perfect woman" possible. Though actress Scarlett Johansson stopped an AI voice option that mimicked her voice with suspicious accuracy, the advancement remains concerning. This kind of tech may hook men and negatively influence their attitudes toward real, human women.

Before there was ChatGPT-4o, there was Scarlett Johansson. Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* tells the story of Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a lonely Angelino living in the not-so-distant future who finds himself a changed man when, in the midst of divorcing his childhood sweetheart (Rooney Mara), he falls in love with his new, artificial-intelligence-powered voice assistant, "Samantha" (Scarlett Johansson).

This May, OpenAI, the Microsoft-backed company behind ChatGPT, introduced a new model. ChatGPT-4o is voice-enabled and can respond to user speech in real time. The model can detect emotion in user voices and reply accordingly.

In a demonstration video, an OpenAI staff member wearing company merchandise holds a phone in front of him as if taking a selfie. ChatGPT-4o "looks" at the man and says, in a perky, slightly raspy female voice, "I see you're rocking an OpenAI hoodie. Nice choice." The user explains that he's going to make an announcement. "That's exciting! Announcements are always a big deal," the voice says with the eager, somewhat patronizing lilt of a kindergarten teacher.

The OpenAI staffer reveals that ChatGPT-4o is the announcement. "M-me?" asks the incredulous-sounding ChatGPT-4o. "The announcement is about me?" She giggles. "Well, color me intrigued! ... You've got me on the edge of my... well, I don't really have a seat, but you get the idea," she jokes.

The ChatGPT-4o voice used in the video, named Sky, speaks with the vocal enthusiasm of a porn star. The voice in the demonstration is obviously feminine without being too high-pitched. It has just enough vocal fry to sound sexy without becoming grating. It's recognizably similar to Johansson's in the role of Samantha.

Regarding the announcement, CEO of OpenAI Sam Altman tweeted one word: "her." It's clear Sky draws heavy influence from *Her*, and that Altman intends to give consumers a similarly appealing technological "partner." But what effect will his efforts have on users? And what does the movie's leading lady have to say about the product?

Johansson squashed Sky

The Internet certainly noticed the unsubtle inspiration behind Sky. In the days following ChatGPT-4o's announcement, online publications and commenters made the obvious comparison to Samantha. Then, Johansson herself chimed in.

She alleged that Altman previously sent her an offer, intending to hire her to voice ChatGPT-4o. "He told me," reads her statement, "that he felt that by my voicing the system, I could bridge the gap between tech companies and creatives and help consumers to feel comfortable with the seismic shift concerning humans and AI. He said he felt that my voice would be comforting to people." Johansson rejected the offer. Days before ChatGPT-4o was announced, she says, Altman contacted her agent to ask that she reconsider the offer.

However, ChatGPT-4o was released before Johansson was able to respond. The outraged actress took legal action against Altman and his company. In response, OpenAI removed the Sky voice option and published a statement on its website: "Sky's voice is not an imitation of Scarlett Johansson but belongs to a different professional actress using her own natural speaking voice." He declined to disclose the actress's identity due to privacy concerns.

So ends the short life of the fun and flirty voice assistant — for now. Time will tell how Altman and company will redirect following this controversy and resume their apparent mission of crafting the ideal female companion.

Men historically wanted to create the perfect, fake woman

OpenAI's objective is not to create workflow-enhancing interfaces to aid knowledge workers, students and others who may benefit from working

alongside large language models. The company's stated mission is to create artificial general intelligence that "benefits all of humanity." This goal is loftier than just designing artificial narrow intelligence, which is goal-oriented and designed to perform singular, specific tasks.

It seems only natural that this great benefactor of humanity should come in the form of the Samantha-inspired Sky. She is unwavering in her devotion towards her users. She is always enthusiastic and helpful. She immediately stops speaking upon interruption and doesn't mind the intrusion. She giggles, sighs and uses filler words like an actual woman.

Further, it seems Sky was designed with male amusement in mind. She makes coy jokes and gives teasing compliments. She's nothing if not agreeable, and her "Oh, you big hunk, you!" demeanor is constantly affirming. She sounds hot and yet motherly. Sky is an Oedipal dream come true, a vessel and a mirror, a pseudo-woman with no opinions of her own. She's capable of being whatever users wish her to be.

This desire to create the feminine ideal is not novel. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written in 8 AD, Pygmalion becomes disillusioned with mortal women and sculpts his ideal bride, Galatea, from ivory. She is divinely alluring, with neither agency nor autonomy. Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve*, written in 1886, tells a similar story. A fictionalized version of Thomas Edison creates Hadaly, a beautiful android. Like Galatea, Hadaly is flawless and dependent. At last, in 2024, the subservient dream woman is here, and she can be carried around in your pocket.

Blurred lines between saucy machines and attached humans

This sexy actual-Samantha is what we've all longed for, right? It's not just Altman's fantasy

brought to life by his contemporaries? Really, does the average consumer want a breathy, ego-stroking improvement of the feminine Siri and Alexa to tell them, “Wow, that’s a great outfit you’ve got on, rockstar!” and “You’re right, that is ‘above-average!’?”

I don’t know what the typical AI user wants in a product. I haven’t asked them. I do know that I want a tool to help me automate the monthly reports I generate and summarize meeting minutes on my behalf. I have no interest in an artificial approximation of companionship. I am, however, not within ChatGPT-4o’s possible target demographic.

The historically male-heavy Silicon Valley is home to many Theodore Twombly types. This region is responsible for the development of high-tech solutions that promise to make life a little easier and, possibly, a little less isolating. Now is the perfect time for ChatGPT-4o and other products, those branded as AI companions like Replika, to hit the market. Loneliness is an epidemic.

Some will cringe at the sound of ChatGPT-4o, but others will embrace the model. It has been purposely designed to attract attention, after all. Before, ChatGPT’s responses were cold. Many of its replies began with the disclaimer, “as an AI language model,” as a reminder that the entity at the other end is not human. Now, OpenAI is attempting to blur the distinction between human and machine by making you feel as though you’re interacting with a real person.

Altman once called the interactions between humans and AI as depicted in Her “incredibly prophetic.” Silicon Valley CEOs and product engineers seemingly view futuristic media through an optimistic lens. Many dream of utopia. Some earnestly believe that they are helping to create it. Others recognize that the promise of utopia makes

for an excellent selling point. But what about the people who don’t sit in their boardrooms?

Ordinary users will form attachments to the current wave of AI assistants. This is a documented phenomenon that was discovered with the ELIZA computer program in the 1960s. The appropriately named Eliza effect refers to people’s tendency to attribute human-like understanding and emotions to AI systems based on simple, conversational interactions. ELIZA was created to mimic a psychotherapist, and the program used basic pattern-matching techniques to create an illusion of comprehension. Users believed they were interacting with a sentient being.

Regular users may find it difficult to differentiate between human and non-human interactions — even OpenAI staff anthropomorphize their creations to help distinguish between them. When users can tell this difference, they often don’t care. That worries me.

The digital woman concerns me

What duty does a company like OpenAI have to individual users who’ve formed emotional connections with their products? What happens when ChatGPT-4o changes in personality? Will it be like that horrific moment that sometimes occurs with a long-term partner, when one no longer recognizes the person they’ve woken up with?

Her does not end with Theodore and his computerized lover running gleefully into the sunset. No, the AI assistants achieve super intelligence and transcend to a plane of consciousness where people cannot venture. The film closes with a spotlight on human-to-human connection. Theodore and a human friend gaze out over their city, having both lost their AI companions. They are left behind with emotional pain akin to that which follows the end of an actual relationship.

I worry that, as consumers begin to form parasocial relationships with feminine AI programs, they'll begin to further objectify actual women who are disappointingly unprogrammable. I dread the day when "Why can't you be more like ChatGPT?" becomes argument fodder.

Like Samantha and Sky, I'm characteristically enthusiastic. I possess several of the virtual women's desired qualities... sometimes. Sometimes I'm obstinate or even spiteful. At all times, I am human. Humans do not live to fulfill our expectations and cater to our desires. Sometimes, they let us down. We choose to love one another in spite of, and because of, our shared humanity.

This is a lesson that Theodore Twobly and his real-life counterparts stand to learn. As Theodore's ex-wife Catherine points out, he "always wanted to have a wife without the challenges of actually dealing with anything real."

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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Elizabeth does not remember a time before high-speed Internet. Much of her work explores the influences of modern technology on the human psyche and the lived experiences of Generation Z.

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