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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

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A Book's Foreword Is Your Greatest Forgotten Resource

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
August 04, 2024

A foreword is not just extra text at the beginning of the book. It is a thoughtful comment from someone who deeply understands the subject or the author and who can provide context that deepens or expands one's experience of a text.

Dear FO° Reader,
If you're reading this foreword, it's probably because, while you're in the habit of skipping a foreword when you see one in print, that habit has not yet transferred to text on a screen. We all do it, of course. If I'm picking up a book, I presumably want to hear from the author, and not someone else the editor has decided to inject at the beginning of the book. Still, we probably skip over forewords more or less without thinking. What Ranjani Iyer Mohanty has done is take this unthinking reflex into conscious consideration. She asks: "What do I really have to gain from reading a foreword?" As you will see, this question is materially equivalent to "What do I have to gain from reading a thoughtful, knowledgeable and invested fellow-reader?" And the answer to that is, quite evidently, "A great deal."

I hesitate to call myself knowledgeable, but I am invested and, I hope, thoughtful. I will testify that Ranjani has convinced me to pay more attention not only to my reading but to the way I approach reading. As I write this on Sunday, Western culture's traditional time to slow down and pay

attention, I am reminded that, if I am sitting down to read a book at all, I ought not to be in a rush. Reading is leisure, and in a world dominated by the false binary of "work" and "entertainment," we must fight to preserve that one scrap of time that is more serious than entertainment and more liberal than work. So, the next time I open a book, I will turn to page i and not just to page 1. I hope you will consider doing the same.

Anton Schauble

Reader, Editor and Occasional Foreword-Injector

Whenever I crack open a book — like Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women*, which my daughter recently gave me as a birthday present — I turn to the foreword first.

By foreword, I do mean the foreword, not the introduction or the preface. I say this with a specious confidence because I only recently discovered that they're not the same. While all are located before the main body of the book and offer contextual information to readers, they differ in terms of writer and purpose. An introduction is written by the author and, as the name suggests, introduces readers to the main topics in the book. A preface is also written by the author and "tells readers how and why the book came into being." Both can be found in works of fiction and non-fiction. A prologue is written by the author but from the perspective of a character in the story, often gives details of what happened before the main story began, and is therefore found only in works of fiction.

My slight annoyance with introductions and prefaces and prologues is that the authors have already had ample opportunity to say whatever they want in the main body of their work. So why should they be qualifying it with an add-on? Did they forget to say something? Do they just like the sound of their own words?

A foreword is different. It is written by someone other than the author of the book and therefore brings something new, different and hopefully insightful. The foreword is generally written by an authority either on the author or the topic, or both. Its purpose is to increase the credibility of the author, the relevance of the book and ultimately attract more readers. Oftentimes, the fame of the foreword writer itself is sufficient to improve book sales, regardless of the quality of the book or even the foreword. Today, any foreword written by Taylor Swift may well push an average book up the ranks into a *The New York Times* bestseller.

While a foreword is spatially placed before the main section of the book, it is always written after the main text — sometimes years or even centuries later. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was first published in the early 1800s, but M.K. Joseph wrote a foreword to it in the early 2000s. This distance gives the foreword a certain independence from the text.

A foreword is also different from a book review or critique in that the foreword is, as a rule, favorable. It is usually written by someone who loves or at least values the book. In some sense, reading a forward can serve a similar function to a book club meeting where you get to hear other people's perspectives of a book. Only, with a foreword, you get to read a singular, coherent and favorable perspective, and you get to do so in an uninterrupted manner.

Moving forwards with forewords

Most people skip the foreword, and they have good reasons to do so. They may be excited to get directly to the story. They may not want someone else's thoughts on or interpretations of the work, preferring to make up their own mind. They may not want any context before they start reading the work and indeed want to be surprised.

But I find forewords fascinating. Isabel Allende said, "Every life of a character is within a context." Similarly, I think every life of a book is within a context. And how nice if some authority can explain that context to me, or at least their vision of the context.

A foreword can act as a guide and tell us how to navigate the book. It can provide succinct summaries and insightful observations. It can explain certain complexities of the work or place it on a more philosophical or sociological plane. It can highlight the uncommon or link it to other similar works. It can explain why the subject matters. It can praise the author and the writing. It can help us relate to older works in several ways: by highlighting the work's timeless concepts and emotions, by explaining that older context or by showing the work's relevance to present times and current audiences. It can draw connections between both writers (the author of the book and the writer of the foreword) and thereby also hope to connect with the reader. Ultimately, a foreword should and can provide the context to make a book shine.

Forewords also have the advantage of catering to my highly efficient — ok, lazy — side. Sometimes, after reading a brilliant foreword, I feel so fulfilled, I don't bother to read the rest of the book.

One amazing foreword

The virtue of some forewords lies in the famous personality of the foreword's writer. However, in order for the foreword to be memorable, it needs to go beyond their fame to establish a visceral link. Oprah Winfrey's 2015 foreword to Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is not just the convergence of two famous personalities but a friend commenting on the writing of a friend. In Maya's memoir of her childhood, Oprah finds herself: "I was that girl

who loved to read. I was that girl raised by my Southern grandmother. I was that girl raped at nine, who muted the telling of it.” Oprah hopes that by highlighting this deep connection, the many people, particularly women, who feel an affinity with her will feel a similar affinity towards Maya.

The virtue of some forewords lies in the shared topical expertise of the foreword’s writer and the book’s author. Such is the case with influential diplomat Richard Holbrooke’s foreword to eminent historian Margaret Macmillan’s book *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. Holbrooke served as US Ambassador to Germany and the UN as well as US Assistant Secretary of State for two continents (Asia and Europe). His practical overview compliments Macmillan’s detailed academic work.

There are even some forewords in which the author and the foreword writer are closely related, and the virtue of these forewords lies in how intimately the foreword writer knows the author. Christopher Tolkien wrote the foreword for his father’s 50th anniversary edition of *The Hobbit*. More recently, Rebecca Walker wrote the foreword for her mother Alice Walker’s book *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For*.

Then, there are forewords that do not rest on any special characteristic of the writer other than the strength of their own insightfulness. The virtue of the foreword lies in the foreword itself.

Andrew N. Wilson’s foreword to *Excellent Women* is one of these. Wilson is not a famous personality; he’s not an expert on the subject of “excellent women”; he’s not Pym’s son. But he has written an amazing foreword.

Wilson places *Excellent Women* in context in several ways. He explains the title from a sociological perspective. He describes the economic atmosphere in which the book was

written in 1952. He compares and contrasts the book to famous works written a generation earlier, and finds that while “the conventional romantic novel ends with marriage,” Pym “very deftly turns comic tradition on its head.”

Then, Wilson wades into Pym’s personal life, her friends, her particular style of writing and how her life is reflected in this book. His subtle observations — like those of the author — speak volumes. He compares Pym to her close friend, the poet Phillip Larkin, and finds both similar in important aspects: “muted in their emotional response to life,” feeling that “life cannot hold out very exciting opportunities” and having “their eyes fixed firmly on the inevitability of age.”

Wilson concludes by saying that “any amount of social change does not alter the fact that the majority of human beings find life emotionally unfulfilling, and humdrum.” While this statement is unsettling in its nearness to a universal truth, it’s also strangely comforting. I find relief just in hearing someone voice it. Of still more comfort is Wilson’s observation that Barbara Pym’s books continue to speak to such people.

Forewords and daughters

The foreword is not only another person’s perspective on the book, but it’s a person who is speaking directly to me, the reader. It seems personal, revealing not only of the book and its author but also of the writer of the foreword. And when the foreword writer says, “I feel this way about the book,” “The book has led me to feel this way,” “This is how I interpret the book,” or, “This is how this book connects to this universal phenomenon,” it gives me the license to do the same.

How wonderful it would be if I wrote a foreword to each of my most loved books and left them for my daughter when she comes to read

those same books. Then, once my daughter finished reading the book, she could write a backward for me.

Backwords — more commonly called afterwords — are less usual than forewords but they do exist and appear at the end of the book. The writer of the afterword has the opportunity to write more freely, without fear of giving away any secrets or spoiling the plot because the reader has already read the book. They can even discuss alternative endings or offer a different perspective.

George Orwell's iconic 1984 has a foreword by American novelist Thomas Pynchon and an afterword by social psychologist Erich Fromm. Some editions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* have a foreword by Oprah Winfrey and an afterword by writer-musician James McBride.

Mind you, my daughter has now far surpassed me in her reading and thinking, and so would no doubt be well able to write nuanced, insightful, humorous forewords for me. Then I would have the role of writing the afterwords for her. Forwards and backwards. Forewords and backwards. Mother and daughter. Daughter and mother.

After finishing *Excellent Women*, I called my daughter and told her how much I loved the book. It was the perfect birthday present. And of course, the foreword was the icing on the cake.



Ranjani Iyer Mohanty is a writer and academic editor and QR novice. After a previous career in information systems with consulting companies, banks, and development organizations in Canada, England, Holland, India, and Portugal, Ranjani now works as a writer and editor for business, academia, and the nonprofit

sector. She divides her time between North America and Asia.

Crime, Churches and Corruption: The Case Behind Rio's Surging Violence

Karin Schmalz
August 06, 2024

Jair Bolsonaro's 27-year-long political career was rife with corruption and crime. Many blame him for the increased militia violence in Rio de Janeiro's streets. However, the problem extends beyond Bolsonaro's bad politics. Rio has a complicated history with paramilitary groups that is exacerbated by the intersection of corruption and politics.

Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's political career was connected with criminal groups from the start. His election came with ample support from police, the military and the militia, so much so that a coup was orchestrated in the capital on January 8, 2023 to protest his re-election loss. Additional information about the insurrection can be found in the first part of this series.

It is no secret that Bolsonaro had his hand in criminal factions. In fact, his connections to the infamous Office of Crime faction, headed by militiaman Adriano da Nóbrega, are still under investigation. It is also no secret that Bolsonaro was a staunch supporter of violent militia. In a speech to the National Congress in 2003, he defended the idea that "death squads" were a

perfect solution for Rio de Janeiro's public security crisis. He had consistently used his position as a politician to support death squads and distributed medals and jobs among well-known militia members, especially from Rio.

In 2008, Bolsonaro intended to find a way to legalize militias as a part of the governmental apparatus against crime. It is clear that he bolstered the relation between paramilitary groups and organized crime. The Brazilian state has become unstable due to this rise in war as governance. Unfortunately, the ignorance did not start with him. The problem runs much deeper.

How criminal groups have become Rio's political elite

In the state of Rio, paramilitary death squads were hired and ordered by army generals and police commanders to eliminate "undesirables." This includes journalists, academics and those in the military who disagree with the regime. In fact, a new book about Nóbrega reveals that three Rio de Janeiro politicians were assassinated by Brazil's Office of Crime. Death squads are also responsible for the development of torture techniques and methods to dispose of bodies.

These infamous paramilitary groups first appeared in the late 1950s. They didn't rise to power until the 1960s, when a Ku Klux Klan-inspired organization became legal and official after a military coup in 1964. Composed of low-ranking, retired and expelled military personnel, these militias acted much like the Italian Mafia. They would sell "protection" for businesses in violent, low-income communities while simultaneously acting as guns-for-hire to the political and economic elites.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these militias took control of expanding favelas — Brazilian slums — in Rio and São Paulo, disputing power

with drugs and weapons. These groups often collaborated with criminal organizations. In some cases, paramilitaries would completely replace them. Their chokehold over favelas such as Rio das Pedras went from offering protection and assassinations to controlling basic services and transit.

By the 1990s, militias had shifted their focus to politics. Militia members exchanged safety for votes and quickly became a large caucus within both state and federal houses of representatives. The war over territories grew exponentially during this decade. The two largest criminal factions, Comando Vermelho (CV) and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), gathered support from criminal organizations across the country. The subsequent conflict led to an exponential increase in the number of casualties and an escalation in weaponry. Militias advanced into the territories under the guise of arresting or killing faction commanders. They were seen as agents of the state. Instead of ending the criminal activities, the militias became the kingpins of organized crime.

During the neoliberal governments of Fernando Collor de Melo and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, which lasted from 1990 to 1992 and 1995 to 2003, respectively, organized crime and militias lost their distinction. The criminal activities of the militias brought on an enormous cash flow, which created a need to establish money laundering schemes. This was especially important as many militia members were, at this point, starting political careers that drew the eyes of the law.

Business façades such as pharmacies, motorcycle companies, shops and restaurants were all used by militias as laundering hubs. Many of these schemes were caught by the Brazilian IRS due to discrepancies in their books. However, one scheme in particular remains prevalent today: the phenomenon of narco-Pentecostalism.

Rio's state religions are a political force

Around this time, a religious revolution was taking place. Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has held a strong majority in Brazil. The Roman Catholic religion disallows its priests to hold political offices. From the 1970s on, however, religion no longer remained separate from Brazilian politics. Neo-Pentecostal megachurches preaching the American-inspired prosperity gospel started to spread their own political messages all over the country. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) founded by bishop Edir Macedo became the most infamous of these religious-political sects.

Macedo is a controversial character. He gave blatant political speeches in his temples, placed many of his priests in politics and funded political parties and candidates. Accused of charlatanism, money laundering and other crimes, Macedo was arrested in 1992. By that time, he had already gained influential political power and escaped justice.

Macedo's political power came from his absolute control over Brazilian media. In 1989, Macedo anonymously put up a bid to purchase the television network Record for 45 million reais. He did this despite knowing that the transfer of broadcasting rights to the head of a multimillionaire church could be challenged by Article 19 of the 1988 Constitution. The 1988 Constitution established Brazil as a secular country, and clearly forbade any governmental connection to religious institutions on its Article 19. As all media in Brazil are public concessions, the article could be interpreted as a constraint to the purchase of radio, television and printed media by churches.

Despite the illegality, the network quickly gathered a significantly large audience. Macedo preached that his followers would be awarded

riches in life only if they contributed to his church. Under the government of Itamar Franco, in 1993, Macedo managed to get a judicial order allowing him to become the sole owner of Record Group, which also included many radio stations. Macedo amassed extensive political power as a result of this approval from the federal government. The purchase was only formally challenged in 2005.

By the end of the century, tax-exempt neo-Pentecostal churches of various denominations followed Macedo's lead and combined political messages with their religious ones. The Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the Brazilian Congress and Senate already counts 189 members, representing 80% of political parties. Half of those parties belong to neo-Pentecostal denominations.

Religions are also a criminal force

Neo-Pentecostal parties didn't restrain themselves to the legal sector of politics, however. Many old kingpins of favelas, devotees of African-derived religions, became targets of neo-Pentecostals under the guise of a fight against demonic forces. With the growth of Neo-Pentecostal churches, African-derived religious temples and priests started suffering attacks. Many were even expelled from their homes as militias affiliated themselves to intolerant denominations.

The intolerance is a result of a centuries-old prejudice that is intermingled with racism since colonial times. Rio's favelas had been historically populated by members of African diaspora religions. Descendants of enslaved African peoples were left penniless and homeless after the abolition of slavery in 1888, and moved to large port cities such as Rio to look for work. Historically-entrenched racism drives neo-Pentecostal affiliated militias to target the African diaspora in favelas heavily.

As recently as 2021, 91% of religious intolerance attacks in Rio de Janeiro were aimed at African religions, and half of African-derived religious houses each suffered up to five attacks between 2020 and 2022. Their removal — either by threats or assassinations — quickly opened power vacuums that were promptly occupied by evangelical criminals. The new neo-Pentecostal kingpins pushed the population to vote for their candidates.

The rapid growth of the neo-Pentecostal denominations in favelas gave militias and organized crime a perfect way to launder illegal earnings. As all churches are tax-exempt in Brazil, they can declare any amount of money they receive as tithes. Churches are able to invest in those earnings, legitimate or not, without legal obstacles. Thus, militias, politicians and drug traffickers are tightly connected with neo-Pentecostal churches, as they can move money through temples without raising concerns from criminal investigators. The connection between these groups is illustrated by the dangerous campaign by the UCKG to indoctrinate the police force throughout Brazil. The mixing of religious indoctrination and security forces has been deemed “medieval” by some authors.

As a consequence of this tight-knit partnership, Brazil developed the very peculiar phenomenon of neo-Pentecostal-narco-militias, or narco-Pentecostalism. The phenomenon quickly took over large swaths of territory in Brazil’s most important cities. Consequently, narco-Pentecostalism has become influential in politics, business and media. In certain localities, like the city of Rio and the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, political candidates will not be elected unless they have the support of these groups. The political sector has been hijacked by crime.

The relationship between crime and politics has damaged Rio

Rio has witnessed wars between police forces, militias and organized crime for decades, especially in the metropolitan area. Since 1992, armed forces have been called upon many times to help with Rio’s security issues. Yet it seemed like they could never successfully solve the problem of rampant crime. In fact, scholars believe many of these attempts — such as the creation of Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) in 2007 — gave definite control over large territories to the militias.

In the past, the called-upon armed forces remained under state control. The 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees autonomy to Brazilian states, making them responsible for their own public security. There are instruments, however, that allow the federal government to intervene in states under certain circumstances. These conditions are established in Article 34 of the Constitution. Operations using armed forces to restore order in states are called “Provision of Law and Order” (in Portuguese, *Garantia da Lei e da Ordem*, or “GLO operations”).

It is important to emphasize that the application of GLO operations can only be triggered in exceptional circumstances, and exclusively under presidential order. However, it seemed like former Brazilian President Michel Temer chose to ignore the “exceptional circumstances” stipulation when he ordered the 2018 federal intervention into Rio.

After the soft coup against former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, her right-wing vice-president Michel Temer took office. In his 2020 autobiographical book, he wrote how the armed forces commanders disapproved of Dilma’s attempt to modernize the syllabuses of military academies. A move to topple Dilma was welcome, Temer explained, and thus Dilma was out of the way on August 31, 2016. Temer later confirmed that he had several “conversations” with commanders such as General Eduardo Villas-Bôas and General Sérgio Etchegoyen — the latter of

whom was later rewarded with command of the Institutional Security Bureau (in Portuguese, Gabinete de Segurança Institucional da Presidência da República, or GSI) — from 2015 to 2016.

Temer promptly gave the military complete control over sensitive areas of the government. He ensured his austere measures did not affect the armed forces. In October 2017, Temer even signed a law exempting military personnel working on a GLO operation from being taken to a civilian court in case of civilian deaths. This move virtually gave the armed forces free rein — including their most feared auxiliary branch, the Military Police — to kill with absolute impunity in case of military intervention.

The combination of Temer's leniency toward the military and Rio's neo-Pentecostal mayor proved fatal to Rio's citizens. In January 2017, Marcel Crivella, nephew of Macedo, finally took office as mayor. He had received almost 60% of the city's votes — over 1.7 million people — in the second round against left-wing lawmaker Marcelo Freixo. Freixo had been a sworn target of militias for more than a decade. As a provocation, Crivella's last campaign rally was held in a tightly-controlled militia territory, as militia members had declared their support in his bid against Freixo.

Any federal move in the city could only proceed with the support of the state's capital mayor, and Crivella was more than happy to provide that support. Thus, the state of Rio went under federal intervention in February 2018. Article 34 was applied due to "grave danger to public order," despite the fact that the crisis was connected more to the chaos in public finances than any particular violent act. In fact, an increase of cargo theft in the state, not the violence in poorer communities, became an excuse to remove the acting governor's powers. This was the first time a GLO instrument took place since re-democratization.

Armed platoons invaded citizen's houses and took over territories, yet avoided militia-controlled areas. Community residents denounced soldiers and police agents for raping, torturing and killing innocent civilians. Scholars refer to the intervention as a war against the poor. 95% of the operations happened in low-income communities, using brute force, home invasions and shoot-outs as tools.

In the first months of the GLO, police killings increased 150% while no reduction larger than 20% in crime was recorded. The most notorious violence of that period was the assassination of Marielle Franco, Rio's councilwoman. She had bravely denounced the intervention and brutal police tactics and pointed out the complicity between state and militias. This defiance cost Franco her life.

Overall, the operation was highly ineffective. Anthropologist Jacqueline Muniz, a specialist on public security, described the overtake as "the economic policy of fear production" from an authoritarian regime based on public unsafety. Many warned, even before the intervention, that strangling Rio's poor communities would not end the problem. Militias still held complete power in 15 states. The ten-month intervention actually empowered militias, as they counted on the well-armed reinforcements sent for the GLO. It is obvious that militia members, armed forces and politicians share an incestuous relationship.

Sociologist José Cláudio Souza Alves of the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro affirmed this when he stated that Rio's criminal militias are not a State-like power, but actually are the State. The strengthening and spread of militias as a result of the intervention was also noted in Congress, where representatives denounced the operation's disastrous outcomes.

Even before the end of the intervention, residents, police officers and soldiers agreed that the whole operation was “ineffective and full of lies.” Those involved in the atrocities got off scot-free. Military courts did not push forward any procedures, either.

In the end, Temer’s intervention in Rio was nothing more than a mere taste of a military takeover. Yet violence and crime continued even after the intervention ended in December 2018.

Bolsonaro was already elected and awaiting office when the intervention ended. Rather than withdrawing the military, Bolsonaro sent troops to Ceará to “impose order” in the state. He used the army for other interventions, such as the prison riots in the Federal District and rescue efforts after natural disasters in Bahia and the Amazon. He also loosened gun laws and removed Brazilian troops from the UN Peace Corps.

Bolsonaro’s term also saw the continued growth of civilian deaths at the hands of state agents. In April 2019, armed forces were still working in the streets of Rio. Musician Evandro Rosa was returning home with his family when his car was “mistakenly” showered with over 80 bullets fired by an Army platoon doing police duty.

Bolsonaro became a very convenient — and disposable — scapegoat for the issues following the intervention. However, while it is true that his policies caused great harm, the problem goes deeper than bad politics. Federal military and violent militias are close cousins. Criminal organizations have found comfortable seats in the government. In the end, Michel Temer’s intervention in Rio de Janeiro was nothing but an amuse-bouche of a military takeover in the country. The intervention exacerbated that which Brazilian citizens have fought against for decades: far-right politicians have allowed for military

police to gain a stronghold on federal law-making instances.

[Cheyenne Torres and Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Karin Schmalz is a Brazilian scientist who has worked with human rights and environmental organizations since 2002. She has held positions as an environmental scientist, university lecturer, and science, culture and politics writer for over 25 years. After graduating at federal universities in Brazil, she received her DPhil in Zoology from the University of Oxford in 2005.

The Colorful, Toxic Economics and Epidemiology of “Baby Media”

William Softky
August 06, 2024

Infants need to interact with real people to grow and learn. But human engagement costs more money than screen-based images, which hold kids’ attention all too well. “Baby media,” often taking the form of colorful videos, affects kids like narcotics would. Society must stop this dangerous baby media.

If you think social media is bad for teenagers, imagine what so-called “baby media” does to babies. These colorful videos look fun from the

outside, and one can misinterpret the infant's eyes being glued to their screen as fascination or delight. It's natural that parents show their kids things they seem to enjoy, and they might even think they're doing a good thing by exposing them to this cheery entertainment.

The problem is, growing babies learn from high-bandwidth, back-and-forth sensory interaction — not “content.” Our nervous systems are hardwired to use and learn from all our muscles and senses in concert, interacting with three-dimensional people and objects. Babies learn by putting things in their mouth, making faces, wiggling and noticing the results.

That applies doubly to social learning. Infants learn by imitating and practicing. They coo while their mothers speak in sing-song (which is referred to as “parentese”). They learn by sound, mimicry and serve-and-return interaction first and foremost, because it underlies both social and physical skills. Full three-dimensional awareness develops years later, and being able to see three-dimensional content on flat screens develops later still.

Practicing social skills with real people worked well until it didn't. For millennia, most babies always had people around to play with: parents, older siblings, relatives and neighbors. Any live human was fair game for cuddling or teasing, and many people liked playing with them. Work was manual, so it was simple enough to entertain the baby in the kitchen, the workshop or the field. In physical settings, babies get to practice with actual playmates.

Fast-forward to our screen-saturated present. Parents are often at work, and older kids are at school. Both are typically on screens. The age-old supply of social companions has dried up, leaving babies lonely. For many guardians, the solutions are either to pay for professional childcare by the hour or to subject little ones to vivid screen

entertainment, which costs far less. In crass economic terms, parents must choose between connecting with their baby or having money. That is a toxic tradeoff.

But at least the toxicity can be understood epidemiologically, and the tradeoffs understood economically. Both are needed to realize and fight baby media's negative influence.

Economics vs. epidemiology

Economics is the weaker of these two sciences, being deeply unprincipled. The profession praises capitalism professionally, yet in its core competency, information flow, still can't tell up from down: should information flow unhindered and unmodified, to benefit society, or should information be filtered and amplified for private profit? It can't be both ways.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, epidemiology — the study of how ill-health spreads within populations and how that spread can be controlled — is as deeply scientific as particle physics. It balances subtle hypotheses spanning multiple streams of data and leverages its conclusions to save human lives. This branch of science is how diseases and environmental dangers from germs to chemicals are discovered, understood and fought. Its full statistical power is the best way to manage growing threats to public health: COVID-19, cigarettes, fentanyl and electronic screens.

Economics investigates the connection between behavior and money. Epidemiology investigates the connection between behavior and public health. When both are in play, cash flow impacts public health.

Sometimes, the interaction is beneficial, like when a profitable new vaccine or therapy saves lives. But malignant interactions grow

exponentially, especially when biological instincts are up for grabs. For example, opium chemically creates cravings, which affects behavior, which affects profit. The profit is concentrated and actionable, while the damage appears as distant externalities. “Externalities” is the catch-all term for unintended and long-term consequences, the unplanned results that happen off the spreadsheets. Externalities are always the problem.

For instance, in the Opium Wars of the 19th century, Britain systematically profited by creating drug addiction in China — the profit was local, while the damage was distant. Today, the similarly addictive chemical nicotine drives a profit cycle via the tobacco industry. Alcohol and sugar cause similar problems while supporting large industries. Now all of those are regulated, because for a society to survive long-term, it must limit attractive products that hurt the populace. As I’ll soon describe, baby media is one of those dangerous products.

Baby media hacks and damages babies’ brains

It’s clear that chemicals like opium and nicotine drive basic urges. But videos aren’t chemicals at all, just patterns of light and sound. How could patterns of pixels hack our brains’ biology?

They do it the same way chemicals do. Chemicals carry both fuel and information. Some we need in bulk, like water and air. Others we’re sensitive to in trace amounts, like vitamins. Opium and nicotine happen to trigger mind-altering and behavior-changing pathways in the brain (and to a lesser degree, alcohol and sugar do as well). The particular patterns of atoms in opium and nicotine “hack” our information processing.

Particular patterns of light and sound work similarly. Bright flowers send attractive signals, while camouflage does the opposite, erasing the signals of a creature’s presence. Our nervous

systems are tuned from birth to interpret specific colors, shapes, frequencies and movements as meaning certain things. Pre-programmed biological boosts are crucial cues for filling in a rich, detailed world.

Babies not only make cries and coos which pull the mother’s heartstrings; she makes sounds which touch her baby, too. Her sing-song “Hello, baby!” voice or soothing tones were primed by primate physiology ten million years ago. The baby’s nervous system knows those sounds mean Mom is near, so the child instinctively responds. That natural, native back-and-forth at certain frequencies and cadences is why the mother-baby bond appears in the first place. Those patterns taste sweet to the child’s heart and mind.

In that informational sense, baby media is taking candy from a baby, over and over. The jangly, clangy, ultra-high-pitched frequencies on shows like Chip and Potato, Ms. Rachel and CoComelon catch a baby’s attention; their frequency spectra overlap with the ones the baby’s nervous system naturally enjoys. So, those shows capture babies’ attention specifically by triggering vibratory mother-infant bonding instincts. Likewise, the shows’ looming, veering cartoon faces and frequent cutscenes cue nearby motion to the primary visual cortex. It’s ear-candy and eye-candy, in other words, and not by accident. The creators of CoComelon, for instance, algorithmically optimized the show for this.

When such patterns grab a baby’s attention, the kid responds as if called by a real person, typically by looking or wiggling. They then expect the person to respond. In real life, this would be a perfect data-gathering opportunity for the child.

But when watching a video, if the show’s pre-recorded response is timed just right — as some are — the baby might be fooled into thinking it received its desired answer. But the screen is just a

screen, and doesn't pay attention to the baby. Every time the video and sound provoke them into tasting the sweetness of anticipated play, the reward is yanked back. Mom never appears. That moment's bonding instinct is wasted, and a precious chance to gather social data is desensitized. It alienates the young mind a little bit more, as the child falls for a machine in place of a person, and is then jilted.

This is the same dynamic as social media, in fact. The algorithms that so successfully manipulate teenagers into spending hours a day on social media provoke the same innate instincts as those locking babies' eyes to screens. The difference is that social media uses the selection and timing of content such as posts and videos, while baby media hacks babies' brains using the native harmonies of the nervous system. Both of them desensitize and disrupt basic nervous system function.

It doesn't just damage social skills. Children can't make three-dimensional sense of a two-dimensional screen until the age of three (the video deficit effect). And that's if the kid grew up strictly in our three-dimensional world. Unfortunately, touch screen tablets, in the same way as baby media, harness native urges for novelty and interaction to keep kids' eyes and fingers glued to glass.

In order to learn multi-sensory consistency and physical reality, babies search out novelty, the frontier beyond what they already know. Tablets are delightfully interesting, of course, but their novelty cheats by deviating from our world with surprising, disconnected lights and sounds. So interaction with a tablet poisons babies' training data. Babies who use tablets will undoubtedly face later problems with spatial skills, navigation and stereo vision, just as children who spend too much time on close focus become near-sighted — which is a growing worldwide problem blamed on

education, not on screens. Epidemiology will discover the damage to babies soon enough, but can it save the day?

The battle against baby media begins

The imminent battle over baby media is horribly lopsided. Corporations outgun pro-child advocates millions-fold.

Anti-digital advocates have at best millions of dollars of funding, while media companies have trillions. Advocates promote laborious studies on hundreds of people, while companies surveil whole populations automatically. Advocates know little about companies, while companies know loads about us. Humans have nervous systems easily dazzled by distraction and misdirection, which companies are paid to exploit, fueled by biometric data and protected by fig-leaf disclaimers and disclosures.

The deepest asymmetry, paradoxically, is ethical. Human morality forbids experimenting on people, but that wasn't always the case. The infamous Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis deliberately and secretly withheld medical treatment from sick people over decades. The Nazi physician Josef Mengele performed such awful and specific experiments on prisoners that medical science has renounced and forever forsworn using such experiments, data or lessons. The notorious Stanford Prison Experiment spurred the creation of human subjects protections, restricting university experiments from harming their subjects. These rules make gathering direct medical evidence of harm to humans difficult, slow and expensive.

Those ethical rules don't apply to private experiments. Social media companies routinely use an automated method called A/B testing to maximize users' time online without their knowledge. I once coded such programs myself. Ten years ago, Facebook intentionally made many

users feel depressed by selecting depressing news for their feeds.

The most extreme human experiment today is the ingenious gadget called the Distractatron, which CoComelon owner Moonbug Entertainment uses to optimize the show's captivating effect. As a test infant watches the show on a main screen, a screen to the side plays boring, real-world scenes to vie for their attention — this is the Distractatron. Every time the kid's attention wanders to that second screen, program creators declare that moment a weak point. They add yet more attractants to the video to prevent the baby from un-glueing its eyes.

I'd urge readers to view Time's pro-corporate, propagandizing take on CoComelon. Note how it positively describes the show's content without addressing that its attractiveness comes from low-level cues that exploit child biology. Babies can't even comprehend the identified "positives" while they're learning to use their eyeballs.

Scientifically speaking, optimizing for captivation is like optimizing a digital drug. The fact that optimized shows all reproduce the same high-speed, high-frequency sonic and visual textures proves the science of attention-grabbing works. Unfortunately, the goal is to create addiction, not stop it.

The baby in the lab may not be harmed much by those few hours of experimentation, but the finished show puts infants everywhere at risk, for their whole lives. Which country will step forward first to renounce and forever forswear such experiments, data and lessons and products based on them?

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



William Softky is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

Japanese Rate Hikes Cause Colossal Losses in World Markets

Alex Gloy
August 08, 2024

Rising interest rates in Japan sent financial markets reeling this week. Investors who had been borrowing cheap funds in yen to spend in dollars scrambled to exit their positions. Volatility is high, and in the short- to medium-term, trouble may be ahead for global markets.

On Monday, August 5, the Japanese Nikkei stock market index dropped 12.4%, marking the worst day since the worldwide "Black Monday" crash of October 1987. On August 5, the US S&P 500 index lost 3%, while the tech-heavy Nasdaq lost 3.4%.

The VIX index, a measure of volatility, reached 65, its third-highest reading in history. Only in 2008, after the demise of Lehman Brothers, and in 2020, during the onslaught of COVID-19, did the index top that number.

A reading of 65 on the VIX is very high. To justify such a high volatility, stock prices would have to move by at least 4% (in either direction) on at least 13 trading days over the following 20 trading days. This would indicate a major economic calamity of global importance, which, to our best knowledge, has not occurred.

What happened?

On Wednesday, July 31, the Bank of Japan raised interest rates to 0.25%, sparking a rally in the yen that caught hedge funds off guard.

The same day, the US central bank hinted at a possible interest rate cut in September. Two days later followed a worse-than-expected US job market report. The unemployment rate reached a 3-year high.

As predicted by futures markets, the probability of a 0.5%-point cut in interest rates by September briefly reached 100%, with some contracts even implying a reduction by 0.75 percentage points. Jeremy Siegel, who lectures on finance at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, called for an immediate 0.75%-point cut via emergency meeting followed by another 0.75%-point cut in September.

Within a few days, the Japanese currency reversed its weakness and gained 13% compared to the US dollar, causing large losses to the so-called yen carry trade.

A carry trade involves borrowing funds in a low-yielding currency, like the yen, and investing the proceeds in a higher-yielding currency, like the US dollar. Since the summer of 2023, a large difference in interest rates between the US (5.3%) and Japan (-0.1%) attracted plenty of money.

The exact size of the yen carry trade is unknown. Cross-border yen loans reached \$1

trillion as of March. Speculative positioning in yen futures at the CME futures exchange in Chicago reached 180,000 contracts at the beginning of July. With each contract being worth ¥12.5 million, a total of ¥2.25 trillion (\$15 billion) was thus at stake.

The prospect of rising Japanese interest rates combined with falling US interest rates meant the yen carry trade became less attractive. Higher volatility in the yen/dollar exchange rate led quantitative and trend-following investors to reduce their positions.

Why did the Bank of Japan raise rates?

Around 30% of the Japanese population is aged 65 and older, making Japan the country with the highest share of elderly people globally.

Elderly people are retired and live off their savings or fixed pension payments. Their income usually does not adjust to inflation. Elderly people are hurt by inflation.

Japan had built up a network of 54 nuclear reactors. The Fukushima incident in 2011 led to the shutdown of all 54 reactors, of which only 10 are back in operation today. This has left a wide gap in energy production, leading Japan to import large amounts of fossil fuels, which make up roughly a quarter of Japanese imports.

Fossil fuels are quoted in US dollars. A decline of the Japanese yen thus makes imports more expensive, leading to higher inflation. The further the yen/dollar exchange rate declined, the lower the approval rating of the current government fell.

Throughout May, the Japanese Ministry of Finance intervened in foreign exchange markets with more than \$62 billion, which did not help to stop the yen's slide. Hence the surprise interest rate hike in late July.

After having achieved its goal of stabilizing the yen, the Bank of Japan quickly reverted to damage control by stating it would not raise rates during times of market instability.

What does this mean for investors?

Stock markets quickly recovered from Monday's shock — the Nikkei Index gained 10% and the S&P 500 around 1%. Volatility receded; while current reading (about 28) is still elevated, it is a far cry from Monday's panic-driven levels.

Monday's sell-off can be explained by technical factors. But what about fundamentals? The market value of all US equities amounted to \$51 trillion as of December 2023, or nearly twice the US GDP. In the past, this has been considered an "expensive" ratio.

Market breadth, or the number of shares participating in a trend, has narrowed down to a few mega-cap stocks. The weight of the ten largest US companies makes up around one third of the S&P 500, a proportion that has been growing for at least 50 years. The weight of the largest stock compared to the stock in the 75 percentile even exceeds levels seen in 1929.

Microsoft trades at 25 times operating cash flow while NVIDIA is valued at 60 times. Few market observers dispute that US stock valuations are exceptionally high, and therefore vulnerable to setbacks.

But what about the economy?

Market turmoil, if sustained, can feed into the "real" economy. Initial public offerings might get postponed due to a lack of risk appetite. Financial costs for corporations might increase as the risk premium over (presumably risk-free) US Treasury bond yields widens. Leveraged takeovers might fail due to lack of financing.

A recent survey of purchasing managers in the manufacturing sector (ISM) showed many companies reporting a noticeable slowdown in business. On the other hand, the (much more important) service sector painted a more benign picture.

Undoubtedly, employment growth is slowing down, while the rate of unemployment has begun to increase slightly. Consumer confidence is between mediocre and abhorrent. Adjusted for inflation, retail sales declined in 15 out of the past 20 months. While personal disposable incomes are still growing by a low single-digit percentage, little is left after accounting for inflation.

Even the current large fiscal deficit of 6–9% of GDP fails to stimulate the economy; the government sector deficit instead translates into a surplus for the foreign sector (a mirror image of the US trade deficit).

Investors hoping that falling interest rates benefit stocks might be disappointed. Financial markets have anticipated those cuts for years, as evidenced by the negative slope in the yield curve.

Now would be a good time to go through portfolios and ask questions. "Would I buy this entire company at this price?" (the question of valuation) and "Would I be comfortable holding this company if the stock market closed for 10 years?" (question of quality).

Yes, in the long run, stocks go up, thanks to the inflationary bias of our fiat system. In the short- and medium-term, the stock market doesn't owe you anything.

[Anton Schauble edited this piece.]



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Kaleidoscope Voting and Kamala: TikTok's Influence on the 2024 Election

India Nye Wenner
August 13, 2024

Generation Z's favorite haven is TikTok. Within this satirical dreamscape, young people discuss politics. In recent months, US presidential candidates Donald Trump, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have made prime content. For a candidate to win TikTok's favor means a shot at winning over the youth vote.

If you've opened up TikTok in the last month, chances are you've wondered why your feed looks like a coconut tree-riddled Hawaiian

Island. In the month before, you may have been bombarded by AI-generated images of an embracing Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

TikTok is a distinctive sea. Gen Z — the generation born from around 1995 to 2010, currently teenagers and young adults — makes up 60% of TikTok's 1.1 billion users. But just as the ocean tides can push around a ship that thinks it's still sailing on its own, TikTok influences Gen-Z users more than they know.

In recent years, politicians have begun to catch on to TikTok's potency. Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, who is much younger than her predecessor Joe Biden, or their Republican rival Donald Trump, seems to understand the power of the video app better than most. But, to understand this digital sorcery, the contenders of this November's US presidential election must understand the platform's unorthodox content.

Political dismay

In the 2020 presidential election, a record-breaking number of young people voted. Based on recent registration numbers, youth turnout this year seems poised to be near that of 2020. However, it was only two months ago that many young people were distancing themselves from the ballot boxes. They disliked both presidential candidates; both were, to put it simply, old. They were "stuck in a political Groundhog Day," as Erica Pandey at Axios said, and saw national politics as a rusted establishment. Confidence in the nation's institutions has plummeted among younger Americans. Like many Iranians, young people saw no point in voting in the presidential election. There was a sort of nihilistic apostasy among young people from both candidates and the political system at large. "Youth perception towards politics [was] a combination of disinterest and disgust," Richard Fox, a professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University, told me.

Young people decided to turn their noses up at their electoral power simply because neither the government nor its politicians had a “magic wand to end the suffering,” as The Washington Post’s Jennifer Rubin describes.

In classic Gen-Z fashion, young people took to the Internet and flooded TikTok with satirical political content.

Coping with humor, celebrity culture and moral standards

“If you had to pick a Democrat or a Republican, Joe Biden or Donald Trump, gun to your head, who would you vote for?” “The gun would go off.” This back-and-forth (posted by Jason Selvig and Davram Stiefler, an American political comedy duo that has amassed 2.2 million followers on TikTok) was viewed over 27 million times. The clip took on another life as an additional 25,000 original videos were made reusing its audio track, spreading it across the internet.

Cut to video: “Late at night I toss and I turn” — insert Biden and Trump photos — “and I dream of what I need. I need a hero” — insert photos of Sue Sylvester from the series *Glee* or of the media personality Kid President. For young people, Bonnie Tyler’s song “Holding Out for a Hero” perfectly mirrored their political predicament.

And then — kickstarted by the worrying and almost comedic presidential debate at the end of June — there was the advent of “Triden,” the romantic pairing of Trump and Biden. Thousands of young people posted videos, often set to popstar Chappell Roan’s song “Casual,” portraying the two political rivals as lovers. These videos featured AI-generated images of the two men shaking hands, hugging and playing golf. One user, @diorgr6ande, partook in the trend by splicing together AI voice impersonations of Trump and Biden: “They want to take us away from each

other, but I won’t let them. Joey, I love you,” declared AI-Trump. “I know you never meant to say anything mean about me, Donny. Maybe in another lifetime, we could be together,” replied AI-Biden. The video got over 10 million views. One user commented, “I love my generation.”

“It was like a form of coping,” Mebby, a 19-year-old part-time TikToker studying communications and film and media studies at Saint Louis University, told me.

To much of the youth, the political motif of Chappell Roan’s artistry represents all that they stand for. During her performance at the Governors Ball Music Festival in June, she stated, “This is a response to the White House, who asked me to perform for Pride. We want liberty, justice and freedom for all. When you do that, that’s when I’ll come.”

When politicians fail to satisfy the youth’s hunger for justice, the youth forsake the government and seek refuge in their own generation and the reverie of idealism. While these high moral standards are admirable, young people risk losing sight of progress and pragmatism in the pursuit of political perfection. The heart of democratic politics is compromise, but many young people are unwilling to “betray” their principles by voting for an imperfect candidate.

The TikTok echo chamber

TikTok works by algorithm, tailoring a user’s feed based on videos the user has interacted with. After the algorithm has done its dirty work, a user will be fed a stream of agreeable, accommodating content, their “own personal self-affirmation chamber,” as Vox’s Christian Paz described it.

“TikTok is ... likely part of a new echo chamber as the algorithms being applied deliver ideologically compatible content to TikTok users,”

Richard Fox and Kiani Karimi wrote in a recent study that surveyed a large sample of 18- to 25-year-olds to explore TikTok's political influence. If a user engages with satirical political content, their echo chamber will spit like content relentlessly back at them. The Biden-Trump memes were "discrediting the [political] process," Fox told me. And how can one not be influenced by such an endless stream of cynicism?

"People are consumed by what they see on social media and think it's the world around them," Mebby told me.

If a young person is trapped in a sphere of political fantasy and incredulity, they will lose sight of reality and inevitably lose any motivation to vote. If not outright, TikTok's influence is subliminal, rooted in conditioning through repetition — we are what we eat, we are what we behold.

The 2024 Harvard Kennedy School Survey of young Americans' attitudes towards politics and public service reports that 62% of 18- to 29-year-olds nationwide disapprove of the government's performance and that 73% use social media platforms to stay informed. These same people dominate social media platforms. In consequence, young people are staying informed through the same apps on which their generation is perpetuating a negative view of the government.

"When these people that they consider to be "real," that they consider to be truthful and honest, tell stories of certain government acts, people feel empathy for them and therefore see the government as the enemy," Mebby told me.

But can TikTok be a force for good?

And suddenly, Biden dropped out. Like a phoenix, Kamala Harris rose. TikTok was the wind beneath her wings. A new hysteria overtook the platform,

but this time the digital commotion was not nihilistic — it was hopeful. As young people processed the news of Kamala's candidacy, she became a heroine of high-octane Gen-Z culture.

Kamala became "Brat," the trend of the summer, an online delirium named for popstar Charli XCX's new album, Brat. Even Charli herself endorsed Kamala as a Brat-figurehead, posting on X, "kamala IS brat." The Harris campaign's official social media embraced the Gen-Z typhoon, rebranding in Brat's signature lurid green color.

One year earlier, in May 2023, when giving remarks at a White House swearing-in ceremony, Kamala laughingly spoke some words that Gen Z will never forget: "You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you." And luckily for Kamala, the internet never forgets. These seemingly cryptic, pseudo-philosophical words fit into the TikTok meme machine like lock and key. "Coconuts" and "context" entered the Gen-Z vocabulary.

When Kamala became the presumptive Democratic nominee, her words came back not to haunt her, but to supercharge her. Young people mixed coconuts and context with Brat and got to work. They spliced Kamala's iconic words into "Apple" by Charli XCX, "Blow" by Kesha and "Look What You Made Me Do," by Taylor Swift — three singers representative of female power. Kamala HQ caught on quickly, subtitled its social media pages with the words "Providing context."

Chappell Roan made her way back into the fray as young people used her song "Femininomenon" to celebrate Kamala's candidacy. These same young people, who only days earlier had used Roan's music to mock the government, were now invested in the election. One user, @cattakespics, posted a video set to a Charli XCX-coconut

mashup prophesying: “All of Gen Z pulling up to the voting booths with nothing but this audio in their heads as they single-handedly elect the first female president of the United States.” It was bombs away. In the days just after Kamala’s emergence, tens of thousands registered to vote. More than four-fifths of them were between 18 and 34 years old.

The making of memes and organicness

What was so effective about these memes?

For starters, they came about organically. “It was regular, random people finding the things that they cared about already and mashing it together. It was not top down, it was bottom up — and that is so important to meme culture,” said @organizer, a pro-Harris influencer.

If political campaigns push content too hard, young people may feel coerced by what they scorn as efforts from the “out-of-touch” and “cringe” older generation. The memes must be coming from young people so they feel as if they are in control. Furthermore, they then become empowered as the mobilizers and not just the mobilized.

In a phenomenon called the “social vote,” people are more likely to vote when they perceive that their social networks and friends expect them to vote. Due to the personal nature of TikTok’s content, users may psychologically classify complete strangers on the For You Page as friends. Another, soon-to-be released study finds that social media and friends, more than any other factors, have the most influence on political beliefs.

“I think the most interesting thing about social media is shared human experience,” Mebby told me. “Real people have a major impact.”

Kamala Harris got lucky. The seeds of her coconut meme-wave had already been planted in social media, so when she took over for Biden, young people on TikTok knew what to do with her. “Candidates have always attempted to stage this kind of virality ... but the moments that truly take off lock into the absurdist, chaotic energy of the internet and are almost impossible to predict,” writes Vox’s Rebecca Jennings.

In 2020, ultra-influencers — such as Charli D’Amelio, with over 100 million followers — ruled TikTok. Now, the app has a more lived-in feel. It is characterized by multitudes of everyday users turned creators. 83% of TikTok users have posted a video. The most valuable advocate on TikTok is the ordinary user. Campaigners must recruit these users and use them like sleeper agents; they can flood the platform with seemingly authentic videos until other users market the candidate of their own free will — until the content catches on like a prairie fire.

“What this all amounts to is a viral marketing stunt that any presidential candidate would pay millions for, but one that no strategist or ad agency could create,” Jennings concluded. “It’s all entirely organic, forged from the fires of a truly bizarre and unpredictable time.”

What bones to throw?

To create a Gen-Z trend, one must understand that TikTok is a place where young people go to keep things that are theirs and only theirs, things their elders would not understand. It must deviate from mainstream culture, because TikTok, if anything, is an avenue for young people to assert their own, unorthodox cultural identity. It should be idiosyncratic, atypical and avant-garde. It should be jarring, discordant and unmistakable.

And if you can get something like that, something like Brat, associated with a political candidate — Gen Z will listen.

“I feel like, for so, so long, people were always under this impression that anything political couldn’t be fun or entertaining,” Cathryn Kuczynski, a 20-year-old UCLA student, told me. Ioana Literat, the TikTok researcher from Columbia’s Teachers College, told Vox, “The idea that political expression should be serious and based on facts and rationality — when we look at TikTok political content, it looks almost the opposite of that.”

Maybe fun — and joy — is exactly what politics needs.

In any case, fun and joy certainly seem to be working for Kamala Harris.

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How to View Independence Amidst Ferment, Rape and Dirty Toilets

Atul Singh
August 14, 2024

Independence in 1947 has led to a corrupt military-run Pakistan and an unstable Bangladesh. India is doing much better but has a long way to go to make the sacrifices of those who fought for independence worthwhile. Hospitals safe for women doctors and clean train toilets would be a start.

Today is Pakistan’s independence day, and tomorrow is India’s independence day. British India once comprised India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In 1947, the British packed their bags and left. Pakistan and India were the two successor states forged after absorbing the princely states, which the British used as puppets. In 1971, Bangladesh won its independence from a West Pakistan that had conducted genocide and rape of dark-skinned Bengalis.

Even as I write this, Bangladesh is in turmoil. Mobs stormed the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s palace, and she has fled to India after 15 years of increasingly autocratic rule. Pakistan is not doing much better. Economically, it is definitely doing worse. In 2023, Pakistan’s per capita income fell to \$1,407, from \$1,589.3 in 2022. Bangladesh’s per capita income fell too, but to \$2,529.1 in 2023 from \$2,687.9 in 2022. In 1971, Pakistan’s per capita income was \$175.2 while Bangladesh’s was \$128. Clearly, the darker cousin outstripped the fairer one over the decades.

Anwar Iqbal, writing in Pakistan’s flagship newspaper Dawn, tells the tale of Pakistan going with a begging bowl to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) a staggering 23 times. Even as IMF bailouts continue, a kleptocratic elite lives opulent lives as latter-day Mughals. The Pakistani Army holds the country together with the barrel of a gun and by whipping up the fear of its larger neighbor, India.

Yet there are schisms even within the military. Two days ago, the military arrested Lieutenant-General Faiz Hameed of the fabled Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in a historic first. The former ISI chief was close to cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, who became prime minister upending traditional parties but is now languishing in jail. Now, members of Pakistan's traditional political families — lucky sperm club — hold elected offices after blatantly rigged polls. As Pakistani elites flee the country to safe havens like Dubai and London, this nuclear-armed country is becoming ever more Islamist.

India is doing much better but is in ferment

India's per capita GDP has risen from \$118.2 in 1971 to \$2484.8 in 2023. India has avoided the instability of either of its Muslim-majority neighbors. Except for a brief two-year interlude in the 1970s, India has been a democracy with regular elections and a peaceful transfer of power.

Today, Indians are better-fed, taller and live longer than ever before. In 1947, when India won independence, an average Indian lifespan was a little over 32 years. Today, it is over 70. To be fair, life expectancy has also gone up in Pakistan and Bangladesh. If I go by numbers, independence has been a jolly good thing for the Indian subcontinent.

Yet for all the progress, Indians feel a sense of underachievement at the global stage. At the recently concluded Paris Olympics, 1.4 billion-strong India finished 71st, behind tiny Lithuania with a population of 2.8 million. Before independence, India had Nobel laureates like Rabindranath Tagore and C.V. Raman. Today, the country has none.

Education has become a game of competitive examinations with private coaching companies making fortunes to train teenagers to crack exams for prestigious public universities generously

funded by the state. Government hospitals are overcrowded and the country is currently up in arms after the rape and murder of a female doctor in Kolkata. Ironically, this state of West Bengal (population of over 100 million) is ruled by the Trinamool Congress's Mamata Banerjee, one of the most prominent women leaders in the country. A day ago, a final-year engineering student was abducted, raped and dumped on the Agra-Delhi highway. This state is ruled by Yogi Adityanath, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who has made his reputation for being tough on crime.

Part of the reason for high crime is the lack of police reforms since 1947. Also, courts take an eternity to decide upon cases. The structure of the state is still colonial and corruption is a way of life. In many ways, Indian democracy is skin-deep. At the district level, unelected officers of the imperial-era Indian Administrative Service (IAS) rule like feudal lords from colonial bungalows. They are assisted by officers of the Indian Police Service (IPS). Both the IAS and the IPS answer directly to the chief minister of the state. Local mayors have no real power.

Strong chief ministers from almost all parties rule their states with two to five IAS officers and one or two IPS officers imposing their will on the people. They are elected monarchs with vast powers of patronage. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken this IAS model of governance to the national level. His ministers are ciphers with no power or even status. Favored IAS officers are Modi's feudal barons who ride roughshod even over BJP politicians. In other parties such as the historic Indian National Congress or the Samajwadi Party, dynasts rule the roost. Indian democracy is proving resilient but is not in rude health.

India is not alone in experiencing institutional and moral degradation. South Africa does not have a Nelson Mandela; France is not led by Charles de

Gaulle, and the US is far cry from the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Dwight David Eisenhower. Yet with 1.4 billion people, urban squalor, rising unemployment, unmet expectations and social divisions along caste, region and religion, the Indian republic faces immense challenges ahead.

My father was born in 1942, five years before India's independence. In the 1971 India–Pakistan War, he operated for 72 consecutive hours. In his old age, he views India's post-independence story wistfully. India is doing much better than Pakistan or Bangladesh, but that is not enough for him. He takes the view that hospitals safe for women doctors and trains where toilets are clean are not that hard to achieve. That is the minimum I have to achieve as a people to make the sacrifices of those who spent years and even decades in British jails worthwhile.



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The Left Won Big in the UK — But Look Deeper

Atul Singh
August 18, 2024

Sir Keir Starmer led Labour to a whopping win, but his party won fewer votes than it did in the last two elections. Low turnout, Conservative infighting, the rise of Reform UK and the Liberal Democrats' impressive showing helped Labour. A centrist Labour leadership is likely to govern prudently to prolong its stay in power.

Parties of the Right have enjoyed good fortune in Europe lately. However, the British elections this year came as a relief to the Left. Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party won 411 seats out of 650 in the House of Commons. In the previous elections in 2019, Conservatives had won 365 seats, breaching Labour's fabled red wall in the North.

Jeremy Corbyn, the left-wing erstwhile Labour leader, is now no longer in the party. Under Starmer, Labour has moved resolutely to the center even as the Tories (as British Conservatives are called) have imploded into post-Brexit fratricidal bloodletting.

The UK has a parliamentary, first-past-the-post system. The candidate with the most votes becomes the member of parliament (MP) in each constituency. The party leader who commands a majority in the House of Commons becomes prime minister and governs the UK from 10 Downing Street.

The first-past-the-post system can lead to strange results. For instance, the Liberal Democrats won a lower percentage of votes than Nigel Farage's Reform UK, but the former won far more seats than the latter in these elections. However, the Tories and the Scottish Nationalists

were the big losers in 2024 while smaller parties flourished, as the table below demonstrates.

Unusually for any British government, the new Labour government is led by former civil servants rather than professional politicians. Starmer is a centrist who aims to bring back stability to the UK. Before his political career, Starmer was the head of the Crown Prosecution Service. His new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, worked in the Bank of England. Both have a reputation for competence and prudence. Like previous prime ministers Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Boris Johnson, Teresa May and David Cameron, Starmer and Reeves went to the University of Oxford. However, they did not come from affluent backgrounds or go to elite schools. They beat the odds to rise to the top.

Unlike leaders of the Left in many other parts of the world, Reeves is not promising any increased government spending. Instead, she is advocating supply-side economics to boost growth. In her first major speech, Reeves promised to make economic growth the number-one priority for her government through increased private investment, labor participation and productivity. Both Starmer and Reeves are fiscally prudent, which should lead the British economy to stabilize after a rocky eight years following the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Fund managers and business leaders in New York and London say that the risk premium for UK assets will go down because of the Labour government's reputation for responsibility. They believe that Starmer and Reeves will steer a closer relationship with Europe, reduce frictions in UK–EU trade and give a fillip to house-building. In contrast to most other democracies, this party of the Left has won a thumbs-up from markets and business leaders.

Conservative meltdown facilitated Labour victory, now what?

As this author predicted in 2016, Brexit turned out to be “a damn close-run thing,” and what followed was madness. Prime ministers came and went with alarming frequency; Truss enjoyed less than the shelf life of a head of lettuce. Post-Brexit Britain could not make up its mind whether to become Singapore-on-Thames or a revived manufacturing power with rejuvenated northern cities. Immigration continued to be a problem. Shipping migrants to Rwanda did not excite the public. Johnson's parties during the COVID-19 pandemic turned public chafing against draconian government restrictions into open anger. Sunak had the charisma of a dead mouse and demonstrated a gift for fatal political gaffes such as leaving D-Day celebrations early for a meaningless television interview. In a nutshell, the Tories screwed up so badly that a Labour victory was obvious long before the elections.

Labour's victory is massive. Yet it is a shallow one. Only one in five Britons voted for the party. Importantly, voter turnout fell from 69% in 2019 to 60% in 2024. In 2017, nearly 12.9 million people voted Labour. In 2019, this figure fell below 10.3 million. This year, a little fewer than 9.7 million voters cast their ballots for Labour. A graph by FOI, a political and geopolitical risk advisory, tells an interesting tale of voting numbers and parliamentary seats over the last two British elections.

British politics have become extremely dynamic. New trends are worth noting. The significant vote shares of the right-wing populist Reform UK Party — second to Labour in 92 constituencies — and the Green Party — second to Labour in 41 constituencies — put pressure on Labour to improve immigration and environmental policies, respectively. Recent riots all across the UK show that voters are concerned about migrants flooding the UK. The Starmer government will have to restrict arrivals. In fact, immigration was a key reason why voters chose Brexit in 2016.

During the election campaign itself, Labour promised a more effective approach to tackling illegal immigration and unveiled a plan to bring net migration down by training British workers. Labour threatened to block non-compliant companies from sponsoring visas for their overseas employees. On his first full day as prime minister, Starmer canceled the outgoing Conservative government's plan to deport illegal migrants to Rwanda, saying, "I'm not prepared to continue with gimmicks that don't act as a deterrent." Instead, his government aims to curb small boats crossing the English Channel by hiring investigators and using counter-terror powers to "smash" criminal people-smuggling gangs.

On the renewable energy front, Starmer's government has promised to accelerate the development of large projects by assessing them nationally, not locally, and ending an effective ban on onshore wind farms. The rise of the Green Party, as mentioned earlier, and the resurgence of Liberal Democrats (the party for the nice Tories of the shires) will make Starmer's Labour more environmentally friendly than Sunak's Tories. (As an aside, the Liberal Democrats' victory in Tory heartlands saw them win seats held by five former Tory prime ministers.)

Most political parties with such a large majority would enact a far more radical agenda. Starmer is determined to do no such thing. Those close to the prime minister reveal that he is playing the long game and aims to be in power for at least two terms. Starmer is determined to win back Labour's credibility as the party of responsible government after 14 years in opposition and the damage suffered under Corbyn's leadership.

The country is now led not by alumni of the famous public schools (the curious British name for expensive private schools) but by leaders who hail from the working and middle classes. They are more self-reflective, grounded and rigorous than

their Conservative counterparts. To put it in English Civil War parlance, Starmer and Reeves are Roundheads, not Cavaliers. After years of posh public schoolboys from Eton and Winchester ruling the roost, no-nonsense commoners are on top.



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Horrific Jobs Report Suggests That a US Recession Now Looms

Imran Khalid
August 21, 2024

The US faces the possibility of an imminent economic recession. Investors fear the combination of bleak job reports, dismal non-farm employment data and declining technology stocks. The Federal Reserve has signaled interest rate cuts, which can stimulate the economy but, conversely, cast doubt on its current stability.

The United States economy appears to be precariously perched on the brink of recession. The stock market's recent plunge reflects heightened recession fears, further exacerbated by a bleak jobs report. On August 2, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that non-farm employment rose by a mere 114,000 in July. This marks the lowest increase since December 2020, and far below the anticipated 175,000.

Concurrently, the unemployment rate edged up to 4.3%, the highest since October 2021, surpassing the expected 4.1%. These disappointing figures triggered a rush into government bonds, driving benchmark yields below 4%. After the data release, US President Joe Biden acknowledged the mixed signals: While inflation shows signs of easing, job growth is evidently slowing. This dual challenge paints a complex picture for policymakers juggling between fostering employment and curbing inflation.

The market's reaction to the jobs data highlights the precarious balance that the US economy must maintain. As investors seek refuge in safer assets, the broader implications for growth and stability remain a pressing concern. The road ahead for the country's economy is fraught with uncertainty, with market dynamics reflecting the underlying anxieties of a potential recession.

Tanking US tech stocks raise economic concern

Similarly, US stocks took a nosedive the next day, on August 3. They closed sharply lower after a weak July jobs report stoked fears about the softening economy. Technology stocks were hit particularly hard as they reeled from disappointing earnings reports. The Nasdaq Composite market index tumbled 2.4% and the S&P 500 fell 1.8%, while the Dow Jones Industrial Average slid 1.5%.

Each major index ended the week on a sour note. The Dow's four-week winning streak came to an abrupt halt. Both the Nasdaq and S&P 500 marked their third consecutive weekly declines. Notably, the Nasdaq has slipped into technical correction territory, and now sits 10% below its July 10 record close.

The weak jobs report underscored the precarious state of the economy. It exhibited a picture of uncertainty, with employment gains failing to meet expectations. This dismal news, coupled with underwhelming earnings from tech giants, cast a shadow over the markets. Investors are left grappling with the dual challenges of a faltering labor market and lackluster corporate performance.

As the summer heat blazes on, so do concerns about the future trajectory of the US economy. The recent downturn in the stock market serves as a stark reminder of the volatility that lies ahead.

The Sahn Rule warns of an imminent recession

The July non-farm data from the US has intensified concerns about the employment landscape, raising the specter of a looming recession. With the release of this data, the unemployment rate has surged by 0.6% from its low point earlier this year.

This rise triggers the Sahn Rule, a principle introduced in 2019 by former Federal Reserve economist Claudia Sahn. According to the rule, when the three-month moving average of the unemployment rate increases by 0.5% or more from its lowest point in the previous 12 months, the US economy practically enters a recession.

The rule serves as an early warning system for the US government. It signals when a recession is imminent and enables timely policy interventions to support households through economic

downturns. Its accuracy and reliability have made it a cornerstone in economic forecasting.

As the unemployment rate climbs, the pressing question becomes how the government will respond to cushion the blow for American families. The current data denotes the urgent need for strategic measures to mitigate the impact of a potential recession.

The latest US non-farm employment report has sparked two significant market concerns: fears of an impending recession and anxiety over a potential Federal Reserve policy misstep. Analysts now worry that the economy may be weaker than the central bankers at the Federal Reserve had anticipated. This could compel the Federal Reserve to make a sharp cut in borrowing costs in September, or even resort to an emergency rate cut beforehand to stimulate demand.

The sharp slowdown in payrolls in July and a more pronounced rise in the unemployment rate have made a September interest rate cut seem inevitable. This situation has increased speculation that the Federal Reserve might commence its loosening cycle with a significant 50 basis point cut, or an even more drastic intra-meeting move. With the economy seemingly teetering on the brink of recession, market expectations for Federal Reserve rate cuts are intensifying. Traders are now betting that the Federal Reserve will reduce rates by 50 basis points next month.

Rate cuts are a double-edged sword

Furthermore, the outlook for 2024 has shifted dramatically. Bets on total rate cuts for the year have reached 111 basis points. This growing speculation underscores the precarious balance the Federal Reserve must maintain.

The market's trajectory hinges not only on economic data but also on how investors interpret

potential interest rate cuts. These cuts are typically designed to stimulate economic activity, encouraging businesses to expand and consumers to spend. However, they can also indicate underlying concerns about the economy's health.

The delicate balance the Federal Reserve must maintain becomes evident in times like these. On one hand, cutting rates can provide much-needed relief to a slowing economy, fostering growth and stability. On the other hand, such measures might be perceived as a red flag. They could indicate that the Federal Reserve is apprehensive about the economy's robustness. Investors are acutely aware of this duality.

When the Federal Reserve signals a rate cut, the immediate reaction can be a mix of optimism and caution. The optimism stems from the potential boost to economic activity, while the caution arises from the implicit admission that the economy might be faltering. As the market digests these signals, the broader implications for economic growth and stability remain a pressing concern.

The Federal Reserve's actions are under intense scrutiny, with every move potentially influencing market sentiment. The interplay between rate cuts and market perception reflects the complex dynamics at play, shaping the future trajectory of the US economy.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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The Truth About Narendra Modi's Unexpected Electoral Flop

Aniruddh Rajendran, Anton Schauble
August 22, 2024

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell from 303 to 240 seats in a 543-strong Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament. It managed to stay in power only thanks to its coalition partners. Suffice to say, Modi ran a poor campaign, selected some terrible candidates and relied on out-of-touch sycophants instead of competent supporters or allies, triggering a crisis for the BJP.

On June 4, India released the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi failed to win a majority on its own. India's Lok Sabha ("House of the People" — the parliament's lower house) has 543 seats. Before the elections, the BJP had 303 seats in the Lok Sabha, and Modi set the target as 400 this time around. Instead, the BJP won only 240 Lok Sabha seats, and Modi is in power only thanks to his allies. In fact, the BJP's allies did better than their big brother in these elections.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has 293 seats. This is less than the BJP held alone in the previous Lok Sabha (303) and much less than the alliance as a whole did (353). Clearly, the BJP is now in a weaker position and Modi is not quite as powerful as before. He has been prime minister since 2014 and the undisputed

top dog in Indian politics. Now, Modi's top dog status is under threat.

There are four key reasons why the BJP has fallen short in these elections. First, the party ran a poor campaign which ignored key issues that concerned Indian voters. Second, candidate selection was poor, and the party over-relied on turncoats while ignoring popular local leaders. Third, Modi alienated core voter groups that are traditionally loyal to the BJP. These groups felt taken for granted and sat the election out. Lastly, Modi failed to sufficiently extend the party's appeal to voter groups traditionally outside of the BJP.

Ultimately, all four factors come back to a first cause: Modi has attempted to run the BJP from the top down. Instead of balancing the concerns of leaders, members and voters in each state, Modi tried to campaign on a national brand that centered on his own personality and achievements. This presidential style played poorly in a party with a strong tradition of internal democracy and grassroots organization. Modi has filled his cabinet with career bureaucrats that only answer to him instead of politicians that have their own followings. Instead of mobilizing all the forces of the BJP — which is still by far the most powerful political force in the country — Modi's small circle of apparatchiks isolated itself and lost a sense of what voters really wanted.

The last two months have demonstrated that the Modi-led BJP is running out of steam. Opposition leaders such as Indian National Congress (INC) chief Rahul Gandhi, Shashi Tharoor and Mahua Moitra have been hammering Modi and the BJP in the Lok Sabha. Because it lacks the votes in parliament, the government has had to withdraw key bills. However, the Modi government has still not learned its lesson and has no clear plan for the future. Furthermore, no feedback loop exists and

Modi is increasingly out of touch with the new realities of Indian politics.

The BJP's campaign was not only poor but also tone-deaf

In 2014 and 2019, the BJP successfully sold a positive message of growth and development that galvanized voters. This year, its messaging got bogged down in identity politics, focusing on irrelevant Hindu–Muslim culture war issues such as which meats people eat and what ornaments women wear on their wedding days. The BJP thus ignored more vital issues like economic distress and mishandled numerous entrance exams, alienating voters.

What issues do matter to Indians? It is an oft-cited law of elections that “it’s the economy, stupid!” The universality of this truth may be fairly doubted. Still, it holds true in most elections, and the 2024 Indian elections were no exception. In the years leading up to the election, India faced several economic setbacks.

In 2016, Modi announced his now-infamous demonetization scheme. The government pulled 500- and 1000-rupee banknotes from circulation. Modi hoped that removing large bills would hamper organized crime and force businesses to conduct exchanges electronically, thus preventing them from avoiding taxes. Instead, the move wreaked havoc on India’s vital informal sector and on small businesses that relied on cash. The scheme may have wiped out as much as 1% of India’s GDP and cost over 1.5 million jobs.

The demonetization fiasco is a great example of the growing out-of-touchness of the Modi administration. Had party leadership consulted more closely with small business leaders, it would have understood how vital the cash economy was for this vital sector. Instead, it arbitrarily rolled out

a policy that decimated millions of small businesses around the country.

The Modi government deserves much credit for rolling out the much-needed goods and services tax (GST), which made India an economic union like the EU for the first time after independence in 1947. Yet it is also true that the government implemented the GST suddenly and arbitrarily (on July 1, 2017 — India’s financial year begins on April 1), giving no time for businesses to adapt and causing many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to go bankrupt. As per the World Bank, “the multiple rate structure and an enforcement framework using onerous reporting requirements for businesses place[d] a huge compliance burden on businesses especially SMEs and [had] a negative impact on the economy.”

From 2020, India also struggled through the COVID-19 pandemic. Although India eventually succeeded in inoculating the majority of its population, the vaccine rollout was bumpy. Several nationwide lockdowns froze the economy for a total of 74 days, with additional lockdowns in many states. These lockdowns were arbitrary. Bureaucrats changed conditions every few hours, leading to nightmarish results for citizens and businesses.

Demonetization, GST and COVID shrank the economy. Businesses closed and unemployment soared. For example, the number of unincorporated enterprises fell from 63.3 million in 2016 to 5.03 million by the middle of 2021, only recovering to their previous levels in 2023. That meant over a hundred million lost jobs in that sector alone.

India currently faces an unemployment rate of 8%, and many economists believe the real figure is much higher. India’s population is growing, but the economy is not growing fast enough to employ millions of young people entering the job market every year. Also, growth is increasingly jobless,

and fast growth alone may not solve the jobs problem.

In recent history, Indians have looked to the public sector for jobs. Under socialism, these jobs were prized. Although they make up only 5% of the job market, public jobs continue to hold symbolic value for struggling Indians. However, there is an acute lack of openings in the public sector and scarce jobs have resulted in sporadic protests by angry youth.

In an unpopular move, the government made military service temporary. Now, volunteers join for four years and only 25% of them will be retained. If they get wounded or killed, it is unclear whether their families will get pensions or benefits. This scheme has cost the BJP votes among castes and communities with a tradition of military service.

In India, huge numbers of applicants compete for a relatively tiny number of positions. Of course, this is often frustrating, but one can at least content oneself when the selection process is fair. Recently, however, a spate of leaks has compromised the integrity of civil service exams in many states. In February, hundreds of candidates appearing for these entrance exams protested in Lucknow. They had good reason to do so. Exam papers appeared on social media platforms before the government conducted the exams. The Uttar Pradesh (UP) state government was forced to cancel the examination and it has not been the only state to suffer this embarrassment. Between 2015 and 2023, nearly 70 incidents of paper leaks have taken place across India.

The BJP's campaign neither addressed the exam leaks issue nor provided potential solutions. Indians understand that their young nation is emerging from poverty and that prosperity will not come easily. Yet they need to know that their government is aware of their needs and that it has a

plan to address them. Instead, the BJP campaign ignored their concerns and focused on irrelevant culture war issues. Modi fearmongered about the opposition pandering to Muslim vote banks, claiming they intended to give public sector jobs slotted for members of poor Hindu castes away to Muslims. He baited voters with thinly veiled references to Muslims as "infiltrators." This turned off an electorate that largely rejects religious antipathy and wants progress, not infighting.

In 2014 and 2019, the BJP ran smart campaigns that gave it an advantage over its opponents. It successfully leveraged Modi's personal charisma, made effective use of social media and commanded a solid party organization. After ten years in power, the party seems to have lost its edge.

Modi's charisma and his spirited campaigning did little to save candidates whom the party fielded with no consideration to their background and track record, especially in UP. Commentator Sanjeev Singh remarks that the BJP lost 10 to 15 of the state's 80 Lok Sabha seats simply due to the massive unpopularity of its chosen candidates.

This time around, the opposition used social media more deftly than the BJP. The BJP merrily repeated the slogan "char sau paar" — "400 plus" — to indicate its high hopes for a blowout result. The opposition turned the slogan on its head and stirred voters to action by warning that, if the BJP won more than 400 seats, the party would change the constitution. The BJP top brass tried to reassure voters that they had no plans to do so, but the damage was done.

Finally, the party organization had grown lax compared to previous years. The widespread belief that Modi could win any election and complacency that "400 plus" was inevitable encouraged BJP voters to stay at home.

The BJP sidelined grassroots politicians in favor of bureaucrats and turncoats

The BJP has been a mass-based party that rose as the INC lost its mass base and turned into a dynastic fiefdom. Along with its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP is a cadre-based organization. Neither the RSS nor the BJP was designed to function as a one-man crew. Modi has fostered a personality cult within the BJP, and the party has not organized an internal election since 2014, the year Modi became prime minister. Party members complained that Modi and his number two, Home Minister Amit Shah, kept tight control over candidate selection. The system has ossified from the top down, and talent is not rising through the ranks.

Worse, Modi has surrounded himself with sycophants. Officers of the heaven-born Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) are more powerful than cabinet ministers.

Many ministers are ex-IAS officers like Ashwini Vaishnaw and could not win even a municipal election. Vaishnaw's shambolic handling of Indian Railways, with tracks deteriorating and accidents increasing as service drops, has been an embarrassment. Vaishnaw has tried and failed to present an image of success by publicizing the premium Vande Bharat lines, which most of the population do not use. Voters sense that ministers like Vaishnaw are shallow social media phenomena and not representatives of a bona fide constituency. They declined to support more of Modi's flash-in-the-pan, manufactured politicians at the polls.

Modi even gave tickets to undeserving children of IAS officers like Nripendra Mishra whose son Saket Mishra lost a seat the BJP would have otherwise won. Modi has no children and has a

reputation of abstaining from nepotism. However, he has allowed his ministers and bureaucrats to make nepotistic choices. Voters punished the BJP for nepotism.

In addition, the BJP has given tickets to turncoats from other parties. Kripashankar Singh went from heading the Mumbai unit of the INC to running for the BJP in Jaunpur, UP. Naturally, he lost the seat. In Maharashtra, Ajit Pawar split a faction of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), a party founded by his uncle Sharad Pawar, to join the NDA. The NCP contested four seats in Maharashtra and won only one. Voters found these Machiavellian alliances unconvincing because they had no ideological justification.

Meanwhile, the opposition lampooned Modi's "washing machine" in which corrupt politicians were forgiven in exchange for their loyalty.

Not only did Modi stuff the party with nonentities who do not command the loyalty of the rank-and-file, but he pushed popular local leaders out. Rumor has it that Modi and Shah have been gunning for Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who is charismatic and popular. Apparently, Adityanath sent a list of 35 candidates to the BJP national leadership, but not one of them got a ticket for any of UP's 80 Lok Sabha seats.

As a result, many BJP workers and RSS members refused to campaign, and many loyal BJP supporters declined to vote. Why should they work for spineless turncoats while their own leaders sit on the sidelines?

Modi's shrinking inner circle is out of touch with up-and-coming talent. Indeed, it feels threatened by young blood. So, instead of making organic promotions from within, Modi and company cobbled together a motley crew of administrators, relatives and turncoats. Needless to say, they inspired nobody.

The BJP alienated core party followers and RSS members

Poor messaging and faulty candidate selection are tactical errors. But the rot runs to the strategic level as well. Simply put, the Modi cabinet has become so out of touch that they have forgotten who actually votes for their party. The end result: the BJP alienated the individuals, castes and movements that form the core of its voter base.

We have already described how the BJP alienated party workers by sidelining local leaders. It bears noting that this was no mere blunder, but a symptom of something deeply wrong within Modi's approach. Traditionally, the BJP is a grassroots party. In each state, local leaders command the loyalty of sections of the populace that have a long-standing relationship with the party and trust them to promote their interests. The party has a culture of local democracy, unlike the INC, which is always led monarchically by a scion of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty. Modi attempted to graft a leader-centric style of politics onto the BJP and run it from the top-down. He thought that he could build a platform on national issues and ignore sectional interests. Thus, core constituencies felt ignored. They punished Modi by staying home on election day.

Hindi-speaking forward castes — particularly Brahmins, Rajputs and Banias — make up the backbone of this Hindu nationalist party. These affluent castes support a disproportionate amount of India's tax burden. (Just 1–2% of India's population pays income taxes.) Modi's administration has raised taxes in order to pay for its ambitious infrastructure development projects and welfare schemes. The bureaucrats who make these decisions are not politicians and thus feel no pressure to please their constituents. Forward caste voters thus feel that their loyalty is being punished as Modi robs Peter to pay Paul. They send their children to private schools and make use of private

healthcare. Why should they supply Modi with funds and votes in return for nothing?

The Modi administration has alienated Rajputs in particular. This caste was once the warrior aristocracy of central and northern India. Although they number just 12 million, they are a key BJP constituency and have been loyal to the party since its inception. Rajputs resented Modi's sidelining of Adityanath, who belongs to their caste. To make matters worse, in March, Parshottam Rupala, a member of Modi's cabinet, gratuitously insulted Rajputs by insinuating that they broke bread with the British colonizers.

Rajputs still retain their old aristocratic disdain for businessmen and look with diffidence upon Modi, Shah and Rupala, who hail from the mercantile, coastal state of Gujarat. They feel no loyalty for a Gujarati party elite that disrespects them and treats them, not as constituents, but as footsoldiers who will vote for whom they are told. So, Rajputs in key BJP stronghold states like Rajasthan, Haryana and above all Uttar Pradesh sat the vote out.

Another key constituency is the RSS. The RSS, whose name translates to National Volunteer Organisation, is the source from which the BJP sprung. This Hindu nationalist organization originally founded the BJP and still largely defines its ideological makeup.

The RSS is a truly popular movement. It boasts millions of members, among whom the most dedicated are the pracharaks, unmarried young men who dedicate their lives to the organization to win hearts and minds by preaching, demonstrating and organizing social relief programs. The RSS distributes food to the poor, help build homes and participate in disaster relief. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they distributed masks and hand soap. These efforts have won them widespread popularity. Often accused of being Hindu fascists

— since, at their founding in 1925, they modeled themselves on Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's Blackshirts — the RSS is in many ways more like the Boy Scouts or the Knights of Columbus. They are the BJP's backbone and spiritual heart.

Notably, the RSS headquarters is not in Delhi but in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The RSS has an independent power base that must be respected but the BJP forgot this basic point. The Modi administration has distanced itself from the RSS. Jagat Prakash Nadda, Modi's appointee as BJP president, virtually declared the BJP independent from the RSS in a May 2024 interview. This statement alienated millions of traditional RSS/BJP workers.

Note that Nadda is himself a sycophant with no significant popular base. Once again, one of Modi's out-of-touch cronies was speaking to the cameras, not to the people. Distancing the party from a controversial right-wing organization may sound good to the Westernized English-speaking press, but it betrayed an utter lack of understanding of the sentiments of the average BJP voter.

Modi had hoped to earn the gratitude of conservative Hindus by constructing the Ram Mandir, a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, UP. In 1992, Hindu rioters destroyed a mosque supposedly built atop a demolished temple during the reign of Mughal Emperor Babur. The temple's construction was expensive and annoyed residents of the sacred city. Too many people lost their homes and did not get adequate compensation. Modi's favorite bureaucrat, Nripendra Mishra, the notorious IAS father of the earlier-mentioned Saket Mishra, was in charge of building the Ram temple and did a truly awful job.

Modi insulted Hindu organizations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal by telling them not to attend the inauguration of the Ram temple. He invited film star Amitabh Bachchan,

whose wife is an opposition MP, to the ceremony but ignored Lal Krishna Advani, the prime mover of the temple construction movement and his political godfather. Many traditional BJP voters were disgusted by Modi's behavior.

The BJP also estranged ideologically friendly parties in various states. In Maharashtra, the BJP's unnecessary schism with the local Hindi nationalist Shiv Sena cost the party dearly. In Tamil Nadu, the religiously oriented AIADMK is a natural ally and ran as part of the NDA in 2014 and 2019. In 2024, the BJP decided to go it alone. BJP state president Kuppuswamy Annamalai exacerbated the split with antagonistic comments against the AIADMK. The BJP took just 11% of the vote, the AIADMK 20%, and neither won a single seat with the opposition sweeping all 39 constituencies.

Modi forgot to keep main supporters and key allies happy. He acted like the BJP was his personal fiefdom. Modi assumed that party members and workers, Rajputs, Brahmins, Banias, Hindu groups and the RSS would vote for him automatically. In a nutshell, Modi forgot that he was the head of the BJP, not the INC.

The BJP underperformed among poor castes

Modi failed to heed his own party because he was trying to expand beyond his traditional base and attract a wider set of voters — the poor. He thought he could gain a voter base so wide that no particular interest group inside or outside the party would have any sway over him.

Yet Modi was not successful. Of course, some of the poor did vote for him; it is impossible to win an election in India without at least some of the poor. Yet Modi did not win the poor over in nearly the numbers he had hoped. Why?

The most basic reason is that, to attempt to reach out to the poor as a voter base, the BJP attempted

to play a game that everyone else was already playing. The BJP's traditional middle- and upper-class voter base knows why it votes for the BJP. They are invested in the part. But why should the poor vote for the BJP? Modi offers a dole of grain or rice, free cooking gas, new bank accounts, maybe even cash transfers. Who cares if Rahul Gandhi offers even more?

It is true that Modi has built infrastructure at record pace. It is also true that Infrastructure projects are impressive and will pay dividends for decades down the line. Modi's government presided over unprecedented economic growth. Yet unemployment is still very high. To the unemployed, growth is just a number in the newspaper or, worse, the reason prices are rising.

So, neither welfare nor development have won over the poor. Token reforms do not win elections — especially not when those reforms are paid for by squeezing the traditional party base.

"Is that the thanks I get for feeding you and treating you so well?" complained the Shepherd.

"Do not expect us to join your flock," replied one of the Wild Goats. "We know how you would treat us later on, if some strangers should come as we did."

— Aesop

Populism is not a game the BJP was built to win.

For all its Sanatan socialism, the BJP also performed poorly with poor populations, especially Muslims and Dalits. India's Muslim community is largely poor, and many of them benefited greatly from Modi's infrastructure development and poverty alleviation projects. Further, Modi banned instant divorce, a deeply unfair traditional practice that allowed Muslim men to abandon their wives simply by uttering the word "divorce" three times. He has made the lives of poor Muslims, especially

women, considerably better. Yet he has not reaped political support in return.

Instead, Muslims perceive the Hindu nationalist BJP as anti-Muslim. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which grants a fast track to citizenship only to non-Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, reinforced this perception. And in the lead-up to the election, Modi did himself no favors. He indulged in rhetoric that made Muslims appear threatening. And of course, though the Ram Mandir affair underwhelmed Hindus,

Modi's construction of this Hindu temple on the grounds of a medieval mosque, even if had fallen into disuse and was once a temple, infuriated Muslims who then voted en masse against the BJP.

Modi also lost the sizable Dalit constituency. Prior to Independence, Dalits occupied the lowest rank in India's caste system, performing menial labor. India's constitution abolished the caste system and established an affirmative action system wherein Dalits would fill reserved positions in the bureaucracy and educational institutions. The INC circulated a rumor that the BJP planned to do away with these reservations if it got enough seats in parliament to amend the constitution. Dalit voters responded in droves and rejected the BJP.

It did not make sense for the BJP to abandon Dalit reservation. That would have meant political suicide and few, if any, parties would engage in such an act. Yet the rumor stuck. This shows the extent of the disconnect between the BJP and the poorest of the poor

In Uttar Pradesh, Muslims and Dalits joined together with Yadavs to back the dynastic left-wing Samajwadi Party and the INC. Together, they gained 37 seats. The BJP hemorrhaged 29. Note that Uttar Pradesh is by far India's most populous state and commands 80 out of 543 seats in the Lok

Sabha. It is a miracle that the BJP is still governing without winning in the state. Next time, the party may not be so lucky.



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Failed Coup in Bolivia Reveals Emerging Social Weaknesses

Luiz Cesar Pimentel

August 23, 2024

With support from politicians and society, Bolivian president Luis Arce neutralizes General Zúñiga's pathetic attempt to seize power. However, the coup, though failed, exposed the weaknesses in Bolivia's society and politics. Now Arce faces potential disruption as he now has to contend with a bumbling military on top of his political rival, former president Evo Morales.

American writer and international correspondent John Gunther, in a moment of inspired refinement, coined the following phrase in 1944: Bolivia is not a country, it's a problem. He was referring to Bolivia's political instability. Ironically, it's one of the few stable things in the country. In the political rollercoaster that jolts Bolivians between coups d'état, Bolivians have faced no less than 194 such episodes since independence. The most recent one on June 26, led by General Juan José Zúñiga, ended in a resounding failure – and with scenes of legitimate comedy.

The failed coup reveals political and social instability

Zúñiga and his forces marched to the traditional Palacio Quemado in the country's capital La Paz to oust Bolivia's current president, Luis Arce. His men even broke down a gate with an armored car. The problem, to recall Gunther, is that Arce does not work in Palacio Quemado. Rather, he occupies

the Great People's Palace, a modern building on a corner of the same block.

In a scene that went around the world, Arce walked up to Quemados and faced Zúñiga eye to eye. With the support of politicians, part of the Armed Forces and society, Arce turned the messy action into dust. He then walked back to the Great People's Palace and swore in a new military leadership. "No one can take away the democracy we have won. We are sure that we will continue to work," he said as Zúñiga's troops left the square.

Aside from the clumsiness, the action in Bolivia reveals a considerable degree of seriousness when placed in the context of the crises that are terrorizing South America. Just remember the recent attacks on democracy carried out in Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador and Bolivia, including the criminal action of the Bolsonaro supporters on January 8 in Brazil. Whether governed by the left or the right, emerging Latin American countries can't keep pace with competitors. The usual wounds - technological backwardness, poverty, inequality, a shortage of value-added products for export - are still exposed in the 21st century.

Bolivia has yet to escape colonial yokes

The coup plot and political turmoil in Bolivia have their origins in lithium. The country has the world's largest reserves of this mineral. It is estimated that regions to the south of Bolivia contain 21 million tons, especially in the area known as Salar de Uyuni. Lithium is the raw material for batteries, especially those for electric cars. As the industry in the sector has grown spectacularly in recent years, the price of the product per ton has risen from \$5,000 USD in 2010 to \$80,000 USD in 2022.

The United States and China, the main manufacturers of vehicles with high-performance

batteries, are fighting a silent war for control of production. Currently, lithium production and exportation is controlled by the Chinese. As the US government fights for control over lithium production, more seismic tremors can be expected soon. The botched and misguided invasion of Quemados demonstrates that Bolivia, and the rest of South America, has not yet rid itself of the colonial caudillo (leader) figure. "It's typical of banana republics in colonized countries," explains Paulo Niccoli, PhD in Social Sciences and a professor at Casa do Saber. He interviewed former president Evo Morales in 2022 and released a book about the movement that removed him from power three years earlier: *The 2019 Coup in Bolivia: Imperialism against Evo Morales*.

Arce has two problems on his hands

Now Arce still has to contend with the bumbling military on top of the endless appetite of Evo Morales. Despite coming from the same party, the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), Morales wants to recapture the party in order to return to power in the 2025 elections. Arce used to be a friend of Morales, who, in turn, supported his election. However, Morales cut ties because of Arce's closeness to right-wing figures. Among them was Zúñiga. "You have to understand the country. You have economic hubs like Santa Cruz de la Sierra, totally dominated by the neoliberal right, but the rest of Bolivia is mostly progressive. In order to govern, Arce began to bring in various right-wing figures, including this general who promoted the theatrical coup, is accused of corruption and has had numerous conflicts with Morales," explains Niccoli.

Zúñiga's idea was to use the coup to bury Morales' possible candidacy in the 2025 presidential elections. This would have been done to the detriment of President Arce's attempt to be re-elected. Zúñiga believed Arce would agree to a self-coup, remain in power and cancel the next

elections. However, the local Supreme Court has not even authorized Evo's attempt at a fifth term. Morales continues to campaign across the country to mobilize support. Clearly, Zuñiga's approach was half-baked and unnecessary.

"The maneuver was totally anachronistic," Niccoli sums up. "With the end of the Cold War and the stability of democracies, the era of so-called soft coups began, without the use of military force." Niccoli also cites the cases of the Kirchners in Argentina and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, all sponsored, he says, by economic powers. "The script is always the same." Not for Zuñiga, it seems.

Shortly before going to jail, an isolated Zuñiga threatened to release two staunch opponents of Arce: former interim president Jeanine Añez and the governor of Santa Cruz, Luis Fernando Camacho. But the problem - to borrow the international correspondent's phrase again - is that they both emphatically condemned the coup attempt. "The mandate of the popular vote must be respected. Any action against it is absolutely illegal and unconstitutional," said Camacho. The Bolivian Public Prosecutor's Office promises to investigate and put in jail the military and civilians who took part in the action. The years and decades go by, and Gunther is increasingly right.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



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well as the manager of UOL and an international correspondent in Asia. Luiz has also written seven books in the area of communication.

Simple Lessons on Islam and Hindu Politics for Narendra Modi

Sushil Kaul
August 23, 2024

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has gone off the rails. Here is a personal letter that sets out where he has gone wrong, the challenges India faces and what the prime minister needs to do as an urgent priority.

Respected Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi,

After your speech observing India's 78th Independence Day on August 15, you may wish to convene the best and the brightest minds around you to respond to the country's most pressing internal security challenge, one which no Indian political leader has had the courage to confront let alone take any steps to resolve: the sinister designs that Muslims on the Indian Subcontinent have for India.

Their plans are all the more dangerous given the overthrow of the Bangladeshi government, after which, quite expectedly, outfits like the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) came crawling out the woodwork. HuT is an Islamic terrorist organization that positions itself as a political party. On August 9, it organized a rally in Dhaka and demanded the establishment of the Khalifah in Bangladesh. Such Muslim fundamentalists see India as a colonizer

state, in the same vein as the US and the UK. I am sure that your National Security Adviser Ajit Doval is telling you the same thing I want you to understand: India's neighborhood has become exponentially more dangerous than before.

Some home truths for you to note

Before I carry on, it is my duty as a well-wisher and as a concerned citizen to point out some important truths.

First, you insisted on making the 2024 elections a referendum on your name. Now, there are no prizes for guessing where the buck ought to come to a grinding stop for the underwhelming result.

Second, ten years have vanished since 2014, the year when you won a historic first mandate. In another blink of an eye, the next election will be upon us in 2029. Soon, it will be 2047, the target year you have set for Viksit Bharat (Developed India). Even you know that this is your last term and that you are running out of time.

Third, Hinduism's holy texts repeatedly warn of the perils of ahankara (ego). Both friends and enemies have accused you of this failing. So, I advise you to get a grip on your ahankara. Shrink-wrap and freeze it. Instead, adopt tyāga, Mr. Prime Minister. This will do you good and, more importantly, it will bring the nation tremendous benefit.

Fourth, you tried to win the Muslim vote through massive welfare schemes. Yet, unlike Jawaharlal Nehru, you did not win their hearts and minds. You certainly did not win Muslim votes. Indian Muslims voted shrewdly, tactically and effectively against you in 2024. Consider it carved in stone they will never vote for you and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Fifth, you underestimate your enemies. The opposition, thuggish, bereft of all scruples and decorum, will do anything — anything — to defeat you and obtain power. The English media in India follows the country's strange brand of secularism that has a romantic view of sharia. This scotch-drinking elite is happy for Muslims to marry four times and, together with their friends and family members in academia, wants the BJP out of power. The same holds true for Bollywood and left-leaning non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Sixth, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), more appositely known as the Indian Arrogant Service, is India's deep state and is implacably opposed to you. IAS officers have come through an examination system designed by the Congress Party's left-leaning ideologues. For their entire careers, they have benefited from rent-seeking by embodying a still-colonial state. They do not want any change. You have succumbed to their flattery and are surrounded by an IAS mafia that does not allow anyone access to your presence. Hindu organizations and devout Hindus have little standing in your administration, but IAS officers who were communists during their St. Stephen's College days can get things done in hours, if not minutes, by calling IAS officers who work in the Prime Minister's Office.

Seventh, the international ecosystem of the Left is your mortal enemy. For them, you are the butcher of Gujarat who slaughtered thousands in 2002. The American press calls a "Hindu supremacist" and "Hindu fascist." For them, you are an Indian version of Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini. Yet you crave approval from this ecosystem and ignore your supporters.

Eighth, centuries of colonization have made Hindus indifferent to their long-term civilizational interests. Extracting all the salt from the earth's oceans is an easier task than awakening the fractious, argumentative and chronically

ineffective Hindus. Under your prime ministership, we had a shot, but you have blown that opportunity most spectacularly. If and when voters turn to the opposition, it's highly unlikely your party will ever return to power. EVER. Then it's over for India and her Hindus.

The pathetic state of Hindus

Allow me to dwell on the division and weakness of Hindus here for a moment. And no, this is not some fake, doomsday, clickbait claim, but rather extrapolated from the views of two of India's greatest leaders: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The first is credited (falsely) with winning our independence, and the second is credited (rightly) with being the chief architect of our constitution. Love them or loathe them, but dismiss their views at your peril, Mr. Narendra Modi.

Gandhi said, "Hindus are cowards and Muslims bullies." The venerable leader offered no solution to this conundrum. Gandhi suggested that Hindus could sacrifice their lives for the Muslims if they wanted to establish their rule over India. Gandhi did not believe in fighting back even during the darkest days of pre-Partition violence.

Ambedkar, who was no friend of Gandhi but his political and ideological adversary, was a bare-knuckled realist on Islam and Muslims. His views are as relevant today as then: "To the Muslims, a Hindu is a Kaffir. A Kaffir is not worthy of respect. He is low-born and without status. That is why a country which is ruled by a Kaffir is Dar-ul-Harb to a Musalman. Given this, no further evidence seems to be necessary to prove that the Muslims will not obey a Hindu government." He commented on the "adoption by the Muslims of the gangster's method in politics" and stated, "The fact remains that India, if not exclusively under Muslim rule, is a Dar-ul-Harb and the Musalmans

according to the tenets of Islam are justified in proclaiming a jihad."

That jihad is underway not only in Pakistan but also in India. The now-banned Popular Front of India (PFI) plans to make India Islamic by 2047. Authorities have seized PFI plans that include "creating a civil war-like situation" in India. They also uncovered "a short course on how to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) using easily available materials" and pen drives containing videos related to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In India, few leaders have taken on the problem of Islam like their European counterparts. French President Emmanuel Macron has spoken against "Islamist separatism" and the dangers of Muslims forming a "counter-society" in France. Retired French generals have warned of "civil war" in the country.

Note that Muslims have marched in Germany demanding Sharia law. In the recent UK elections, Muslims organized themselves on exclusively Islamic issues through the pressure group "The Muslim Vote." The BBC reported on a Labour candidate who faced "abuse and intimidation" from supporters of an independent Muslim candidate. Australia has also started experiencing "Islamic sectarianism." Muslims self-separating in non-Muslim countries is inevitable given the Quranic command not to befriend Christians and Jews. We Hindus are much worse because we are not People of the Book, but idol-worshippers.

When the Muslims of India plan to make India by 2047, they are not trifling. World history records Islam's consistent pattern of lethality towards non-Muslims. Shia Iran has targeted the peace-loving Bahá'ís and Sunni Saudi Arabia still has no space for non-Sunni communities. In India, Muslims conducted ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Kashmir in the early 1990s.

That ethnic cleansing is a precursor to what many Muslims plan for the entire subcontinent. The PFI dreams of 2047, when political power is to return to the Muslim community from whom it was unjustly taken away by the British. It's entirely in character, given that Muslims also dream of getting back Spain — most of which they have not held since the Middle Ages. The saying that Muslims never forget and Hindus never remember has an element of truth.

Alarming trends call for immediate action, Mr. Prime Minister

Al Jazeera, the flagship media organization funded by gas-rich Qatar, has emerged as the voice of the Muslim world. It reports, "Between 1951 and 2011, the Muslim population [of India] rose from 35.4 million to 172 million. The Hindu population rose from 303 million to 966 million in the same period." That works out to a 391% increase in the Muslim population as compared to a 218% increase in the Hindu population. In short, the Muslim population increased at almost double the rate of Hindus for decades after independence.

Demography is destiny in a democracy. If Muslim populations increase, then politicians have to appeal to them. Obviously, some will promise sharia, as Muslims are calling for in Europe. We are facing a clash of civilizations as Samuel Huntington predicted after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Given the times of strife and struggle that lie ahead, we need a good successor to you, Mr. Prime Minister. I take the view that your successor must be Yogi Adityanath, the popular chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Yogi, as this charismatic leader is known, is young (yes, age matters and you are now old, Mr. Modi), dynamic and strong. Yogi is the only political leader in India who has had the courage to shine the light on and condemn the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh. Just as

you were the future once, Yogi is the future now, and you must give way.

As your parting gift to the nation, you must give Hindus administrative control over their temples. Most of my Western friends are shocked to learn that mosques and churches are autonomous and temples are not. Muslims and Christians have the right to run their religious establishments. However, the government controls Hindu temples and even runs them. The IAS lord it over Hindu places of worship but do not dare to intervene even if there is murder or rape in Muslim or Christian institutions. Similarly, Christians and Muslims have the right to run educational institutions whilst Hindus do not really have the same right. Mr. Narendra Modi, free the Hindus finally in their own land.

Mr. Prime Minister, you are a visionary and farsighted politician. So, get your act together and let's see some bare-knuckled action. Borrow your friend Donald Trump's phrase and say, "You're fired," to Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP party chief Jagat Prakash Nadda — they are both utterly incompetent, and you know it.

Instead, make alliances, soothe bruised egos and bring back sulking Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leaders. Once, you were a committed RSS worker. Today, you have abandoned the RSS for the IAS. Go back to your roots, Mr. Narendra Modi.

My advice is straightforward: Reduce ahankara; embrace tyāga; announce Yogi as your successor; give Hindus long-awaited religious freedom; fire your two cronies; return to your roots. If you do this and nothing else, history will remember you as the prime minister who successfully prevented India from falling to Islam yet again.

Will you listen and act?

Yours respectfully,

Dr. Sushil Kaul

Dr. Sushil Kaul is a Germany-based doctor and comes from a family that suffered in the cleansing of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990. He frequently travels to India and is researching a book on the patterns of interactions between Muslim communities residing in non-Muslim majority countries.

This Is What Makes Celebrity Couple Drama Interesting to Us

Ellis Cashmore
August 24, 2024

Actors Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck have filed for divorce after years of on-off relationships and breakups. But why do we care? What makes celebrity relationships so fascinating to us? In truth, it's a combination of vicarious experience and the feeling of authentic humanity that comes from these suffering idols.

“Jennifer Lopez and new flame Ben Affleck kissed, cuddled and made goo-goo eyes at each other for hours yesterday as the Latina lovely was feted at a surprise birthday party.” So reported the New York Post on July 25, 2002. It was the first of countless stories about the couple known sometimes-affectionately as “Bennifer.”

Twenty-two years later, the news broke: Bennifer is over — again. In the interim, there had

been an engagement, two marriages (to other people), five children, more than 18 new fragrance endorsements, a few box office bombs, several spells in rehab and an Oscar. And, for a while, the kind of media delirium that produces headlines like “BEN AND JEN: BODY LANGUAGE: WHAT IT MEANS,” “J.LO: ‘BEN DEFINITELY WEARS THE PANTS’” and “STRIPPER TELLS OF NIGHT WITH BEN.” Perhaps the most memorable was “BEN AND JEN SAY ‘NOT YET.’” In September 2003, Lopez visited her spiritual guide, spent two hours with her, then announced she was calling off her hugely publicized wedding with Ben Affleck. So the most recent breakup conjures a sense of *déjà vu*.

Here's my question: Why? No, not why does this pair keep getting together, splitting up and then kissing-and-making-up before parting again? The more interesting question is: Why on earth are we so fascinated by them? For that matter, why are we fascinated by celebrity couples and their endless caprice?

Taylor-Burton: The beginning of celebrity couple coverage

Precedents can be found in the life of Elizabeth Taylor, whose combustible affair with Richard Burton imploded in 1974, after 12 years, only to regenerate itself in 1975. They married each other for the second time, but this marriage ended in less than a year. Taylor's volatile romance is customarily considered the first modern celebrity coupling in the sense that it was copiously covered by the media. Because of this, it effectively promoted audience interest in how the other half love.

The Taylor-Burton amorous entanglement was a commodity — open, visible, public — compared to, for example, Ava Gardner's erratic but essentially private romance with Frank Sinatra in

the same period. With Gardner, the media were made to work for their stories.

Taylor, probably more than Burton, practically handed out press packs. Their relationship was a romance in the golden age of the American dream factory. As such, it was glitzy, glamorous and, at times, gaudy. There might have been some hesitance, perhaps even reluctance to stampede into Gardner's and Sinatra's private lives, especially as there were spouses and, more importantly, children to consider. Were the media likely to contribute to marital disharmony and even the sadness of innocent children merely by reporting the relationship? Taylor removed those kinds of uncertainties. She practically directed events, which involved double-home-destruction on a catastrophic scale.

Taylor, like Gardner, reminded the world that women could be and often were prime movers in relationships. Sinatra went on to become one of the preeminent entertainers of the 20th century. But during the marriage (1951-1957), Gardner, not he, was the main attraction. One inquisitive enquirer once asked her why she stayed with the 119-pound Sinatra. Gardner replied "Well, I'll tell you — nineteen pounds is cock."

Similarly, Taylor was the force field that pulled in media from all over the world. Being the consummate Hollywood star — Burton had learned his art on the stage — Taylor knew the value of ostentatiousness. She behaved as if she were always in front of a camera. She usually was.

Tabloids and the new voyeurism

There was nothing comparable until 1999, when Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt appeared together at the Emmys and announced a relationship that was, for all intents and purposes, conducted in front of cameras. This included a lavish Malibu wedding in July 2000. The marriage lasted until 2005, by

which time J.Lo's epic relationship with Affleck was known, had taken over as the celebrity coupling du jour and, in time, supplied a narrative of Homeric proportions.

There were other breakups that took the entertainment world by storm: Britney Spears and Kevin Federline separated in 2006. Justin Timberlake and Cameron Diaz broke up in 2007. But Lopez and Affleck was epochal: It characterized a period when the media's interest in the unappetizing areas of celebrity life was rising and audiences gave their approval to the increased coverage. One way they did this was by buying tabloid magazines.

Sales of the likes of *Us Weekly*, *People* and *Star* have slipped in recent years as social media has become the main conduit of celebrity gossip. But their impact in the early 2000s was appreciable and played no small part in cultivating our near-voyeuristic interest in glamorous couples. It could be plausibly argued that there was little new in this. Some might maintain that audiences had long been attracted to dreadful experiences while they remained at safe distance. Living through awful times vicariously may have its rewards: Just imagining how others feel rather than actually feeling is a pain with its own analgesic properties.

The decision by Aniston and Pitt to split and Pitt's subsequent romance with Angelina Jolie was the affair that shook tabloid journalism. It alerted editors that audiences enjoyed learning about how people who otherwise led charmed lives were just as susceptible to the same painful ordeals and privations as anybody else.

This is part of the reason for our prolonged captivation with Lopez and Affleck and, to a lesser extent, other celeb couples. We might envy their lifestyles and adulation. We might even engage in wish-fulfillment and imagine what the world must be like with an A-list partner. Yet, there is

gratification in learning that even the world's most fabulous couples experience mundane squabbles and domestic discord, reminding us that beneath the glamor, they too are just as human as we are.

Performative coupledness and authenticity

That's not the only reason we're drawn to celebrity couples. Harper's Bazaar writer Marie-Claire Chappet uses the term "performative coupledness" to describe the way many couples like J.Lo and Affleck present themselves to the media for our delectation. Chappet argues that celebrity couples are not passive recipients: They pull out as many stops as they can to maximize the inquisitiveness of the media. Coupledness can be a valuable and highly commodifiable item.

Chappet also suggests there is a kind of synergy in performative coupling. "Just look at Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez," she writes, "both huge stars whose wattage flickered all the brighter once they got back together. In fact, in many ways, this couple are the ultimate embodiment of this trend." The colossal coverage given the latest breakup underlines her point.

Neither party swept gracefully upwards after the 2003 breakup. Affleck had scored a triumph with his Oscar-winning film *Argo*, but had featured in flops, too. He struggled with alcohol dependency and had at least three periods in rehab. Lopez's career also seemed to spiral downwards when she appeared on the television series *American Idol*. But to her dubious credit, her Super Bowl halftime show appearance in 2020 elicited 1,312 complaints from viewers to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). She was 50 years old at the time and most of the complaints were about the sexual explicitness of her performance. The latest rift will surely regenerate interest in the ill-starred duo.

No celebrity couple is perfect. Even the best-matched partnerships hit unexpected and often hidden snags, obstacles that complicate or even destroy relationships. If a couple is seen as just too good to be true, the adage kicks in: It usually is. Celebrity couples must have the imprimatur of genuineness to captivate us. This means extremely short affairs, like Kim Kardashian's 72-day marriage to Kris Humphries, are dismissed as stunts. Or, in the case of Britney Spears, whose marriage to Jason Alexander lasted 55 hours, they're viewed as false-starts.

The seeming contradiction between an authentic relationship and performativity is smoothed over by audiences who like to see people at their best and worst. Today's celebrity-savvy audiences suspect staging here and there and accept it. They are celebrities, after all. But couples must humanize themselves and remind audiences of their authenticity with everyday emotions, quarrels and fall-outs that serve to maintain captivation. An occasional rage helps, too.

J.Lo and Affleck may be waving goodbye to each other, but they might just as well be waving a banner bearing the slogan, "This is our pitch for immortality." Individually, they're probably worth a lot less than they are together. But even breaking-up unites them as far as the media and its audiences are concerned. The heartbroken pair appear to be marching toward celebrity immortality. Meanwhile, we wait for the reconciliation.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of *Celebrity Culture*, now in its third edition.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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I Made Two Journeys to Artsakh in Response to Azerbaijan's Invasion of Armenia's Ancestral Homeland

Mark MacCarley
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In 2016 and 2020, Azerbaijan invaded Artsakh, an unrecognized republic long associated with Armenia. Responding to both, Major General (Ret) Mark MacCarley traveled to Armenia and Artsakh. MacCarley and reporter Appo Jabarian inspected their armies, offering feedback for improvement. How did the militaries respond to their advice?

In Spring 2016, Azerbaijan, an oil-rich former Soviet republic in the South Caucasus, invaded the Republic of Artsakh in a four-day conflict. Also known as Nagorno-Karabakh, this self-proclaimed independent enclave has been

associated with the Republic of Armenia, a rising democracy and emerging friend of the United States. Many consider this land the ancestral homeland of the Armenian people. After Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, both nations fought fiercely to control this long-contested area. When a ceasefire was finally declared in 1994, Armenia had succeeded in taking control of Artsakh.

At the commencement of the 2016 conflict, retired Major General Mark MacCarley received an unexpected opportunity to measure the capabilities of the Armenian/Artsakh forces responding to the Azerbaijan incursion. His observations, interviews with senior Armenian and Artsakh military and political leaders, and subsequent research resulted in the formation of the non-profit educational organization called the American Armenian National Security Institute (AANSI). Its mission is to study the country's warfighting doctrine and tactics and give constructive input to its Army leadership. This effort helps the Army counter Russian military influence and prepares Armenian forces to prevail in future conflicts.

My trip to Armenia as a politician (2016)

I retired from the US Army in 2015 and traveled to Armenia on April 1, 2016. Accompanied by a prominent member of the American Armenian community, I went to attempt to understand the Armenian culture and economy. I come from Glendale, California, a mid-sized suburb of Los Angeles County that is home to nearly 125,000 first-generation Armenians.

When we began our journey to the Armenian capital of Yerevan, the Armenia–Azerbaijan War had not yet started. Although armed clashes between the two sides had sporadically erupted since 1992, after Armenia successfully supported Artsakh's war of liberation from Azerbaijan, there

was a long-standing ceasefire in place. This was monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Commission, a non-governmental organization specifically chartered to resolve territorial and ethnic disputes between Armenia/Artsakh and Azerbaijan. This Commission consisted of representatives of the US, France and Russia. After 34 years of seemingly endless and futile negotiations, however, the Minsk Commission had not resolved any material issues separating the sparring parties.

A couple hours after I checked into our hotel in Yerevan, I received a call from the aide-de-camp to Lieutenant General Seyran Ohanyan, then-Minister of Defense of the Armenian Armed Forces. The aide-de-camp asked if I would meet with General Ohanyan as soon as possible. Literally, at that very moment, hostilities between Armenia/Artsakh and Azerbaijan had just erupted. I was initially befuddled about the identity of the caller, but after making inquiries, I agreed to the meeting. To this day, I speculate that General Ohanyan somehow became aware of my entry into Armenia that morning and erroneously assumed that I represented the “spear point” of a desired US military assistance team to Armenia.

I met with General Ohanyan at the Armenian equivalent of the Pentagon. I informed him of my recent retirement from active service with the US Army. I told him that I did not represent the US government. General Ohanyan responded that he was aware that I had twice served as one of the US Army’s senior logisticians in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan. He then asked me if I would be willing to proceed to Artsakh and assess the Armenian/Artsakh army’s logistics capabilities, as it was now engaged in defending the homeland against Azeri invaders. I agreed at no charge to his government.

I remember his concluding statement to me: “You American generals, you always fly where you need to go. But, I apologize, General MacCarley. We just don’t have aircraft to fly you to Stepanakert, the capital of Artsakh. You will have to drive east through Armenia and then through the Southern Caucasus Mountains to reach Stepanakert before nightfall.”

I hired a vehicle and engaged a one-person security detail. I left a few hours later on what proved to be a challenging journey over a nearly impassable 125-mile pockmarked road to Artsakh, the epicenter of the conflict. I arrived just behind an OSCE delegation that sought to broker a ceasefire between the combatants but ultimately failed to do so. I went directly to meet the chief of staff of the Artsakh Army. As expected, he was fully preoccupied with directing defensive operations against the attacking Azeri forces.

We discussed the current situation on the battlefield. I addressed the mission given to me by General Ohanyan. The chief of staff agreed that this requested assessment might prove valuable to him as well. He wanted to know if his army had sufficient capability to sustain combat operations over a period longer than a week. That is, he wanted to know whether his army would have the required means and resources to provide its front-line soldiers with the necessities of war: food, water, ammunition, weapons, medical supplies, spare parts, fortification materials and major weapons systems, such as tanks and artillery pieces.

With the chief of staff’s concurrence, I headed to the field to conduct my assessment. Upon my return four days later, the war was over. Then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had arrived in Stepanakert on April 4 and brokered a ceasefire between the two militaries, with no loss of Artsakh to Azerbaijan. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan had been Soviet client states until 1991.

When I came back, I assured the chief of staff that from what I saw, the Artsakh and Armenian soldiers were the most valorous, committed, dedicated and selfless fighters one could want in an army. But as a military logistician, some things concerned me: There was an insufficient number of ground transportation vehicles and significant problems with ammunition, fuel and spare parts resupply. I had also seen remnants of drones — far less sophisticated than those employed in the subsequent 2020 conflict — that the Azeris were using advantageously against Armenian/Artsakh forces in this 2016 war.

The army even had challenges with such simple things as “field feeding.” Battlefield catering doesn’t sound significant to a war effort, unless you’re a soldier who has fought for hours without access to food or water. I saw homemade meals being delivered to the front lines by women from the local villages. While this is commendable and patriotic, it is not the most efficient and expedient way to feed hungry soldiers in combat.

Upon my return to Yerevan from Artsakh, I met with General Ohanyan and the chief of staff for the President of the Republic of Armenia. I opined that the Armenia/Artsakh Army had resorted to a Soviet Russian model of static positional defense in lieu of emphasizing maneuver, breakout and penetration. This long-standing tactic had worked extraordinarily well for the Soviets in World War II but needed to be upgraded to meet current threats and emerging military technologies. I also commented that neither Armenia nor Artsakh had developed a robust defense industrial base to produce weapons organically. Almost all armaments were imported. I observed that neither the Armenian nor the Artsakh Armies had prepositioned the necessary logistical support in sufficient quantities to sustain any long-term, high-intensity conflict.

To successfully wage war in the 21st century, an army has to be able to fight in all domains: land, sea, air, space and the cyber environment. It needs the capability to supply and resupply its forces at any moment under the contested conditions of intense combat. The Armenian Artsakh Army could not expect victory if the majority of its forces fought in fixed positions, resembling World War I trench lines. I suggested the military leaders of Artsakh and Armenia consider contacting NATO and the US militaries and asking for advisors to teach the Armenians Western tactics, techniques and logistics procedures. I concluded that warfare had changed over the last seven decades and Armenia/Artsakh should seek to adopt these advances in tactics and armament.

When I returned home to the US, I made a few speeches about my 2016 trip to Veterans’ posts and local Armenian American outreach organizations. I did not focus any more energy on the Armenian Artsakh problem at that time.

My return trip as a journalist (2021)

In September 2020, Azerbaijan again attacked Artsakh in the 44-Day War, reclaiming for itself most of Artsakh, including its Armenian enclaves. I attempted to return to Armenia and Artsakh in October to assess what went wrong for their armies. However, I was unable to enter the country due to a shortage of flights, COVID-19 and the Armenian government’s decision to bar foreigners from transiting into Artsakh, which was once again the epicenter of the conflict.

I couldn’t help but speculate that the Armenia/Artsakh forces had not learned from the tactical and strategic issues I had identified in 2016. This 2020 war was characterized by Azerbaijan’s adroit use of drones and tactical missiles against Armenian static positions, while simultaneously waging a cyber campaign to disrupt Armenian/Artsakh’s communications and

network operations. Neither Armenia nor Artsakh had established a robust combat logistics supply chain to sustain the fight.

A few months later, I found a way to return to Armenia and Artsakh by securing press credentials. I was accompanied by Armenian American investigative reporter Appo Jabarian, publisher of USA Armenian Life magazine.

As the name suggests, the 44-Day War ended after 44 days of intense fighting, when Russian President Vladimir Putin stepped in and directed the two sides to put down their weapons. Putin forced Armenia/Artsakh to cede four-fifths of Artsakh to Azerbaijan. In exchange, the hostilities would be terminated and the Russian forces would be deployed in Armenia and Artsakh to keep the peace with Azerbaijan.

Russia also committed to policing the vehicular corridor, called the Lachin Corridor, between Armenia and Stepanakert. This two-lane road constituted the sole lifeline for transporting all goods, including food, fuel, weapons and medical supplies, to the over 150,000 Armenians inhabiting Artsakh. Artsakh's airport had long been closed due to Azeri threats to shoot down any incoming or outgoing aircraft. There was no railroad network nor any navigable waterway to support the transit of people and goods to this contested region.

I recruited some help to accompany me on this new trip. Jabarian came, of course. Retired Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, PhD, a professor of Defense and Foreign Policy at Wesleyan College, joined me. And my son Aaron MacCarley, a documentary filmmaker, came as well. Together, we embarked on an investigative and educational journey to see what remained of Artsakh and how its armed forces had fared in the fight.

We arrived in Armenia in August 2021. As journalists, we were afforded access to some

civilian and military representatives of the Armenian government. At my request, a senior member of the Armenian Army met me and agreed to discreetly help my team and me enter Artsakh over the Lachin Corridor. He said that we would be the first Western journalists to transit the Corridor since the end of the 44-Day War.

Indeed, we pushed off to Stepanakert the next day. Our journey was uneventful as we were escorted by the chief of staff to the President of Artsakh. Upon arriving in Stepanakert, we had the opportunity to interview Artsakh President Arayik Harutyunyan. After some casual conversation, he described his own recent experiences leading the Artsakh Army in the field against Azerbaijan. He criticized the US and France, both signatories to the Minsk Convention, for their collective failure to take any direct action or provide any material support to Artsakh and Armenia during the war. He said such support might have positively influenced the outcome of the war for the Armenian people.

We did not respond to such criticisms about the alleged failure of the US and its NATO allies to send military and humanitarian aid to Armenia and Artsakh. We were journalists, not diplomats. At the president's invitation, however, we did take the opportunity to visit the accessible sites of several vicious battles between his forces and those of Azerbaijan. We sat down with a good number of veterans of the 44-Day War and heard their stories and their opinions about why this 2020 War was lost.

After two days in Artsakh, we began our return journey to Yerevan, but not without incident. When we first entered Artsakh via the Lachin Corridor, we had received an official escort from the Artsakh chief of staff who maintained a cooperative relationship with the Russian security forces there. On exit, however, we were all by ourselves, notwithstanding the chief of staff's

promise to contact Russian border officials to allow us safe passage.

For a trip that was supposed to take no more than two hours, it took us over seven to travel the 24 miles back to Armenia from Artsakh. We were confronted and challenged by Russian border guards at every checkpoint. They insisted on detaining us, sometimes for up to an hour, to determine whether we had committed immigration violations — entering Artsakh without papers. The engagements with the Russian guards ultimately proved benign. But I will never forget how the young Russian soldiers stationed at several of the checkpoints would rest their Kalashnikov assault rifles on the side door window frame of our vehicle, muzzles aimed at our driver's torso.

My reflection as a writer (2024)

Our journalistic mission to Artsakh resulted in some articles we penned and a YouTube documentary that we produced for our Western subscribers. But we made something of a splash in Armenia. The story of our transit through the Lachin Corridor checkpoints and meeting with President Harutyunyan circulated in local newspapers. I repeatedly stressed that it was an honor for me to execute this mission, which might improve the Armenian armed forces. If that is the outcome of my two journeys to Artsakh, then my efforts in the face of some risk and mildly difficult conditions were justified.

Jabarian's photos capture the culture and excitement we experienced. Armenia and Artsakh are fascinating places. Sadly, Azerbaijan overran Artsakh in 2023, although a government-in-exile still exists. I hope that Armenia develops greater defensive strategies so it can endure against future Azeri threats.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Major General Mark MacCarley was commissioned in the United States Army Reserve (USAR) in 1983. He retired in 2015 as the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). He spent half his career on active duty, mainly in Active Component Units. Prior to his assignment to TRADOC, he served as the Deputy Commander (Support), 1st Army and concurrently as Commander, 1st Army Reserve Support Command.

Botswana Stares Down Trouble in the Economy and Competitive Politics

Ved Pant
August 29, 2024

For years, Botswana was considered one of Africa's model states, both with regards to the strength of its democratic institutions and the potency of its economy. Ahead of this year's October elections, however, the country's future looks uncertain. The driving factors include a political feud, income inequality and climate change.

Botswana is the model of democracy, good governance and pragmatic policy. In the words of The Economist Foreign Editor Robert Guest, the country has “been governed sensibly, cautiously, and more or less honestly” since its independence. In an age where

democracies have been backsliding, Botswana has maintained its democratic reputation and continued to engage stakeholders down to the rural level of governance through its Kgotla system. This political culture is based on public meetings, community councils and traditional law courts. It continues to promote confidence in the country's institutions and governance.

Though its strong principles have propelled the country through decades of political and economic success, Botswana's responses to current struggles will determine whether this success will continue. The greatest challenges include the ruling party's diminishing dominance and economic fault lines.

Botswana is the oldest continuous multiparty democracy in Africa. Its democratic roots trace back to the colonial era, when the British only exercised indirect rule over its Bechuanaland Protectorate. This allowed its indigenous institutions and leadership of its chiefs to flourish.

Seretse Khama, Botswana's first president and pioneer of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), came to power at the country's founding in 1966. While in office, he translated those effective tribal structures into Botswana's post-independence governance. He prioritized the role of local leaders, upheld protections for citizens and secured freedom of expression for the media.

After his death in 1980, the legacy of the BDP has carried on — the party has won every general election since. Ironically, this means that despite Botswana's status as a thriving multiparty democracy, only one party has ruled throughout the country's 57-year history. Today, this legacy of BDP dominance is challenged by Khama's son, Ian.

The BDP's dwindling dominance

Upon his death, Seretse Khama passed the office to Vice President Ketumile Masire, who reigned from 1980 to 1998. Festus Mogae, his vice president starting in 1992, took command from 1998 to 2008. Then Ian Khama took over for him from 2008 to 2018. As per the constitution, after serving his maximum two five-year terms, Khama relinquished power to his Vice President, Mokgweetsi Masisi. Against the backdrop of this legacy of succession within the BDP, support for opposition parties had steadily grown, with 45% of the popular vote in favor of all opposition parties combined, against a dwindling 53% for the BDP.

A falling out between President Masisi and Ian Khama further fueled this rise in opposition support. Khama claims that Masisi has "totally undermined democracy, human rights, [and] the rule of law" since becoming president. Khama resultantly departed from the BDP to form a new political party: the Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF). The strife between these politicians came partly from Masisi's refusal to appoint Ian's brother, Tshekedi Khama, as vice president in 2019, among other requests that would give Ian a more active role in Botswana's leadership.

This splintering of the BDP and Khama's opposition against Masisi could challenge the party's dominance ahead of October's upcoming general elections. If the opposition parties are able to overcome factionalism and slightly increase their popular support, 2024 may mark the end of the 57-year legacy of the BDP's rule in Botswana.

An end to diamond dependency?

Post-independence, Botswana's consistent economic growth was driven almost entirely by its most precious resource: diamonds. Alongside the partially state-owned De Beers Group, Botswana established Debswana, a joint venture that quickly grew to become one of the world's largest diamond suppliers by value. Botswana's rich

diamond reserves fueled decades of growth — the best in the region. However, the slow pace of diversification has kept Botswana’s economy dependent on diamond revenue.

In the first quarter of 2024, Debswana’s diamond sales fell 48% due to decreased demand and competition from lab-grown diamonds. This came with major consequences including rising unemployment and economic uncertainty. This uncertainty has only been exacerbated by the BHP mining group’s recent takeover attempt of Anglo American, the majority shareholder of De Beers. This triggered a hasty attempt by Anglo American to sell its majority stake in De Beers. The groups held many negotiations entailing complex restructuring that would directly impact their work in Botswana.

Although the acquisition attempt failed, it underscores the extent of exposure Botswana’s government has to De Beers and other major players in the diamond space. Not surprisingly then, despite its strong GDP per capita numbers, more nuanced economic indicators point in a different direction. For example, the country’s score for socioeconomic development in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) has recently fallen from five points out of ten to four, due to extremely high income inequality. This is further underlined by a Gini index score of 53.3 and a high poverty rate of 38%.

Hoping to limit this diamond-dependency and trigger growth in high-value sectors that were stifled by the Covid-19 pandemic, Botswana has adopted the Reset Agenda. This project aims to accelerate economic diversification, empower youth and increase employment opportunities. Further, it attempts to promote local industry and economic self-sufficiency through import bans of fresh produce and water; the government seeks to use this to develop economic resilience and prepare for extreme weather conditions caused by

climate change. Given the country’s high dependence on rain-fed agriculture, it is particularly vulnerable to changes in rainfall and droughts.

Simultaneously, Botswana’s strong financial institutions are promising indicators that the country has the tools required to overcome looming economic turmoil. Its robust banking system and relatively effective monetary stability from the Bank of Botswana exemplify this. Still, diversification and inequity remain pressing issues that will undoubtedly persist for years to come. They will be central issues in the upcoming general elections, which are shaping up to be the most competitive in the nation’s history.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Civil Liberties at Risk Under Vietnam’s Tô Lâm

Caleb Mills
August 30, 2024

On August 3, Tô Lâm was unanimously elected as Vietnam's next Communist Party General Secretary, the country's most powerful position. Since then, he has intensified his crackdown on public dissent, civil liberties, and privacy rights, reinforcing a decade-long trend of escalating censorship and political persecution in Vietnam.

On May 25, 2023, a Vietnamese court in Danang sentenced 39-year-old noodle vendor Bui Tuan Lam to six years in prison for posting an online clip deemed anti-government propaganda. Detained since 2021, Lam was isolated from his wife and children for two years before his trial drew international attention for its bizarre background and questionable legality. The dangerous video in question? A TikTok-style parody video mocking then-Minister of Public Security Tô Lâm's extravagant culinary selection at a steakhouse in London.

One year into the food vendor's sentence, now-President Tô Lâm's political fortunes changed dramatically. On August 3, the former top security official was unanimously elected as Vietnam's next Communist Party General Secretary, the most powerful position in the country. It was the culmination of his meteoric political rise, facilitated by the death of his mentor and longtime party boss Nguyen Phu Trong, in July. Pledging to build on his predecessor's legacy, Tô Lâm made it clear that he will continue prioritizing the anti-corruption policies and security measures that defined his tenure at the Ministry of Public Security.

However, as Bui Tuan Lam and the other 160 Vietnamese political prisoners have come to realize, Tô Lâm's extrajudicial definition of a

security threat includes public dissent, civil liberties, and even lighthearted comedy.

Born on July 10, 1954, Tô Lâm has always prized security. After graduating from the People's Security Academy in 1979, he held various law enforcement roles until his elevation to the Ministry of Public Security in 2016. There, he defined himself as an excellent political enforcer, leading an impressive anti-corruption campaign under Trong's direction. Together, Lâm and Trong's "Blazing Furnace" campaign targeted over 20,000 government officials in 2023, a dramatic increase from previous efforts.

"Tô Lâm was appointed one of five deputy chairmen of the Central Steering on Anti-Corruption that was the spearhead of Trong's blazing furnace campaign," Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor of politics at the University of New South Wales, told me. "As Minister of Public Security, Tô Lâm was also responsible for the harassment, intimidation, arrest and imprisonment of political and civil society activists."

To General Secretary Trong, Tô Lâm's role in Hanoi as an enforcer quickly became apparent. In Lâm's first week at the Ministry, the former law enforcement officer oversaw the brutal suppression of protests against Formosa Ha Tinh Steel, the company responsible for arguably the worst environmental disaster in Vietnamese history. 41 protesters were arrested, including activist Hoang Duc Binh, who was sentenced to 14 years in prison for advocating on behalf of local fishermen affected by the disaster.

Two years later, Tô Lâm's Ministry of Public Security significantly expanded government surveillance powers. The Law on Cyber Security, passed by the National Assembly in 2018, required telecommunication providers to record and store their users' private data, including "full name, date of birth, place of birth, nationality, profession,

position, place of residence, contact address.” Despite widespread condemnation and international outrage, the law continues to undermine Vietnamese civil liberties and online privacy.

It’s not just democratic organizers and human rights advocates who have been targeted under Tô Lâm’s security regime. Le Trong Hung, a former middle school teacher, was arrested in 2021 after challenging General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to a nationally televised debate. Another teacher, 43-year-old Bui Van Thuan, was also arrested that same year and sentenced to nearly a decade in prison for publicly criticizing the Communist Party. Even Lâm’s own police officers, such as Captain Le Chi Thanh, have been prosecuted for exposing corruption within the Ministry of Public Security.

Tô Lâm’s self-styled campaign to root out “corruption” and enhance state security also coincidentally targeted political opponents within his own party. “Tô Lâm used the Investigative Police Department of the Ministry of Public Security to gather evidence of corruption by the President Vo Van Thuong, the Chairman of the National Assembly Vuong Dinh Hue, and the Permanent member of the party Secretariat Truong Thi Mai,” says Thayer. “These were the three most powerful figures in the leadership under General Secretary Trong. All were pressured into resigning in turn.”

Since taking office in August, General Secretary Lâm has moved quickly to solidify his position on the international stage. Last week, the Vietnamese leader visited Beijing to meet with China’s Xi Jinping, marking his first official overseas trip. The visit came nearly a year after Vietnam upgraded its diplomatic relations with both Japan and the United States. However, this continuation of former President Trong’s “Bamboo Diplomacy” should not be interpreted as a sign that Lâm

intends to govern as a carbon copy of his mentor. Tô Lâm’s particularly abysmal human rights record distinguishes him as a unique threat to civil liberties and basic freedoms, further cementing a decade-long trend of increasing censorship and political persecution in Vietnam.

[Ting Cui edited this piece.]



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