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Independence, Diversity, Debate

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www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

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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.

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

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Kamala's New Tone on Gaza Won't Energize Her Base Yet

Emma Johnson
September 01, 2024

With a death toll past 40,000, the ongoing Israeli invasion of Gaza is a vital issue for young American voters. Newly minted Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris has made statements showing unprecedented support for the Palestinian cause. However, her move away from US President Joe Biden's pro-Israeli position is merely incremental and, in the eyes of many potential voters, underwhelming.

On July 21, Vice President Kamala Harris announced her candidacy for the 2024 US presidential elections. Three days later, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Washington to address the US Congress.

Recaps of Netanyahu's key points and reports of the volatile climate in the Capitol briefly flooded online platforms, but the energy dissipated with the dawn of a new day. News of American flags being burnt drew more attention from the American public than Netanyahu's comparing the October 7 attack to 9/11. While the ongoing Israeli siege of Gaza has elicited significant international attention, Harris and President Joe Biden have

shifted the dialogue to decenter the conflict as the November elections near.

Biden's approach

Nearly 11 months have passed since the Hamas attack on Israel that sparked the war in Gaza. On the day of the attack, Biden released a statement declaring that the "Administration's support for Israel's security is rock solid and unwavering." His administration followed through with this commitment in the months following, sending massive shipments of weapons and significant financial assistance to Israel, including a bill passed in April that provided Israel with over \$4.4 billion. A few months prior, the US had garnered anger across the globe for vetoing a UN resolution demanding a ceasefire in Gaza, further demonstrating the administration's commitment to Israel.

Despite his initially supportive approach, Biden's position faltered in May in the face of a potential attack on Rafah, a city in southern Gaza where a great number of displaced Palestinians had fled. At the time, Rafah held over one million displaced Palestinians. As Israeli forces continued their assault on the strip, the president threatened to withhold arms shipments to Israel should they "go into Rafah."

While the administration did pause at least one shipment in response to Israel's then-impending attack on the city, both the language and bureaucratic processes surrounding policy decisions about Israel have been confusing and unclear. Biden's statements have revolved around a staunch commitment to stand beside Israel, while

establishing vague and immeasurable benchmarks and boundaries. Consider his attempt at taking a stronger stance on the situation in Rafah. Biden stated: “I’m not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities — that deal with that problem.”

What does it mean for Israel to “go into Rafah”? At which point is the move, still ongoing, considered a violation? Additionally, what weapons specifically was Biden referring to? There is a long history of arms support between the US and Israel, with a number of varied weapons supplied. Which weapons would Biden withhold, and for how long? Biden’s approach has been incredibly muddled and ridiculously ambiguous, leaving many Americans frustrated and confused.

In light of Biden’s ineffective move to hold Israel more accountable, Netanyahu has tried to leverage his decades-long relationship with the current US president. In his July address, Netanyahu went as far as to thank Biden for his “friendship to Israel” and for being a “proud Irish-American Zionist.”

Despite Netanyahu’s personal effort to sugarcoat US–Israel relations, over the course of the conflict, Biden has drifted from staunch support to a wishy-washy, passionately delivered yet logically confusing position. With the November elections rapidly approaching, that vaguely bipartisan-minded approach made sense as Biden faced a tough uphill battle. But Biden’s attempt to remain relevant quickly became a moot point when Harris replaced him as the Democratic candidate in late July. Depending on how Americans show up this November, it will now be she who controls the dialogue surrounding the situation in Gaza.

Harris’s approach

Since Harris became its candidate, the Democratic party has risen like Christ from the grave. Following the widespread panic tied to Biden’s performance in the first presidential debate, Harris’s arrival on the scene has suddenly revitalized the party and support is surging in. But her platform thus far has yielded next to nothing in terms of tangible plans and policies to be implemented in relation to the Israel–Gaza issue.

On the one hand, Harris certainly had little time to prepare, entering the race with only 15 weeks until Election Day. She hit the ground running, with her platform focused primarily on the economy, healthcare and tax credits for the low to middle classes. But even on her extremely active social media platforms, there is little mention of the horrors unfolding in the Middle East — with over 40,000 Gazans now dead — despite the significant role of the US in facilitating its ally’s war effort. In fact, until the recent Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Harris has conveniently avoided seriously engaging with the topic that the world has watched with bated breath since last October.

In her 37-minute speech on the final day of the convention, it took Harris over half an hour to get to the situation in Gaza, following her mention of the war in Ukraine. While stating that she will always support Israel’s right to defend itself, echoing Biden’s approach, Harris closed with a passionate claim that she will work to ensure “the Palestinian people can realize their right to dignity, security, freedom and self-determination.” A statement more explicit and direct than anything the public has heard from Biden since October 7.

Although she allocated just two minutes of her speech to discuss the conflict and reiterated Biden-era perspectives, Harris’s declaration of support for Palestinian self-determination signals that she may bring in a significant new approach to US–Israel relations. But context is crucial here: each

and every vote matters in this election, and Harris' balancing act of speaking in favor of both Israel and Palestine may be a strategic move to connect with a larger voter base.

The future of Israel-Gaza in America's political landscape

Americans have a lot on their minds going into the November elections. With an assassination attempt on Donald Trump, widespread panic after seeing Biden's performance in the first presidential debate and overwhelming bouts of voter fatigue, Harris has a tough road ahead if she wants to emerge victorious. While her path forward is paved with the sparkling stones of America's "future" of which she speaks so passionately, continuing to deprioritize the situation in Gaza could be crippling for Harris.

How our candidates and leaders speak of things matters, and voters are paying attention. Back in May, Biden had already lost 13% of supporters who voted for him in the 2020 elections due to his recent support of Israel — and the fighting is nowhere near over. Harris should not forget that many Americans, especially young voters, care deeply about the suffering in Gaza. Additionally, these young voters — who tend to align with Palestine — are majority-Democratic.

Harris needs those votes. According to recent polling, Trump and Harris are currently neck-and-neck. The Democratic nominee has little room for error, and maintaining a vague, double-sided approach to the issue is a huge gamble that could cost Harris the election.

While US engagement with Israel thus far has been largely driven by the Zionist-friendly perspectives of the Biden administration and the longstanding relationship between the two countries, America is still a democracy. The voice of the people cannot be ignored, and it is this voice

that will determine what the future of US–Israel relations will look like as votes are cast this fall. Until then, it is up to the Presidential candidates to demonstrate how they plan to show up for America, and for the people of Gaza, should they be voted in as the most powerful individual in the world.



Emma Johnson is an editorial intern at Fair Observer. She has a bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Washington and a special interest in foreign policy, diplomacy and security. Focusing on conflict in the Middle East and the intersection of collective identity and politics, Emma co-authored a policy recommendation report on the topic of antisemitism. She has also worked as an English teacher in Moscow, Russia.

Outside The Box: Do You Think AI's Full of Schmidt?

Peter Isackson
September 02, 2024

For the past year, in "Outside the Box," we have been interrogating ChatGPT to better understand how AI "reasons." It's time to move on to interrogating the people who are actively shaping the role AI will play in our lives. Will AI ever have intentions? We don't know, but the people crafting our experience of AI certainly do.

AI is an increasingly visible feature of our environment. It has even achieved the status of an artificial culture. As cultures are defined by their values, do we know anything about the values of this new culture?

The “Outside the Box” team at Fair Observer wishes to deepen our perception of a culture that is being created by people largely beyond our reach. It is a small elite now busy investing in technology and making fundamental decisions about how it will affect our lives.

We shall now begin featuring videos as well as our traditional conversations with ChatGPT. For starters, here’s a fascinating interview in August with former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt. Concerned that people found some of his statements controversial, he had the video removed from YouTube. We have to thank YouTube user and AI enthusiast Matthew Berman for retrieving the video and commenting pertinently on the most significant moments.

After watching Schmidt’s performance, I addressed the following prompt to ChatGPT:

“Eric Schmidt made this prediction: ‘In your lifetimes the battle between US and China for knowledge supremacy is going to be the big fight.’ This tells me a lot about how Schmidt thinks not just about AI, but also the world. After all, that’s what language does: Whatever it literally communicates, it reveals something about the speaker’s view of the world. In this case there is a clear political dimension. Is that apparent to you, as an AI that speaks?”

ChatGPT offered this sympathetic analysis of Schmidt’s worldview.

“Yes, Eric Schmidt’s statement does indeed reveal much about how he perceives the world, particularly in terms of global power dynamics and

the role of knowledge and technology in shaping those dynamics. Here’s a breakdown of what his statement implies:

1. ****Framing Knowledge as a Battleground****

· ****Knowledge Supremacy:**** Schmidt uses the metaphor of a “battle” or “fight” for “knowledge supremacy” between the U.S. and China. This language suggests that he views knowledge, particularly in fields like AI, as a strategic resource that nations compete over, similar to how they might compete over economic or military dominance.

· ****Zero-Sum Competition:**** The choice of words implies a zero-sum competition, where one nation’s gain in knowledge is seen as another’s loss. This is a common perspective in geopolitical thinking, where global power is often viewed as a finite resource.

2. ****US-China Rivalry****

· ****Bipolar Worldview:**** By framing the issue as a contest between the U.S. and China, Schmidt reinforces the idea of a bipolar world order, where these two countries are the primary contenders for global leadership. This reflects a recognition of China’s rise as a major technological and economic power.

· ****Focus on AI and Technology:**** Given Schmidt’s background in technology, particularly AI, his prediction likely reflects concerns that advancements in AI and related technologies will be a key factor in determining which country leads in this global contest. This suggests that he sees technological innovation as not just an economic asset but a crucial element of national power.

3. ****Political Dimension****

· ****Implicit Nationalism:**** The statement carries an implicit nationalism, as it presupposes

that the U.S. and China are natural adversaries in this “battle.” This is not merely a technical or scientific competition but a political and strategic one, where the stakes are high for national sovereignty and global influence.

· ****Urgency and Lifespan:**** The phrase “in your lifetimes” adds a sense of immediacy and inevitability to this conflict, suggesting that it is not a distant concern but an ongoing and intensifying struggle that will define the current and upcoming generations.

4. ****Power Dynamics in Language****

· ****Influence of Language on Thought:**** As an AI, I recognize that language shapes how people perceive and think about the world. Schmidt’s use of combative and strategic language suggests a worldview where global interactions are driven by competition rather than collaboration. This perspective might influence not only how individuals and institutions approach AI development but also how they perceive international relations more broadly.

In summary, Schmidt’s statement reflects a worldview where knowledge, particularly technological knowledge, is a key axis of global power, with the U.S. and China as the primary actors. The political dimension is indeed apparent, as it frames the development of AI and other advanced technologies as part of a larger geopolitical struggle, rather than as purely scientific or economic pursuits.”

It should be clear that, had I not expressed what may be called my “concern” with Schmidt’s attitude, ChatGPT would not have analyzed things in a similar way to my own. ChatGPT is perfectly capable of behaving in ways similar to participants in an “echo chamber” on social media. In this case, ChatGPT develops a line of reasoning in support of my own observations.

Following this brief exchange, I prolonged the conversation with the following prompt.

“You evoke a possible alternative to Schmidt’s competitive worldview; a collaborative approach. What would such an approach mean for the value of science, especially given the fears that exist about AI? Would the AI that emerges and eventually dominates — precisely as people like Schmidt imply — be different in a world where collaboration defines the fundamental orientation of R&D?”

Rather than duplicate ChatGPT’s very interesting response here, I’ll hold off my examination of its complete response till next week. One thing, however, appeared to me particularly significant:

“The AI that comes to dominate in a collaborative world might be more inclusive, considering diverse perspectives and needs across different cultures and societies. This contrasts with AI developed in a competitive environment, which might prioritize the values and interests of a single nation or group.”

In this age of exaggerated nationalism; when major powers seem intent on shying away from dialogue as they prefer to rely on the display of force, we desperately need a debate about how all technologies are going to be used in the coming years and decades. Why not engage ChatGPT in that same debate?

It’s particularly encouraging that we can engage in something that truly resembles a dialogue with AI. It’s something we obviously cannot do with drones, hypersonic missiles and nuclear explosives.

What is less encouraging is the asymmetry that exists between ordinary people — including deep thinkers on questions of science and geopolitics —

and wealthy public personalities such as Eric Schmidt, Elon Musk and Sam Adkins. As a society, due to their wealth, we have endowed them the power to make decisions for us. They choose which technologies to invest in and how to harness those investments for personal profit. They also make decisions that aim at leveraging geopolitical influence and lead to the prosecution of wars.

Will these people be asking ChatGPT the same questions we are asking about worldviews? It seems unlikely. That is precisely why ordinary thinking people who feel even a slight concern for the way technology is likely to craft our own futures should at the very least seek to join the debate.

Here at Fair Observer, we invite you to weigh in and to do so in the framework of what we are calling our developing and evolving “Crucible of Collaboration.” We are not alone. People like Matthew Berman are producing the evidence and raising similar questions.

Unlike ChatGPT, these people don’t seek to impose their authority by giving what appear to be definitive answers to any question we throw at them. Instead, they are asking questions, reacting to the answers they have received, and pushing further, in the spirit of a modern Socrates. Ultimately, that behavioral contrast may define the difference between artificial intelligence — including superintelligence — and the human attribute AI has been designed to imitate. Humans are curious and engaged; AI is knowledgeable and indifferent.

This brings us back to the question of the meaning of Schmidt’s notion of “knowledge supremacy.” As an intelligent human being with life experience acquired in a diversity of cultures, Schmidt’s phrase evokes in my mind a kind of instinctive, unprompted association with another

notion: “white supremacy.” Is there a connection? We need to explore it. Would AI or some future superintelligence make that connection? I doubt it, because it serves no programmable purpose.

AI could, of course, be prompted to make the connection, by an inquiring human mind. I like to call this kind of mental operation, for lack of a better term, the capacity for “creative suspicion.” It’s a feature of critical thinking, and I would maintain a crucial one. It springs from feelings, not directly from knowledge. It is a natural part of our psychological makeup that some governments and institutions today are seeking to suppress, in the name of rooting out disinformation.

This conversation will continue next week.

Your thoughts

Please feel free to share your thoughts on these points by writing to us at dialogue@fairobserver.com. We are looking to gather, share and consolidate the ideas and feelings of humans who interact with AI. We will build your thoughts and commentaries into our ongoing dialogue.

*[Artificial Intelligence is rapidly becoming a feature of everyone’s daily life. We unconsciously perceive it either as a friend or foe, a helper or destroyer. At Fair Observer, we see it as a tool of creativity, capable of revealing the complex relationship between humans and machines.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Peter is Fair Observer’s chief strategy officer . He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For

more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics.

Voters Want Politicians Like Trump and Harris to Be Celebrities

Ellis Cashmore
September 04, 2024

Celebrity culture has increasingly influenced the way we view our political leaders, transforming elections into spectacles of personality rather than policy. Voters demand politicians who are capable of combining leadership with entertainment. When and how did this start and how will it affect the forthcoming Harris/Trump race?

“How has the national debt personally affected each of your lives? And, if it hasn’t, how can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if you have no experience of what’s ailing them?”

Republican candidate George W. Bush stood and started to answer this question before the chair interrupted him and warned he was digressing. “Help me with the question,” he requested after getting tongue-tied. The questioner wanted to know how he was personally affected. Democratic candidate Bill Clinton took his turn to answer. He stood, walked toward the audience and spoke, not to the audience but to the woman who had asked the question. He motioned to her, his eyes fixed on hers. “In my state, when people lose their jobs, there’s a good chance I’ll know them by their names.”

It was a transformational moment in politics. Of course, we didn’t know it at the time, but on October 15, 1992, at the University of Richmond’s Robins Center, politics changed. The hapless Bush was aloof and seemed almost contemptuous while Clinton interacted relaxedly with the audience without feints or deviations. It was as if he was having private conversations that could be heard, not overheard.

Outside politics, cultural change was turning us all into voyeurs. I don’t mean that people started to take an unwholesome pleasure from watching others engaged in sex or suffering in some way (although some might have). No, the new voyeurism involved the guiltless enjoyment of observing or eavesdropping on private conversations and discovering intimate details of others' lives, particularly through television and, later, social media. This reflected a growing fascination with the personal and often unfiltered experiences of others. We called it curiosity. It soon extended into politics.

Political celebrities who seem like real people

Celebrity culture was, for many, a Trojan horse: Innocuous-looking enough to allow into our lives but baleful in its consequences. Our captivation with the lives of other people seems perfectly

natural now. But it wasn't in the 1970s. The misleadingly inoffensive horse entered in the 1980s, so that by the early 1990s, it had already taken up residence. Impatient with entertainers who were cautious about sharing details of their private lives, audiences wanted everyone to be like Madonna: unsparing in their distribution of the minutiae of their lives.

Audience appetite was for real people — not the disproportionately impersonal and untouchable godlike characters who dominated public life for most of the 20th century, but people who resembled the other people they were supposed to entertain.

This affected politicians. It seems laughable that we once looked up to them. For most of the 20th century, they were guardians in a benevolent moral and ministerial sense. The electorate admired, respected and, in some cases, idolized these near-transcendent beings. By the 1990s, however, audiences no longer admired politicians from afar; they wanted close-ups. What's more, they demanded access to their private lives, blurring the lines between public service and entertainment.

Clinton seemed to understand the power of ordinariness. The folksy, down-to-earth charm that characterized him and allowed him to face several accusations of impropriety and an impeachment with equanimity made him one of the most popular presidents in history.

Clinton's kind of ordinariness became a valuable resource. Audiences responded to politicians who mirrored themselves: They may have had more power, authority, status and attention; they may even have led more opulent lifestyles; but, unlike politicians of earlier eras, the new breed could and probably should exhibit the same kinds of flaws and problems as the people who followed them. So, Clinton's sex scandals, far from being a source of damnation, worked like a

celebrity benediction. There had been sex scandals before, but never anything approaching Clinton's triple obloquy. The media, which by the early 1990s were ravenous for scandal, covered it extensively.

Bush's struggle to connect with the audience starkly contrasted with Clinton's approach, highlighting a shift in what Americans began to value in their leaders. Bush followed Clinton to the White House. He was prone to gaffes, making him the object of parody and criticism, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

By contrast, Bush's successor Barack Obama masterfully balanced the demands of celebrity culture with a scandal-free image, projecting the persona of a cool president. He had suaveness, eloquence and an uncommon ability to connect with a broad range of people, from appearances on talk shows to a preparedness to share his taste in music (he was known to favor Beyoncé, Tyla and Kendrick Lamar.)

Harris, Trump... and Oprah

Obama's successor, Donald Trump, entered politics as a fully formed celebrity in a similar way to President Ronald Reagan and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger — all three were well-known entertainers before their forays into politics. Trump hosted *The Apprentice* for 14 seasons from 2004 till 2015, so, by the time he won election in November 2016, he was an established figure in the media and popular culture.

Trump may have lacked Clinton's magnetism and Obama's relatability, but he could challenge both with his sex scandals and ability to dominate the news cycle. He had little experience in public office but was adept at maneuvering the media. Perhaps he still is. But is his audience still excited? Or are we witnessing Trump fatigue?

Audiences like novelty, freshness and new personalities. If Trump's celebrity appeal begins to wane, Kamala Harris emerges as a pristine face in American politics. Despite being vice president since 2021, she's relatively unknown. She's probably the least-known nominee in living memory. She didn't even benefit from the exposure of going through primaries. Ironically, this might not be such a bad thing.

Her paradigm will surely be Oprah Winfrey. A proven kingmaker with her pivotal "We need Barack Obama" speech at Des Moines, Iowa on December 8, 2007, Oprah has already given Harris her seal of approval.

As far as I'm aware, there is no celebrity equivalent of osmosis in which style, knowledge and appeal can pass from one person to another. If there were, Harris should learn how it works. Harris' campaign already has an Oprah feel: The "Joy" theme is confection, though not meaningless confection: It suggests Harris will, if elected, be a person who brings great pleasure and happiness — as celebrities often do.

The most amusing political spectacle in history

It seems frivolous to discuss celebrity culture in the solemn context of politics. But let's face it: politics is no longer solemn: The dignity that once seemed to ennoble politicians has vanished and whatever they say seems glib or, at best, rehearsed. Small wonder that audiences expect value-for-money entertainment from politics. Politicians, at least the successful ones, know this and often respond in a way that elicits a reaction. Trump has an intuitive grasp of this: His bombastic statements and bumptious behavior guarantee him an expectant audience and a breathless media. His dismissal of a miscellany of accusations with a shrug gives him a certain sheen. He also recruits established showbusiness stars, sometimes to their

chagrin (Abba asked Trump to stop playing their music at his rallies).

Like everything else, politics changes. Some might despair at the prospect of politics succumbing to trashy and meretricious celebrity culture. But voters demand it: They want politicians who are as imperfect as they are, empathic enough to be relatable, unpredictable in a way that keeps everyone curious and, above all, entertaining. And, if they're not, they're gone: There are plenty of politicians with presidential aspirations who rose to prominence but not for long. Who remembers Deval Patrick, Jim Gilmore or Lincoln Chafee — all hopefuls from recent political history?

Voters are accustomed to being entertained by all manner of celebrity, some weaponized with talent, others just disposable and quickly forgotten. Harris and Trump both want to convince voters that they're not celebrities but serious politicians. That means much of the campaign will be about trying to command the media's attention and shape the way it presents the candidates, whether as impressively august with superabundant leadership skills or just pretenders. This guarantees the campaign will deliver a theatrical, extravagant and probably the most amusing political spectacle in history.

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



Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a professor of sociology who has held academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His [first article](#) for *Fair Observer* was

an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Out-of-Control Wildfires Have Brazil Gasping For Air

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
September 08, 2024

In 2024, fires in Brazil rose by 80% compared to 2023, spreading from the Amazon to São Paulo. Human-caused fires, worsened by drought and weak laws, have burned huge areas. Despite penalties, those responsible face little punishment, and the fires are expected to get worse in September.

In 2024, Brazil has seen an alarming 80% increase in fires compared to the previous year. August has been the worst month so far, with fires spreading from the Pantanal and the Amazon to São Paulo. Under a thick layer of smoke, Brazilians watch in disbelief as the fires continue to grow.

São Paulo, one of 10 states affected by smoke and soot from the Amazon by late August, found relief on Friday, August 23, when a cold front arrived. The temperature dropped by 12°C, bringing some hope of cleaner air. That same morning, at 10:30 AM, IPAM (the Amazon Environmental Research Institute) satellites noticed an unusual rise in smoke columns. Within 90 minutes, the number of fire hotspots in the state

had skyrocketed from 25 to 1,886, surpassing even the Amazon's total. This sudden spike reflects a troubling year, as land clearing for agriculture drives most of the fires.

While authorities haven't officially declared the fires to be arson, evidence strongly suggests it. Over half of the fires were in sugarcane fields, with 20% in pastures and 17% in other crops. Nearly 4,000 rural properties were affected across 144 municipalities, with 48 placed on high alert. São Paulo saw a record number of fires this August — seven times more than the same month in 2023. Experts don't hesitate to attribute this to human activity. "Fires started in 50 municipalities at once. That means 99.9% of them were caused by people," said National Civil Defense Secretary Wolnei Wolff. "It's unnatural to have so many fires break out in such a short time. It's like São Paulo's own 'Fire Day,'" added Ane Alencar, IPAM's Science Director.

Alencar compares August 23 to Brazil's 2019 "Fire Day," when ranchers and land grabbers organized mass fires in the Amazon, burning 1,457 areas simultaneously. The fires prepared land for farming and cattle while also challenging environmental regulators under then-Minister Ricardo Salles. "I monitor satellite images daily, and I've rarely seen Brazil covered in smoke like this. It's almost impossible that these fires were natural," says Marcelo Seluchi, a climatologist at INPE. Alencar adds, "Fire remains a key tool in Brazilian agriculture, used to renew pastures and clear biomass from deforestation, making way for crops or grazing land."

The fires tend to flare up between July and October, Brazil's dry season, with 80% of fires occurring during this period. However, 2024 presents an extra threat. According to Brazil's National Center for Monitoring and Alerts of Natural Disasters (CEMADEN), the country is experiencing its longest drought in central regions

in 44 years. Over 70% of municipalities are dealing with some level of drought.

The record-setting number of fires in São Paulo is echoed in other states. Minas Gerais saw the highest fire activity in 13 years, while Mato Grosso experienced a 260% increase compared to 2023. Fires doubled in the Cerrado region. “I’d say 95% of this is linked to human activity. Fires were once controlled for land preparation, but today’s hotter and drier conditions make them harder to manage, even when not intended to spread,” says José Marengo, a CEMADEN researcher.

The Pantanal, one of the world’s largest wetlands, saw a 3,316% rise in fires in August, with 3,758 fires compared to just 110 in 2023. In the Amazon, over 50,000 fires have been recorded since the start of the year. These fires send smoke across the country, creating a vast corridor of haze. During “Fire Day” in 2019, São Paulo turned dark in the middle of the afternoon as smoke blotted out the sun. In August 2024, the smoke tinted the skies shades of orange and red across Brazil.

Weak laws exacerbate Brazil’s situation

If investigations confirm the fires in São Paulo were deliberate, the motives could range from defiance of environmental laws to political or economic messages. One thing is clear, though — such acts continue because of the impunity surrounding them.

In August, Greenpeace Brazil released a report marking five years since the 2019 “Fire Day.” They examined 478 properties linked to coordinated burns and found that 65% of the areas had been sanctioned for violations, but only 10% for illegal fires. Fines for these environmental crimes totaled around 1.3 billion reais (\$232.2 million), yet only 41,000 reais (\$7,300) had been paid. Some of these properties even received over

200 million reais (\$35.7 million) in rural credit. Despite this, no one has been arrested in five years.

Spain offers a stark contrast. In 2006, after a rise in human-caused fires, Spain passed a law prohibiting the sale, reclassification, or use of burned land for 30 years. This led to a significant drop in arson driven by speculation. In Brazil, if banks stopped giving credit to rural properties involved in illegal burns, it could make a major difference.

Brazil’s laws on fires are weak. While burning is technically illegal in forests and native vegetation, there are exceptions. Fires can be authorized for “specific cases” by environmental agencies, and controlled burns for agriculture are allowed in “exceptional cases.” This loophole has resulted in 25% of the country’s land — an area larger than Mexico — being destroyed by fire between 1985 and 2023. “In Brazil, we have two main laws for forest fires. The first punishes anyone who starts a fire with 2 to 4 years in prison, plus a fine, if it’s intentional, and 6 months to 1 year if it’s accidental,” explains criminal lawyer Enzo Fachini. “If a fire is set in crops, pastures, or forests, the sentence can be 4 to 8 years.”

Despite these laws, little happens. “We’ll assess the damage with rural unions and offer support. Agribusiness is crucial to the state,” said São Paulo Governor Tarcísio de Freitas on the second “Fire Day.”

The São Paulo Department of Agriculture estimates losses at \$1 billion reais (\$178.6 million). Six people were arrested for suspected criminal actions, and two firefighters died fighting the flames. The smoke that blanketed much of the country led to a 60% rise in emergency medical visits due to poor air quality, mostly affecting children and the elderly.

Supreme Court Minister Flávio Dino ordered the Defense, Justice, and Environment Ministries to urgently mobilize resources to fight the fires in the Pantanal and Amazon. However, with a 78% rise in fires between January and August compared to 2023, the situation remains critical. “We haven’t even reached the worst part yet — September,” warned Alencar.



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

Chevron Overturn Signals Volatile Emerging Storm of Litigation

Atul Singh
September 09, 2024

A recent US Supreme Court ruling in *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo* reversed 40 years of legal precedent. Previously, federal courts were required to defer to the administrative state’s interpretation of ambiguous laws. Now, courts may review these interpretations. Thus, a huge number of administrative rules are now open to legal challenges. This will introduce major uncertainty for businesses and deluge the courts with lawsuits.

On June 28, the US Supreme Court’s six conservative justices joined together in *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*. They overturned the 1984 decision *Chevron U.S.A., Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.* This case was the basis of the “Chevron deference doctrine,” under which judges were required to defer to a regulatory agency’s interpretation of the law on points that Congress had not made precise, as long as the interpretation was “reasonable.” Chevron remained one of the bedrock principles of administrative law for 40 years.

In the decision, the majority stated, “The Administrative Procedure Act requires courts to exercise their independent judgment in deciding whether an agency has acted within its statutory authority, and courts may not defer to an agency interpretation of the law simply because a statute is ambiguous; Chevron is overruled.”

The decision to overturn Chevron was split down partisan lines. The Court’s three liberal justices dissented from the majority decision, calling it an act of judicial hubris.

The Court’s overturning of 40 years of legal precedent will have far-reaching effects. While Democrats and Republicans blame each other for the coming storm, it is clear that the polarization surrounding the decision will overwhelm the legal system and lead to high-cost consequences for many businesses.

The beginning and end of Chevron

The logic behind the Chevron deference doctrine was to make regulation more effective and efficient. When Congress passed the Clean Water Act of 1972 to control water pollution, they could not define every pollutant and set safe levels for

every one. So, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) creates the standards, policies and detailed regulations to fill the gaps.

In 1984, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc. (NRDC) challenged the EPA's standards in Chevron. The DC Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the NRDC, but the Supreme Court reversed that ruling, inaugurating the deference doctrine. If the 1972 act was silent or ambiguous with respect to a specific issue, the Supreme Court decided, judges should defer to the EPA's interpretation of the statute. This precedent soon became a foundational principle, being cited thousands of times in the following years.

Later, however, the Supreme Court has been diluting the Chevron deference doctrine. As Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, "At this point, all that remains of Chevron is a decaying husk with bold pretensions."

In 2022, the court created the "major questions" doctrine in *West Virginia v. EPA*. Agencies asserting new authority with economic and political significance required a higher standard of "clear congressional authorization." This put limits on the power Chevron gave to administrative agencies. The major questions doctrine was also the basis for striking down US President Joe Biden's policy to forgive \$430 billion of student loan debt.

Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo was the final nail in Chevron's coffin. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), a branch of the Department of Commerce, required Loper Bright Enterprises, a herring fishery, to have a third-party monitor on every boat to prevent overfishing. The government paid the salaries of the monitors. However, when the money ran out, the NMFS told Loper Bright Enterprises to pay the monitors.

The employees of Loper Bright then sued Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, claiming that the NMFS' requirement was unconstitutional. Due to Chevron, the case was dismissed because the court deferred to the agency's interpretation. However, when Loper Bright appealed, the case made it to the Supreme Court where it found several conservative justices ready to overturn Chevron.

Businesses will be hit hard

Businesses operating in the US will be affected by the overturning of the Chevron doctrine, though the exact impact and timing are not yet clear. As judicial challenges to federal regulations proceed, compliance requirements for businesses will become less predictable.

Changes could occur in several areas, including in visa regulations, workplace health and safety, equal employment opportunities and the status of independent contractors. In the longer term, a patchwork of regulations may be upheld or canceled, leading to increased ambiguity and confusion for businesses. Most importantly, judges may rule in surprising ways and along partisan lines, causing a clash between ideologies.

A practical example illustrates why the 2024 judgment is extremely consequential for consumers, businesses and the economy. After the 1929 Wall Street Crash, Congress passed the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 and created the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). However, since the 1934 act, the economy and financial markets became increasingly complex. Standards that applied in 1934 may not apply in today's modern market.

Thus, legislative delegation to the SEC must sometimes be implicit, not explicit, to avoid overwhelming legislators. Chevron deference made this easier by giving the SEC the power to

interpret the original act of 1934 without judicial interference. A court was not to substitute its own interpretation of the 1934 statute for a reasonable interpretation made by the SEC. However, with power to interpret taken away from the SEC, rulings on financial standards will vary from court to court.

Chevron caused ideological strife

The Court's three liberal judges argued giving courts the right to impose their judgment on the law was simply a power grab. Conservative judges, on the other hand, took the view that the Chevron deference doctrine gave administrators too much power and prevented judges from judging.

Republicans, conservative legal scholars and business leaders in the US also favor the new judgment. The right points to bureaucratic empire-building since the creation of the modern administrative state by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s. They also claim agencies expanded their power beyond what the original legislation permitted. In 1952, Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson even called the bureaucracy the "veritable fourth branch" of government.

Republicans believe the new decision will check left-leaning bias in federal agencies. Republicans blame Democrats for deliberately passing vague laws to exercise federal power in the name of the Democratic agenda. Left-leaning, unelected bureaucrats impose unending red tape on businesses, causing costs and delays. As such, the US economy becomes less competitive. To Republicans, bureaucrats violate the principle of separation of powers. They act like the legislature by crafting regulations. They also act like the judiciary by interpreting those regulations in their favor.

Just as Republicans complain that Democrats dominate regulatory agencies, the latter complain about the former for politicizing the courts. Supreme Court conservatives adhere to conservative jurisprudence, which is fixated based on originalism and textualism. Originalism is the principle that the constitution should be interpreted to mean what it meant at the time it was written.

Textualism is the theory that the interpretation of the law is based exclusively on the ordinary meaning of the legal text. No consideration is given to non-textual influences. Democrats see the recent originalist and textualist judgments of the Supreme Court as a result of decades of disciplined work by their Republican rivals to put conservatives on the court.

Democrats agonize about the Republican capture of the Supreme Court. After stuffing the Supreme Court with their partisan nominees, Republicans achieved major agenda items such as overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973), putting the legality of abortion back in the hands of the states, and dismantling the US administrative state, causing "havoc in society."

Democrats believe the 2024 Loper Bright decision created legal chaos and a crisis in governance. Democrats, administrative lawyers and legal scholars at the top US schools state that the US legal system will soon experience spectacular fireworks. On July 1, the Supreme Court's five-three judgment in *Corner Post v. Federal Reserve* eliminated the statute of limitations for many challenges to administrative rules.

In her dissenting opinion, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson warned of a "tsunami of lawsuits." Justice Elena Kagan thought similarly regarding the 2024 decision. In her dissenting opinion, she wrote, "In one fell swoop, the majority today gives itself exclusive power over every open issue—no matter

how expertise-driven or policy-laden—involving the meaning of regulatory law.”

The two decisions, Loper Bright and Corner Post, have the ability to come together to create a Brexit-style arrangement supporting conservative ideological fervor for rolling back the Rooseveltian state. The legal certainty that businesses enjoyed in the US is now threatened. Neither the bureaucracy nor the courts are prepared for the imminent tsunami of cases. In an extremely litigious society, the legal system could find itself overwhelmed.

[Cheyenne Torres and Joey McFadden edited this piece.]



Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of

humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Atul studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Now It's Clear, Osama bin Laden Won the War on Terror

Atul Singh
September 11, 2024

Osama bin Laden sought to weaken the American empire by striking its political and financial centers. He orchestrated the bloody

9/11 attacks on American soil. In response, the US launched a Global War on Terror which by all accounts has been a disaster. Twenty-three years after 9/11, the US stands weakened, politically divided and morally coarsened by its ill-thought response.

On September 11, 2001, I was on a flight out of Srinagar, the capital of what was then the state of Jammu and Kashmir, to New Delhi, the capital of India.

Back then, the airport was like a fortress. I was a young officer having my last thrill by riding around on the machine gun nests of military trucks and walking to posts on the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. Some of the fighters we had been facing were battle-hardened Pashtuns who would come swinging down from Afghanistan, which was then (as now) ruled by the Taliban.

After my flight reached its destination, I went to my parents' home and unpacked my uniform. In a few days, I would leave for Oxford to read for a Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree that would change my life. My parents and I were having a late dinner when a fellow officer, now in India's Intelligence Bureau, called on our landline. (In those days, we did not yet have mobile phones.) He told me that the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York were crumbling after a spectacular terrorist attack.

The following is a piece about the man who engineered those attacks and changed the world as we knew it that day.

A story of a chap named Osama

Osama bin Muhammad bin Awad bin Laden, better known as Osama bin Laden, was the one of

more than 50 children of Muhammad bin Laden, a self-made billionaire who made his fortune executing construction projects for the Saudi royal family. Osama's mother, Hamida al-Attas, was Syrian whom good old Muhammad divorced promptly after the child's birth. Muhammad recommended Hamida to an associate, Muhammad al-Attas, with whom she had four more children. Of his father's \$5 billion, Osama inherited \$25–30 million.

Osama reportedly liked reading the works of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and French President and General Charles de Gaulle. Osama also played football — soccer for our American friends — as a center forward. He was an Arsenal fan.

For all his wealth and Western interests, Osama was discontented with the state of the world. As a devout Sunni Muslim, his main interests were the Quran and jihad. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Osama left for Pakistan and used his own money to fund the mujahideen fighting the Soviets. Soon, he was in bed with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who were fighting Charlie Wilson's War to give the Soviets a bloody nose.

The carousing and cavorting Congressman Wilson funded the mujahideen lavishly. Yet this did not endear Wilson's beloved homeland to Osama. This pious Muslim (who left behind 20–26 children and probably had more sex than the playboy Wilson) founded al-Qaeda in 1988. As per the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the goal of this organization was a worldwide jihad. Osama was virulently opposed to American presence on Muslim lands, especially his native Saudi Arabia.

Osama began training young men in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan to unleash a campaign of terror against the US. On February 26, 1993, two al-Qaeda operatives drove a van

packed with explosives into the public parking garage beneath the World Trade Center and set off a big blast. Six people, including a pregnant woman, died, and over a thousand were injured. The FBI arrested five of the seven plotters promptly and found the mastermind Ramzi Yousef later in Pakistan.

Yousef's plan was to topple North Tower with his bomb, and the collapsing debris of this tower was to knock down South Tower. This cunning plan failed, but his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, succeeded in knocking the towers down more than eight years later.

The 9/11 attacks (known this way because unlike the British or the Europeans, Americans put the month before the day) involved 19 of Osama's boys four hijacking planes and flying them to kamikaze-style suicide attacks on chosen targets. A third plane struck the Pentagon, and a fourth, which crashed in Pennsylvania, was apparently meant to hit the White House. Osama's Pakistani henchman had pulled off a huge massacre on a shoestring budget, killing 2,997 people and injuring an estimated 25,000. Now, Osama had worldwide attention for his global jihad.

The US tilts at windmills

The 9/11 attacks led to mourning and shock in the US. Even the Japanese had only struck Pearl Harbor in distant Hawaii, which was not even a state yet. Osama had managed to strike the mainland US itself. This was a really big deal.

Later, the 9-11 Commission Report concluded that Osama's al-Qaeda was "sophisticated, patient, disciplined, and lethal." Osama had issued two fatwas, one in August 1996 and in February 1998, calling for a jihad against the US. He declared that it was more important for Muslims to kill Americans than to kill other infidels. This charming chap was inspired by Egyptian Islamist

author Sayyid Qutb and rationalized “unprovoked mass murder as righteous defense of an embattled faith.”

The murderous ideology that had inflicted such spectacular 9/11 attacks was bound to provoke a response. Under George W. Bush, who was not as bright as his father George H. W. Bush, this came in the form of the War on Terror, later jargonized as the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The US rushed into Afghanistan to get rid of the Taliban and succeeded speedily. Then, they engaged in a quixotic endeavor to build democracy in this famously fractious, mountainous land.

The US installed one notoriously corrupt leader after another into office. These men stole hundreds of millions of American taxpayer dollars. In the end, US darlings Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani became lackeys of the Taliban, who are now back in power despite the blood and treasure successive US administrations poured into Afghanistan.

More importantly, the GWOT morphed into an invasion of Iraq in 2003. This was both unwise and unnecessary. Certainly, Saddam Hussein was no lovey dovey cuddly teddy bear. He was a murderer fond of chemical weapons and had gassed both Shia Arabs and ethnic minority Kurds.

Hussein had invaded Iran (in 1980) and Kuwait (in 1990) as well. The latter provoked the 1990–1991 Gulf War, where US troops annihilated Iraqi forces spectacularly. By 2003, Hussein’s Iraq was a shell of its former self. Besides, Hussein was a Baathist — a political philosophy that advocates a single Arab socialist nation — and no friend to al-Qaeda. Yet deranged American neoconservatives — many of whom were the children of Trotskyites — argued that Hussein would collaborate with Osama to unleash weapons of mass destruction on the US. This argument was bunkum but, just like their fathers, neoconservatives did not let reality

get in the way of ideology. As a result, more American blood and treasure were lost.

The Iraq War destroyed the goodwill the US had attracted after the 9/11 attacks. Few people around the world bought the neoconservative bullshit. Even old allies like France and Germany refused to go along. Tony Blair valiantly sided with Bush Junior but lost his reputation at home for doing so.

Worse, the US under Bush Junior justified torture. My co-author Glenn Carle, a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) with nine ancestors on the Mayflower, resigned from the CIA and wrote *The Interrogator*, a riveting read that captures the madness of this era. Needless to say, this US recourse to torture damaged its reputation globally and caused a crisis of confidence in the idea of America at home.

The US takes its eye off the ball

Arguably, the US has been the greatest superpower in history. The 9/11 attacks were spectacular, but they were perpetrated by little men in the shadows. Crazy ideologies always come up from time to time, and Islamist fanaticism is not new. Muslim countries tend to have very few minorities for a reason. After all, believers have a religious duty to convert everyone to Islam. Fanatical Muslims have resorted to torture and murder in their aim to convert pagans and dissenters from truth with a capital T. The medieval Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and the more modern Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini are just two examples from a long line of crazy nutters.

If the neoconservatives had read some history, they would have realized that the War on Terror was a bloody stupid idea. You can go to war against a state, but not against an idea, especially not if this idea has been around for a long time and just refuses to die. Plenty of disgruntled young men and even others need a villain whom they can

blame for everything. When an ideology offers 72 virgins in heaven, it is an attractive proposition to many testosterone-filled fanatics.

The US got distracted by the War on Terror and ignored other key developments. Few remember that 2001 is not only the year of the 9/11 attacks but also the year in which China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Enter the Dragon was the blockbuster movie Americans somehow missed. The 2016 paper “The China Shock” explains how the entry of China into the global market deindustrialized many economies and depressed worker wages as well. The Rust Belt, where much of Donald Trump’s core support base lives, is a classic example of this shock.

Anyway, fast forward to today and a new Cold War, which includes a full-blown trade war, has broken out between the US and China. If the US had woken up to the Chinese challenge earlier, this would have been entirely avoidable.

There is also an argument to be made that the US was blind to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s tightening grip on power. For years, the US and its allies, especially the UK, were happy to enjoy Russian cash pilfered from oligarchs from Mother Russia. They never really used their leverage against Putin to contain him or, earlier, to help build a Russian economy that was less extractive or exploitative.

To this day, Russians blame Bush Junior for unilaterally pulling out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that prohibited both countries from “deploying nationwide defenses against strategic ballistic missiles.” Putin had promised the US full support after 9/11, and Russians still view the US abandonment of ABM as a stab in the back. Fueled by irrational fears post-9/11, it was entirely unnecessary and extremely unwise.

A weaker, more divided post-9/11 US

I am convinced that many neoconservatives were well-meaning. I met some of them during my time at Oxford. Some of them were Rhodes Scholars and were convinced that an American invasion would lead to democracy. By their logic, there would be rivers of milk and honey in the region, and everyone would sing kumbaya. This is exactly what many Bolsheviks believed in 1917. Yet what they got was lovely Joseph Stalin’s paranoid mass killings and secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria’s rampant raping.

Naive neoconservatives forgot that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. The invasion of Iraq was followed by the rise of the Islamic State and a savage civil war that spilled out into Syria, where the Russians got involved. A former commandant of Sandhurst (the legendary British military academy) who came from a gloriously imperial family remarked to me in 2003 that the borders in the Middle East were all in the wrong place. Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot had not quite got everything right. Yet the trouble is, where do you draw new lines in this famously volatile region? Neoconservatives shook the hornet’s nest, and the results will remain with us for decades to come.

Japan and Germany after World War II were relatively homogenous industrial societies. Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq was one. Both are multiethnic concoctions where the idea of a Westphalian state is still an alien import. The likes of Paul Wolfowitz and Paul Bremer were infernally arrogant and criminally ignorant in their policy prescriptions. De-Baathification in Iraq led to the disbanding of the military, the police, the firefighters, the teachers, the doctors and other employees of Hussein’s state. To survive, not just thrive, everyone joined the Baathist Party. Instead of creating a thriving democracy, neoconservatives

unleashed chaos and civil war. We are still reaping the bitter harvests of the toxic seeds they sowed.

Like the War on Drugs and the War on Crime, the War on Terror failed. Simplistic solutions to complex problems always fail, even when they may seem successful for decades. Neither Nazi Germany nor Soviet Russia were able to create the utopias they promised. Instead, both led to nightmares. So did the War on Terror.

Osama's aim was to weaken the US. He succeeded. Trump won the presidency first by defenestrating Jeb Bush from the Republican Party and then by beating Hillary Clinton in the presidential election. The reality television star blamed both of them for the Iraq War. The neoconservatives' chest-thumping form of American nationalism had paved the way for him. Trump offered a rawer version of patriotism to those on the Right who feared that America had become weak. To them, "Make America Great Again" proved to be an irresistible offer.

At the same time, the Left lost faith in the idea of America. American campuses started viewing the CIA and the FBI as sinister organizations. Many young Americans see their country as an unjust superpower dominated by the military-industrial complex. Osama had blamed the Great Satan — the term used in many Muslim countries for the US — for the sad plight of Palestine and Lebanon. Thousands of students camping in campuses seem to agree.

The Taliban is back in power in Afghanistan. Terrorism still persists even though we have avoided a repeat of 9/11-style spectacular attacks. Airport security is a pain in the wrong part of the anatomy because no one wants to be on a plane headed into a monument. No one trusts President Joe Biden's democracy agenda because they have seen this American movie before. The soft power that Harvard Kennedy School's Joseph Nye speaks

of stands greatly damaged. Worst of all, a coarsened, far more divided US seems ill-prepared to lead a more fractious world.



Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Atul studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

What Could a Trump 2.0 Presidency Mean for Imran Khan and US–Pakistan Relations?

Hassan Shad
September 14, 2024

US President Donald Trump and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan had a special bond during their terms in office. Both men were populists, political outsiders who disdained the systems into which they had broken. Khan now sits in jail, under trial for various accusations, while Trump may soon win election as president once again. Could a second Trump administration alter the US's relationship with Pakistan or change Khan's fortunes?

As the world stands on the precipice of another US election that could return former President Donald Trump to the White House. What does this possibility mean for US–Pakistan relations and the beleaguered political future of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan? In the past few years, bilateral relations have been fraught, characterized by sharp rebukes and fleeting reconciliations. The prospect of Trump’s return offers both a glimmer of hope and a cloud of uncertainty.

Donald Trump and Imran Khan’s unexpected friendship

The year 2018 began with a jarring discord when Trump, then in office, launched a stinging tweet accusing Pakistan of deceit and duplicity for accepting billions of dollars in foreign aid while purportedly sheltering terrorists. The tweet ignited a diplomatic conflagration. Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif retorted sharply, summoning the US ambassador in Islamabad to the Foreign Office to lodge a formal protest. This sharp exchange underscored the fragility of the US–Pakistan relationship and set the tone for the turbulent interactions to follow.

The discord reached new heights in November 2019 when Trump once again targeted Pakistan via Twitter, accusing it of continuing to harbor terrorists. By this juncture, the Pakistani political landscape had undergone a significant shift. Imran Khan, leader of the Pakistan Movement for Justice party, now served as prime minister. Khan’s response was a fervent defense of Pakistan’s honor, which he framed against the broader backdrop of its sacrifices in the War on Terror. Khan’s retort not only challenged Trump’s assertions but also underscored the broader implications of these accusations — the US was holding Pakistan to an unfair standard, blaming it for its own failures in Afghanistan while exonerating itself.

Amid these diplomatic storms, a surprising development emerged in July 2019 when Khan visited Washington. His arrival was marked by an unexpected red-carpet reception from the US president. This high-profile greeting was emblematic of a shared populist ethos between the two leaders. Both Trump and Khan, having risen to prominence with considerable celebrity status, shared a mutual disdain for the conventional political establishment. A certain camaraderie characterized their interaction and suggested a potential thaw in their relationship.

Could a change in administration alter Washington–Islamabad relations?

Both Khan and his party have been the target of numerous legal maneuvers and political machinations. In April 2022, an unprecedented no-confidence motion in parliament removed Khan from office. Since then, Khan has been repeatedly accused of various crimes, convicted, jailed and then acquitted on appeal; he remains, however, in government custody. Given the apparent warmth between Trump and Khan, Trump’s candidacy in 2024 has spurred speculation within Pakistan about a possible revival of Khan’s political fortunes.

Despite fervent lobbying efforts by the Pakistani diaspora, including those with access to influential US senators and congressmen, current US President Joe Biden’s administration’s approach to Pakistan and Khan has remained largely unchanged: The White House has not condemned the brutalities faced by Khan’s party or the ongoing political turmoil. This apparent inertia has heightened the anticipation surrounding a potential Trump return.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, historically, US–Pakistan relations have fared better under Republican administrations. The Cold War era and the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks illustrate how Republican presidents have often taken a

realpolitik approach and sought to rekindle ties with Pakistan for strategic purposes. Still, Trump's leadership style is transactional and inherently unpredictable nature. It could open the doors to potential negotiation, but it is impossible to make definitive forecasts.

Besides, US–Pakistan relations were never easy to put in a box, especially given the US's strategic partnership with India — a crucial ally in its efforts to counterbalance China. The India factor creates a formidable obstacle for any potential shift in US policy towards Pakistan. The Biden administration's alignment with India reflects a broader strategic calculus that might constrain the scope for any significant policy changes. Nevertheless, if the Pakistani diaspora succeeds in mobilizing influential Republican congressmen to advocate on his behalf, there could be a sliver of hope for more favorable outcomes for Khan, on the individual level. (Anecdotal evidence suggests such efforts are already underway.)

While Trump's return might offer a glimmer of hope for Khan's political revival, the uncertainty surrounding Trump's presidency, and the broader geopolitical considerations render any forecasts speculative. Diplomatic maneuvering, strategic interests and personal relationships are all at play.

As the world watches the unfolding drama, the future of US–Pakistan relations and Khan's political fortunes remain in flux. The next chapter in this saga promises to be as unpredictable and riveting as the twists and turns that have come before.



Hassan Shad is a practicing international lawyer based in the Middle East and a graduate of Harvard Law School.

Venezuela's Rigged Elections: How to Achieve a Much-Awaited Democratic Transition?

Helder Ferreira do Vale
September 16, 2024

President Nicolás Maduro claimed victory in Venezuela's 2024 presidential election, despite allegations of electoral fraud and evidence that opposition leader Edmundo González won. As Maduro tightens his grip on power, Venezuela faces deepening political unrest, casting doubt on the country's democratic future.

On June 28, as 21 million Venezuelans awaited the election results, the opposition reported a sudden halt in the vote count. Hours later, electoral authorities declared President Nicolás Maduro the winner with 51% of the vote, despite record turnout and forecasts heavily favoring opposition leader Edmundo González. With tight control over the election authority, Maduro secured another six-year term, extending his rule since taking power after Hugo Chávez's death in 2013.

Unlike previous Venezuelan elections over the past 25 years, where incumbents always emerged victorious, this year's election gave the opposition a genuine chance at victory. The day after the vote, opposition leader María Corina Machado declared the election rigged. Citing tally sheets from polling stations, she reported that González received about 70% of the vote, while Maduro only secured 30%.

The opposition claims are backed by an independent analysis of 83% of voting records, which confirmed González won 67.1% of the votes to Maduro's 30.4%. These records are publicly available, unlike the official results, which remain inaccessible to date. This analysis also closely aligns with independently conducted pre-election polls predicting a large-margin victory for González.

Several governments in the region, including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Peru, questioned Maduro's win. In response, Maduro cut diplomatic ties with them the next day. Even allies like Brazil, Colombia and Mexico urged him to disclose the voting records to legitimize his win. The European Union rejected the results due to electoral irregularities, and the US went further to officially recognize González as the winner.

If Maduro had acknowledged the true election results, it would have made Venezuela the latest Latin American country to transition to democracy. Sadly, the government seems to be sliding further into autocracy, fueling ongoing protests. Now, it's clear that the Venezuelan dictatorship is prepared to remain in power at any cost.

The rise of the opposition

Since 2018, when Maduro won a second presidential term through illegal election manipulation, Venezuela's opposition has grown stronger.

A key moment demonstrating this growing strength was former opposition leader Juan Guaidó's formation of an interim government in 2019 using constitutional provisions, which gained support from the US and several Latin American countries. However, in 2021, the National Assembly, dominated by Maduro's regime, dissolved Guaidó's government. Three of the four

main opposition groups then sought to form a united coalition for the 2024 elections.

In 2023, with Guaidó and two other former opposition leaders in exile, María Corina Machado took the lead in building a civic movement against Maduro. By mid-2023, Machado had achieved unprecedented popularity, not seen since the Bolivarian Revolution under Chávez. Her charisma and conciliatory approach united Venezuelans around the once unthinkable goal of defeating Maduro.

Eduardo González secured the "Democratic Unity" nomination after the Electoral Court, under Maduro's control, declared María Corina Machado ineligible in 2023. Efforts to replace her with another ally failed twice, making González the official nominee. Despite these hurdles, the opposition coalition has successfully unified Venezuelans in their push for government change and democratization.

On the campaign trail, González and Corina traveled across Venezuela on what they call their "Caravan for Liberty." They focus on small and medium-sized cities, drawing large crowds to rallies to voice disapproval of the regime. In contrast, Maduro concentrated on rallies in Chávez-supportive areas, which attracted fewer attendees.

While support for the opposition grew, backing for Maduro and his regime faded.

Waning support for the regime

Maduro's credibility as a democratic leader has been marred by his chauvinistic rhetoric, poor human rights record and autocratic tendencies. In the final days of the campaign, Maduro intensified his aggressive rhetoric. He attacked foreign media and questioned the legitimacy of electoral processes in democratic countries. He also revoked

invitations to official election monitoring delegations, including one led by former Argentine President Alberto Fernández.

Still, hopes remained that basic rules for free and fair elections would be respected this year, given the Barbados Agreement signed between the Venezuelan government and opposition in October 2023. The Agreement aimed to hold the presidential elections in the second half of 2024 with international monitoring and opposition participation in primaries. However, it has been systematically violated. The US partially lifted sanctions to encourage compliance, but reinstated them six months later. After the election, the US seized Maduro's airplane for sanction violations, signaling its disapproval of the autocratic leader.

Sanctions have exacerbated Venezuela's economic collapse, straining the subsidies and social programs that many poor Venezuelans rely on. Since Chávez's death in 2013, Venezuela's economic and humanitarian crises have worsened, straining the country's ability to provide basic services. Under this state of permanent crisis, the regime has increasingly resorted to corruption to maintain loyalty among allies and the military. In a desperate attempt to keep the military unified in support of the regime, Maduro tried to illegally annex Esequibo, a disputed territory with Guyana, in 2023.

As a result, Maduro's popularity has declined. According to Delphos, 25.1% of Venezuelans believe his government is bad and 47.2% believe it is very bad.

Election day and its aftermath have been tense and filled with protests. About 42% of Venezuelans have stated they will protest if Maduro remains in power, and nearly 81% see the 2024 election as a crucial turning point for regime change.

Maduro lacks international support for his current efforts to stay in power, but there is little consensus on how to address the situation. Most Latin American countries advocate for increased international pressure on Maduro and push for a peaceful transition to democracy. However, Brazil and Colombia, which are currently the most influential in Venezuelan affairs, argue that Venezuela's international isolation limits diplomatic options for facilitating this transition.

A long walk to democracy

This year's presidential election in Venezuela represents a watershed moment in the 25-year autocracy of Chávez and Maduro. Still, a peaceful transition will be challenging for several reasons.

First, the army plays a crucial role in Venezuela's crisis. Though not formally a military regime (often classified as a hybrid regime), Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution was built on militaristic foundations. Chávez first gained prominence in 1992 through a failed coup and, since his election in 1999, has structured the revolution around two pillars: chauvinistic social mobilization and military support. With the possibility of contested results, the likelihood of violence is high, making the army critical for a regime struggling to maintain control.

Second, transitions involving massive public participation, or "transitions from below," tend to be sudden and violent. However, Venezuela's social mobilization has been comparatively weak. For a gradual, peaceful transition to occur, the government would need to negotiate with the opposition and open up the regime. There is little likelihood that Maduro will agree to any kind of political transition or modification in the present status quo as long as the army supports his government. Venezuela thus has few options to democratize.

Venezuela's path to democracy will be winding if Maduro, like Chávez, continues using illiberal tactics to stifle the opposition and create an uncompetitive electoral environment. The regime has attempted to limit the opposition's communication ability, though key candidates still managed to appear on public networks. In the past few months, the crackdown on dissent has intensified: Six of María Corina Machado's close aides, including her campaign manager, sought refuge at the Argentine Embassy in Caracas to avoid arrest. Additionally, a week before the election, Machado's chief of security was detained by police for 24 hours for undisclosed reasons.

For the moment, despite repression, the opposition's best course of action is to keep using democratic strategies. Historically, Latin American dictatorships have an expiration date, with the few exceptions being Cuba and Nicaragua. Mexico's slow path to democratization in the 1990s demonstrated how a dictatorship weakens when confronted with elections with a sizable popular opposition. The country ended a 60-year domination of a revolutionary party in 2001 by electing a president from the opposition.

The regime has lost much of its popular support, while the opposition has gained momentum. Despite the possibility of Maduro becoming more radical and repressive, these new dynamics make a democratic transition more likely than in the past.

[Ting Cui edited this piece.]



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

research interests include federalism, comparative politics and democratization. His works appear in several peer-reviewed journals. In the past, he also held academic positions at the University of Barcelona, University of Lisbon, University of Cape Town and the Institute of Advanced Studies Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK), among others. Also, he has worked for the Spanish Ministry of the Presidency, as well as for several international organizations including the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Big Agribusiness: A Look at Brazil's Disastrous Rural Feudalism

Karin Schmalz
September 17, 2024

Agribusiness has made Brazil the world's largest net exporter. Due to historic property laws, however, land ownership remains a major conflict. International actors have hurt family farmers for centuries; local politicians still help them control the country's resources. Brazil's wealthy elite despise the poor populace, creating a fascist environment.

[This piece is a continuation of a multi-part series. You can read [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) [here](#).]

The support of the Brazilian militias and the Neo-Pentecostal churches may have guaranteed Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's victories as a federal deputy in Rio de Janeiro (1991–2018), but

they would not be enough to support him in a bid for the presidency. Even the support of the armed forces would be restricted to highly urbanized areas, only reaching as far as military families and retired personnel. So, to become president, Bolsonaro would need to extend his support base into the country.

In Brazil, 57% of the population lives in only 6% of the cities, many of those state capitals. But the political contribution of smaller cities near rural production areas is significant; 95% of municipalities have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. These voters are crucial in electing representatives to state legislative chambers and both federal houses.

Before we return to Bolsonaro, let us take a look at the political development of Brazil's countryside and small cities.

Brazil's agriculture: powerful, unfair and built on historic slavery

Brazil has been an agricultural powerhouse for centuries. It has a unique potential of growing production, with the most arable land on the planet. It is the top exporter of 32 commodities, being the largest net exporter globally. Agricultural production is the main economic activity in the states of Mato Grosso, Paraná, Sao Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais. Goiás, Mato Grosso do Sul and Santa Catarina have increased their production in the last decades.

The population of these states alone reaches over 112 million. Five million rural properties occupy 41% of the national territory, with over 19 million agricultural workers. They are responsible for almost 25% of the country's GDP. This powerful economic sector has always been crucial for Brazil's political pathways.

Rural areas suffer from growing inequality. An estimated 52% of the population is impoverished, resulting from a multi-centennial project to amass lands in the hands of particular people groups. These issues are far from being solved.

Until 1850, land was not a commodity in Brazil. Settlers could toil and occupy the country, but property rights were given by monarchs — first Portuguese kings, then Brazilian emperors — to their children or godchildren, as a means of feeding the growing European mercantilist economy. Over 80% of the production went to Europe.

To this end, those with the right of use to the land would create latifúndios, enormous landed estates with primitive agriculture and labor, often in a state of partial servitude. These measured billions of square yards and were covered in monocultures. There were economic cycles based on Brazilwood, sugarcane, cotton, coffee and cattle. The workforce comprised peoples enslaved by the Portuguese. During the first economic cycle, the extractivism-based "Brazilwood cycle," native Brazilians were captured and enslaved, sometimes traded by tribes allied to the Portuguese.

When the economy changed to a basis in agriculture, indigenous peoples lost their usefulness; they were not helpful to plantations, as they were unacquainted with cattle and plants brought from Asia and Africa. Over the next centuries, an estimated seven million people — corresponding to 70% of the whole Transatlantic slave trade — were kidnapped from Portuguese strongholds in Africa, with the support of the general society and Catholic church, and taken to Brazil to produce all the country's wealth. As German educator Ina von Binzen remarked in the 1880s, "the white Brazilian just doesn't work."

How the 1850 Land Law changed Brazilian farmers and politics

The vastness of Brazilian territory was too enticing to not be turned into a commodity. In 1850, Emperor Pedro II, Brazil's last emperor, signed Law 601, or the "Land Law," which established territorial property rights to individuals and turned all uncolonized areas within the country's borders into public land that could be purchased from the state. While land reform had been applied in several countries since antiquity, guaranteeing the permanence of early settlers, this issue was never discussed in imperial Brazil. In fact, the 1850 Land Law resulted in the displacement of poorer early settlers and virtually denied property rights to recently freed African descendants.

After the abolition of slavery in 1888, 700,000 freed slaves were left to their own devices, unable to own property and having to beg to stay on their former owners' land. These practices persisted until the 20th century in a phenomenon known as "Coronelism." This was especially the case in Northeast Brazil, which was still one of the main global exporters of cane sugar.

Under the Coronelist system, landed oligarchs were the shadow figures behind the State — they controlled politics and the economy, and they assassinated rivals. Most "Coronels" had, in fact, been part of military forces during the genocidal Paraguayan War (1864–1870), the Republic putsch of 1889 or one of the many military coup attempts until the successful installation of the New Republic in 1930.

The 1889 deposition of Pedro II by Marshall Deodoro da Fonseca came about largely because of the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the lack of compensation to landed oligarchs. This was due to the intrinsic connection between the military and *latifúndios*.

With slavery abolished, the Brazilian government decided that, instead of educating or providing land to the Afro-Brazilian population, they should "whiten" Brazil by bringing over three million European and Asian immigrants. Many of those immigrants, however, ended up manning established monocultures owned by "coffee and rubber barons." They did not have resources to buy land and thus ended up living in conditions analogous to slavery. Over the next decades, the impoverished, landless European settlers became the *campesinos* ("peasant farmers") fighting for land rights, especially in the south of Brazil.

The Land Law fueled land conflicts in Brazil. Land-grabbing became the norm, especially as frontiers were pushed inland. Landowners would falsify property titles by sticking brand new documents into boxes with crickets, which would give them the appearance of old titles. This practice is known as *grilagem* (from *grilo*, meaning "cricket"), and it continues to this day. In fact, businessman Altino Masson is currently the largest *grileiro* (person who illicitly owns land through false property titles) in the Amazon, with 11 extensive farms in public lands from nine states — this territory altogether is three times larger than the city of Sao Paulo.

The greed of land-grabbers led to conflicts that would be considered prolonged low-intensity conflicts by the United Nations, such as that at Engenho Prado, state of Pernambuco. With Bolsonaro in power and the retraction of policing operations in rural areas, land conflicts increased 1,000% and involved almost one million people. Approximately 71% of invaded territories officially belonged to indigenous peoples. Auxiliary military forces, such as the Military Police, are often involved in land-grabbing schemes. They are the ostensive force used by *ruralistas* (large landowners who now head the agribusiness in Brazil) to drive small family farmers off their desired areas.

On August 10, 2019, ruralistas supporting Bolsonaro's anti-environmental policies caused the infamous Dia do Fogo ("Fire Day"), a coordinated arson effort that increased Amazon fires by 300% in just 24 hours. Despite prosecutors warning the federal government about the upcoming organized criminal effort, Bolsonaro accused nongovernmental organizations of creating the disaster to "bring the government's attention." A year later, affected areas were already occupied by cattle. The culprits are still on the loose.

When Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva began his third term in 2023, environmental protection programs restarted. Brazil's environmental and climate ambitions took a progressive turn, with promising early results. Favorable, albeit smaller, results continued to Lula's annual review, and he created programs to reduce deforestation caused by poverty. The problem of latifundiários and land-grabbers trying to replace forests with pastures continues for one simple reason: Land is concentrated in the hands of an agrarian elite with political power that is all but above the law.

The neofascist movement in Brazil, personified by Bolsonaro's term in office, is supported by agribusiness, in the so-called "Agri-Bolsonarism" movement. Some authors blame a failure of the left for the rise of neofascism in Brazil. Others recognize that the land issue is historic and foundational to the territorial conflict that has plagued Brazil since European occupation. They remind us of the corporate forces behind agribusiness and highlight the intrinsic relationship between the agrarian elite and Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro, politics and the demand for land reform

Bolsonaro is currently banned from running for political office. However, support for him began cropping up in wealthy cities in April 2024 and

continues to this day, once again funded by the agrarian elite.

Brazil has been experiencing a spike in Amazon forest fires since last year, with dry conditions facilitating the spread. Agribusiness frontiers like the state of Roraima have been burning for a while, with fires threatening the Indigenous Territory of the Yanomami. But it wasn't until the smoke choked Sao Paulo, Brazil's richest city, that the similarities to the devastating Dia do Fogo became clear. With uncontrolled fires blazing in at least 37 Amazon municipalities and the smoke reaching neighboring countries, the government deployed nearly 1,500 firefighters to the region. Federal prosecutors and environmental agencies warn that the pattern of fires could only come from coordinated actions. Meanwhile, Tarcísio de Freitas, the governor of Sao Paulo state and an old ally of Bolsonaro, insists that there was no coordinated criminal effort; the fires were the result of individual "bandits."

The far-right movement in Brazil is gathering force with the upcoming municipal elections in October 2024. Sao Paulo is, according to Lula, the stage of a "Lula-Bolsonaro proxy battle." In the countryside, agribusiness-founded rural militias supporting Bolsonaro kill indigenous leaders and use violence against land reform settlers. This movement is called "Zero Invasion." The alliance between military and paramilitary forces with large landowners in Brazil is an ancient one. The joining of armed forces and land oligarchs was also at the root of the 1964 coup d'état.

Since the 1950s, rural workers had been organizing themselves into political groups, demanding land reform and an end to rural violence. President Jânio Quadros resigned in 1961, citing "terrible occult forces." His vice president, João Goulart, succeeded him and took progressive steps regarding national resources,

including nationalizing oil production and discussing land distribution.

Not only was he violently ousted a mere two weeks later, but his efforts were in vain: The 1964 coup swiftly quashed the demands of rural workers and family farmers. The following two decades saw the murder of over 1,500 rural workers and 8,000 indigenous peoples, their lands stolen by the same wealthy families of centuries past; their descendents are now populating the Brazilian Congress and Senate. It was a coup against land rights.

In 1984, rural workers organized themselves into the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), pressuring the new civilian government of José Sarney to address land reform. Despite suffering a still-ongoing smear campaign by the most powerful media of the country, the movement managed to converse with legislative representatives. Thus, the Land Reform Law was included in the 1988 Constitution. The new constitution also guaranteed for the first time in Brazilian history the right of indigenous peoples to their land and sovereignty.

Nowadays, MST has over 1.5 million members and is the largest organic rice producer in Latin America, spreading agro-ecological methods of cultivation. As 70% of Brazil's food comes from family farms, training and legal advice offered by MST and other rural workers' organizations are fundamental for the country's food chain.

As a reaction to the Landless Workers' Movement, wealthy landowners and land-grabbers founded the Democratic Rural Union (União Democrática Ruralista, or UDR). This group was so politically influential that it took credit for frustrating any governmental attempt to apply land reform. UDR participated in the assassination of several environmental activists, including the leader of the rubber tappers union and renowned

environmentalist Chico Mendes. UDR leader Ronaldo Caiado became a congressman heading the ruralista caucus and was elected governor of the state of Goiás in 2018, during the far-right wave that swept the country.

In 1995, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso started initiating land reform projects. He gave property rights to around 580,000 families until 2001. The following president, Lula, settled a further 614,000 between 2003 and 2010. The next, Dilma Rousseff, gave property rights to 133,000 families from 2011 to 2015. After the soft coup to remove Dilma, her replacement, Michel Temer, drastically reduced land reform projects. The next president in line, Bolsonaro, would go on to paralyze these. Further, he provided only provisional land titles, gave property rights to wealthy grileiros, legalized the grilagem practice and stopped rural credit. This strangled small farmers.

The same scenario repeats with regard to indigenous lands, although land demarcation started earlier, in Sarney's government. Up to Dilma's term, all presidents demarcated territories for hundreds of ethnicities. This stopped under Bolsonaro's regime, as he had promised during his presidential campaign to not give "an inch" of land to indigenous peoples or quilombolas (Afro-Brazilian people dwelling in settlements established by escaped slaves).

Bolsonaro just implemented what powerful landowners always fought for, as Brazilian politics were increasingly taken by representatives of latifundiários and those sympathetic to their cause. By 2012, the Federal Congress and Senate were filled with members of evangelical religions (the "Bible Caucus"), ruralistas (the "Beef Caucus") and the militias (the "Bullet Caucus"). Known as the "BBB Caucuses," they were a majority in the Congress when Dilma was impeached and were

responsible for the start of the dismantling of constitutional rights that peaked under Bolsonaro.

Brazil still has a long way to go before it can stop those interests from interfering with the application of constitutional rights, especially regarding the environment and the rights of workers and indigenous peoples. The BBB Caucuses are still fighting for the interests of rural elites, with the help of morality agendas and organized crime.

Foreign exploitation and interference

Brazil started as a cash cow for the European mercantilist economy from the 1500s, and the sentiment of the most powerful Brazilians — all of European descent — was always one of detachment from the country. In his seminal book, *The Brazilian People: The Formation and Meaning of Brazil*, anthropologist and sociologist Darcy Ribeiro explains how this alienation from their own country created a cruel, perverted, fascistic, racist and misogynistic elite that despises Brazil and its poor inhabitants. The Brazilian elite is deeply aporophobic, with a visceral hatred for the general population. In Ribeiro's words, the elite sees the populace as nothing more than "coal to be burned" for its own growth.

This hatred resulted in a peculiar *modus operandi* for the Brazilian wealthy: They exploit workers, extract as much wealth as possible from Brazil and send their money and children abroad. Using some perverted logic, Brazilian elites also interfere as much as they can to keep Brazil poor and isolated; any effort by the people to end this situation faces ferocious resistance and threats of resource evasion. This was revealed by the Panama Papers, which listed millions of dollars owned by right-wing politicians.

In his book, *A Elite do Atraso: Da Escravidão A Bolsonaro* (which loosely translates to "The

Backward Elite: From Slavery to Bolsonaro"), sociologist Jessé Souza says that a significant portion of Brazilian elite is proto-fascist. It uses its technical knowledge to serve international capitalist systems at the expense of the population's poor majority. Simultaneously, it shamelessly uses racist, misogynistic and oppressive discourse. This is the part of society that has been in power in Brazil since 2016; its highest manifestation is in Bolsonaro.

Political analyst Tales Ab'Sáber goes further by affirming that Brazilian elites are so disgusted by the lower classes that they prefer to keep an authoritarian, aporophobic government while losing money than allow for an increase in equality. This sentiment is clear in declarations such as those by Bolsonaro's Minister of Finance, Paulo Guedes — he affirmed in 2020 that the high prices of American dollars in relation to the Brazilian real were excellent because, during Lula's terms, "[It was] everyone going to Disneyland, maids going to Disneyland, a hell of a party." For the Brazilian elites, traveling abroad was and always will be a luxury exclusive to the higher classes.

The elites' detachment from the country and hatred of its population made them prone to accept or even ask for international interference in Brazilian economics and politics. Being such a resource-rich country, Brazil attracts the interest of transnational corporations and nations that seek to exploit those resources and take the profits abroad, leaving behind environmental catastrophes. Such a mechanism became clearer during the Covid-19 pandemic, when wealth seeped out of developing nations to the developed world, deepening the crisis in the former and leading to record profits in the latter.

International interference in Brazil with the ultimate goal of controlling its resources was not restricted to colonial times, and this has not

stopped after re-democratization, despite how it violates human rights. From taking control of vast expanses of land to draining the country's water through grain exports, transnational corporations have been undermining Brazil's industrialization, resilience and independence, while paying bribes to Brazilian companies and politicians. Bribery has long been rampant among Brazilian companies, with key examples being construction leader Odebrecht and meatpacking giant JBS. However, the judiciary did not have many obstacles to arrest and fine those responsible, and some of what was lost could be recovered. The problem is more insidious for Brazil when international companies, which cannot be prosecuted in the country, are involved.

The most unfair expression of this trend is the political interference by international actors to force regime changes in Brazil. It's at its worst when democratically-elected governments do not allow cash flow to the developed world to continue, or the hegemony of a developed, industrialized country is threatened.

The 1964 coup d'état to oust Goulart is well-known to have been part of Operation Condor, with the excuse to eradicate communism in Latin America. However, scholars now believe that Goulart's determination to industrialize the country, using nationalized oil royalties to cover costs and land reform to ensure food production for the workforce, may have been what actually triggered America's will to depose the president. The CIA organized the 1953 deposition of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, after all, because he nationalized oil production there.

Similarly, America backed the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically-elected Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, because of the nation's economic independence through resource nationalization. Indeed, the CIA began violently

removing developing nations' leaders when they began to foment true independence. This practice started in 1945 and only became less conspicuous after an American Senate investigation in 1970, though more sophisticated actions continued to be used to force regime change on all continents.

Brazil seemed to be juggling national and international interests well under Lula's first two terms. That changed in 2005, when the Petrobras oil company confirmed significant natural gas and oil deposits in the pre-salt layer within Brazil's territorial waters. Exploring these reserves no less than 2,000 m (over 6,500 ft) below the seafloor was expensive and complex, until Petrobras developed new technologies that cheapened the process and allowed profitable oil extraction in 2006. In 2009, Lula, with support from Congress, approved laws to give Petrobras priority for exploration. The laws also increased government shares of royalties coming from the fields, in case a private company won the bid to explore.

Although oil companies said they agreed with the move, oil giant Chevron promptly contacted José Serra, Dilma's opponent in the 2014 presidential elections, to urge the opposition to change the rules in their favor. Serra promised to do so if he won, as shown in leaked cables from the US Embassy. Dilma won the election and, by 2014, Petrobras was able to reach an even larger pre-salt oil deposit at 6,000 m (over 19,600 ft). This increased its yield fourfold, to over 400,000 barrels per day.

The 2014 elections saw Dilma re-elected to a second term. It also saw the most conservative Congress and Senate since re-democratization, including the re-election of Bolsonaro with almost 500,000 votes — a “disquieting” record in that house. The massive success of right-wing and far-right candidates came after a series of protests in late 2012 and early 2013; these started as a student movement against high bus fare prices and were

quickly co-opted by elite organizations such as patronal unions, bankers, religious media and agribusinessmen. A crucial element was the creation of antipetismo, a multimedia campaign sponsored by the economic elite and international interests, which dealt the final blow to progressive politicians in all levels of government.

Scholars now discuss if the rise of anti-politics and far-right parties was gestated in these movements, which culminated with Dilma's impeachment, a loss of labor rights under Temer and Bolsonaro's election in 2018. Documents leaked by Edward Snowden revealed that heavy American espionage was taking place during Dilma's term in 2013, and that America considered Brazil to be at risk of "instability." In fact, American oil companies were adamant to secure pre-salt oil deposits for themselves. Furthermore, Dilma's term in office became unsustainable in February 2014, when she declared that royalties from those reserves would be invested in Brazilian education and health projects. With Temer at the wheel, the country was set to reclaim its role as a source of international wealth.

Interference from foreign interests did not stop there, however. Land-grabbing by foreign powers, using caveats of the law that prohibit the purchase of rural areas for investment by international agents, has affected land value and distribution. It has also influenced policy for centuries, to the detriment of smallholders and family farmers who feed the country. With the help of friendly lawmakers, international corporations continue their deforestation to produce exports. The financialization of Brazilian agribusiness has become profitable enough to secure foreign pension schemes. The incompatibility of the Brazilian agrarian elite, foreign financial interests and environmental protection is clear.

The historical formula that joins foreign interests, armed forces, religious leaders and land-

grabbers has been established in Brazil for time enough to create a dangerous movement. They will use coordinated acts of violence to prevail. A strong movement for land reform and redistribution is necessary to create the conditions to sort out territorial disputes and wealth evasion, and to curb rural violence against family farmers and indigenous peoples. Protecting the Amazon could be more profitable to Brazil in the long run, but agrarian elites and their armies do not seem to share the idea.

As with other issues Brazil has faced over its history, the country will perhaps need the initiative of the international market to stop these practices, as happened with the abolition of slavery. The forces behind this rise of neofascism and the destruction it creates cannot be controlled by 1,500 firemen or 530 Brazilian lawmakers. It will need the cessation of international funding to its most notorious actors.

[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.

One Dead American. Will Israel Investigate? Don't Count on It

Peter Isackson
September 18, 2024

Kamala Harris occasionally has to contain her patented “joy” and speak about uncomfortable events, such as the death of an American citizen at the hands of Israeli soldiers. Her comments gave a clear indication that she is unlikely to deviate from the orthodoxy of the Biden administration concerning Israel’s crimes.

The campaign to restore what some of its proponents appear to consider a divinely imposed order within the boundaries of Greater Israel has, alas, produced a few embarrassing moments for the Biden administration in Washington, known for its “iron-clad” support for that campaign. The wanton destruction of hospitals, schools, mosques, churches and the killing of humanitarian aid workers and journalists has become routine, causing little alarm and no surprise. But when a young woman with United States citizenship is murdered in the “peaceful” zone known as the West Bank, there may be reason to react.

On September 6, a member of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fatally shot Aysenur Eygi in the head as she was taking part in a protest near the Palestinian village of Beita. The IDF immediately claimed it was “looking into reports that a foreign national was killed as a result of shots fired in the area.”

Eygi’s family was unimpressed by the Israel promise to “look into” the killing. The New York Times cited the complaint expressed by Aysenur’s father, Suat Eygi. “I know that when something happens, the U.S. will attack like the eagle on its seal. But when Israel is in question, it transforms into a dove.”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken had the temerity to describe the killing as “unprovoked and

unjustified.” He used the occasion to helpfully clarify US policy: “No one -- no one -- should be shot and killed for attending a protest.” That clarity should serve to correct an ambiguity that many people will appreciate 54 years after the Kent State killings. Protesters should be reassured. The worst they have to fear in this far more enlightened era is being arrested and accused of antisemitism and eventually complicity in terrorism for speaking their mind.

As the official Democratic candidate for the presidency, Kamala Harris undoubtedly felt obliged to weigh in on such an egregious violation of a US citizen’s rights. “Israel’s preliminary investigation indicated it was the result of a tragic error for which the [Israeli military] is responsible. We will continue to press the government of Israel for answers and for continued access to the findings of the investigation so we can have confidence in the results.” Al Jazeera cites these deeply empathetic words spoken by the vice president while at the same time noting that she “stopped short of endorsing requests for an independent investigation into the incident.”

Today’s **Weekly Devil’s Dictionary** definition:

Press for answers:

Make a rhetorical request that one expects will never be fulfilled and will eventually be forgotten with the passage of time.

Contextual note

The verb “to press” contains the idea of pressure. The literal meaning of the expression “press for answers” suggests a sustained series of actions to put pressure on the party concerned until a positive result is obtained. Anyone curious enough to watch the regular State Department press briefings concerning the Gaza conflict will have witnessed multiple instances of members of the press literally

pressing the administration's spokespersons not just to request, but to require independent investigations of alleged war crimes. Harris's choice of the expression "press for answers" seems to fall somewhere between "request" and "require." Most observers agree the Biden administration's approach to Israel's "excesses" has been to multiply the requests for restraint in some cases or for an investigation in others, without ever requiring such action.

What exactly is the difference between these two concepts? Requesting means the demand may be legitimately refused. It tells us that the person requesting is not willing to use any power they may have over the person to whom the request is addressed. Requiring implies exercising one's power to act. The US clearly has the power to force Israel's hands if it chooses. But it typically chooses not to.

Al Jazeera notes that "Eygi's family had called on the US to conduct its own probe into the killing. But Washington has all but ruled out the request, saying that it is awaiting the results of the Israeli investigation." Given what we know about the Israeli "investigation" of the 2022 shooting of American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, this reminds us of O.J. Simpson's promise to probe the murder of his ex-wife in order to unveil the true killer. But this is a deceptive comparison. Simpson only killed two people at one isolated moment of his life. Israel has made it a daily habit for decades, before radically accelerating the pace over the past 11 months.

A brief sample of dialogue from a press briefing by State Department spokesman Matthew Miller from earlier this year will give a good idea of how the process works. In this typical exchange, the press presses. The government, in contrast, exercises its infinite trust in the professionalism of Simpson... , I mean, the Israelis.

QUESTION: Right. In terms of accountability, though, you talk about the fact that Israel has open investigations. So, what kind of timeline did Israel provide you to conclude those investigations?

MR MILLER: So, we have made clear to Israel that those investigations ought to proceed expeditiously. They ought to reach conclusions as soon as possible.

QUESTION: And have they provided you a timeline?

MR MILLER: I'm not – I'm not going to – I'm not going to speak to our internal discussions or speak for the Israeli Government. But everyone – it is very difficult always to put a timeline on any kind of investigation, certainly on a criminal investigation, and I wouldn't want to do that on behalf of the foreign government other than to say our expectation on behalf of the United States is that they should proceed and finish as soon as possible – but not at the expense of thoroughness.

Apart from the very professional waffling about grand principles, such as "thoroughness" and "respect" for foreign governments, the message should be clear: "We have no reason to press forward."

Historical note

Given the long and fundamentally equivocal history of investigating war crimes, murders of journalists and massive destruction of hospitals and schools, an observer of today's news may legitimately raise the question Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa explored in his classic movie, *Rashomon*. We may know the effects of a crime, but can we ever know the story of a crime? Kurosawa's film tells us we cannot. And the reason is that all crimes must be recounted from someone's point of view. When politics is involved, there is good reason to conclude not that

we cannot but that we will not. We can usually be certain that a greater effort will be made to disguise the crime than to reveal its true narrative.

Sixty-one years after the John F. Kennedy assassination, even though all implicated persons have either died, retired or removed themselves from public life, no truly independent investigation has ever been commissioned. It should be obvious that the Warren Commission was not independent, despite former Chief Justice Warren's personal reputation for independence. The mere presence of former CIA Chief Allen Dulles obviated any semblance of independence.

I raise this question today only because it took six decades for the world to discover the most obvious, credible and easily available evidence, evidence far more credible than courtroom style testimony taken under the intimidating conditions of cross-examination. The document is the raw broadcast footage of Dallas TV station WFAA during the first hour following the assassination. Two journalists and two bystanders who were standing on the lawn below the triple underpass speak at length about hearing the shots coming from behind them on the grassy knoll. One of the journalists even draws a map of the shooting on a blackboard, indicating the origin of all the shots they heard. None came from the direction of the Book Depository where Lee Harvey Oswald worked.

At precisely the time of that broadcast, Oswald had already been identified as the suspect. How strange!

I asked ChatGPT whether the Warren Commission had consulted the WFAA tapes. Its response: "The Warren Commission did not consult the WFAA broadcast tapes that captured the immediate aftermath of the assassination, largely because those tapes were not widely known or considered crucial at the time."

An answer worthy of Matthew Miller's reasoning.

*[In the age of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, another American wit, the journalist Ambrose Bierce produced a series of satirical definitions of commonly used terms, throwing light on their hidden meanings in real discourse. Bierce eventually collected and published them as a book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, in 1911. We have shamelessly appropriated his title in the interest of continuing his wholesome pedagogical effort to enlighten generations of readers of the news. Read more of Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics.

Adults Are Now Pushing Teens Out of Teen Literature

Kaitlyn Diana
September 20, 2024

Young Adult (YA) novels have long been an escape for readers aged 12 to 18. Recently, however, adult readers have devoured the category, incentivizing authors to include more explicit content — even “smut.” To protect growing minds from unhealthy adult themes, publishers and authors need to market books responsibly.

When I was younger, I never considered myself a reader until — at 12 years old — I picked up a copy of Percy Jackson and The Olympians: The Lightning Thief off of a library shelf at school. My nose was perpetually stuck in a book after that. I spent my formative years reading anything I could get my hands on, but I quickly found my home in the Young Adult (YA) section of every library or bookstore I walked into.

Chances are, if you're someone who consider yourself a reader, you have also spent a significant amount of time perusing the stacks labeled YA at your local bookstore or library. YA is home to some of pop culture's biggest hits, like *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*. However, the fact that YA has become so popular does not mean that it is intended for all audiences. In recent years, adult readers have poured into the category, altering it significantly.

What is YA?

YA is a category — not a genre. A genre groups books by a set of thematic elements, while a category groups books by their intended audience. When YA gets redefined as a genre, it can lose touch with its audience.

The Young Adult Library Service Association first created the YA category in the 1960s to cater to readers aged 12–18. They realized that there was not a space for teens in the literary world, so they gave them one.

Other than age range, there are no conventions that YA must follow. However, there is a lot of overlap in the content that these stories explore. YA books tend to share common tropes, character archetypes and plotlines. The main characters tend to be 12–18 years old, the same age as the readers. “Good girls” and “bad boys” are frequent archetypes. Plots often center on love triangles and coming-of-age narratives.

Since YA is intended for a younger audience, it tends to avoid explicit content like intense descriptions of sex and sexual or physical violence. YA can explore these topics, but not with graphic detail; you're not going to find *Game of Thrones* sitting in the YA section. Think of YA in terms of cinema: If it were a rating, it would be PG-13.

In the past five years, however, the content we have been seeing would be rated R. Adult consumers of YA have demanded more explicit content. This raises the question: Why are so many adults reading YA in the first place?

Why are adults flooding into YA?

As an active reader and a participant in online book communities for a decade, I can safely say that most — if not all — of the books I have read in the past five years have been recommended to me via social media. The Internet connects us all, and the book community is no exception. The literature sides of TikTok, Instagram and YouTube (affectionately dubbed BookTok, Bookstagram and BookTube) have allowed readers to share the works they love with one another.

An unintended consequence of this connection is the use of these platforms as a means to promote books. BookTok especially has had a major impact on the way that books are being promoted. Walk into your local Barnes and Noble and there will be a display table piled high with books that are “Popular on BookTok!”

The problem with this form of marketing is who is participating. Most YA promoters are adults, and most of their audience is adults too. It’s not that teens don’t use social media or that they aren’t also a part of these spaces, but they do not make up a large enough portion to have a voice. There are fewer of them, and besides, they have less money to spend.

Adult marketers attract adult readers and isolate teen fans by reducing YA to a set of tropes that readers are accustomed to seeing, without regard to who they are meant for. The protagonist is a teenager and the plot is a love triangle, not because this is what appeals to young people but because this is what the aesthetic demands. Booktok promoters hawk books on popular tropes — “try this new enemies-to-lovers book!” These are abstractions of teenage experiences, and often cliches, that no longer appeal to young people as such. This ageless marketing strategy draws in readers from across the board.

In April, The Guardian reported that 74% of YA readers were adults; 28% of them were over 28. If you go onto BookTok, Bookstagram and BookTube, you’ll find that the vast majority of people promoting YA books are above the intended reader age range.

How are adult readers changing YA?

There is nothing wrong with adults reading YA books. In fact, a lot of adults gravitate to YA because it contains less smut. However, since the typical buyer is now over 18, authors are shifting

to please the largest and most vocal part of their reader base.

Remember that YA is a category, defined by its age base. With the influx of adult readers, it has instead become a genre that peddles the same themes but to a redefined audience. When you pick up a “YA” book now, you will find the same characters, plots and tropes you would have found 15 years ago — but in between these familiar themes, you’ll also find loads of “spicy” content meant to service the new audience.

YA was the perfect place for teens to begin to explore the topic of sex. This came in the form of fade-to-black, closed-door or non-graphic sex scenes. Today, you’re going to find very detailed — and numerous — descriptions of sex. While these scenes might not use the exact vocabulary that novels in the Adult category would, the level of detail becomes graphic regardless of the word choice.

One notable example is the A Court of Thorns and Roses (ACOTAR) series by Sarah J. Maas. When Maas originally wrote the book, she intended for it to be published in the Adult category. However, her existing fan base was in YA, thanks to her Throne of Glass series. So, Maas’s publisher pushed ACOTAR into the category. She accepted this change on the condition that she would not have to cut any of the smut.

The first four books in the ACOTAR series were all published as YA despite containing chapter-long, in-depth sex scenes. Only with the release of the fifth book — A Court of Silver Flames — came a rebrand of the series as Adult. Which raises the question: Why was it ever allowed to be published as YA if the content has always been Adult?

How does adultified YA affect young readers?

The YA category is meant to be a space for teens to find themselves and explore topics that help them through their adolescence. For these readers, sexuality is something new, unfamiliar, awkward and exciting. They deserve books that can help them make sense of this part of reality — not just books that put it on display for a meaningless thrill.

The more Adult books get pushed into YA, the more teens engage with explicit content. Remember, YA starts as early as 12. Between the ages of 12 and 18, there is a lot of mental development occurring. It is not healthy for children to be reading what can — in some of the worst cases — be porn. Whether we can “separate fiction from reality” or not, the media we take in affects us mentally. Porn has documented effects on the brain similar to drugs or alcohol, especially for children who lack the mental defenses to this sort of assault.

Sex in YA novels is not inherently a bad thing. However, there is a difference between scenes that are meant to convey the awkwardness of adolescence and new experiences and scenes that are meant to be erotic. Authors need to be very conscious of what purpose the sex in their books has. If they want it simply for the sake of having it, then YA is not the category they need to be publishing in.

How do we prevent children from reading porn?

The lines get even blurrier when you consider that there is no longer a uniform age range for YA. When the Young Adult Library Service Association coined the term, the age range was 12–18. If you look up what the age range for YA is today, you might get a slightly different answer. The lack of uniformity allows people to stretch the bounds of what is acceptable for the traditional YA

reader to be exposed to. The older the age range gets, the more explicit the content becomes.

The term “Young Adult” itself is confusing. I have spoken to many people who quite naturally interpreted the phrase as “adults who are young,” aged 18–24, rather than 12–18. Dan Weiss and S. Jae-Jones of St. Martin’s Press attempted to resolve this confusion by creating a new category for the 18–24 age range called New Adult (NA). It would serve as a bridge between YA and Adult by allowing these people to have their own space to explore this transitional period in their lives.

Despite the need, NA has failed to pick up as a category in its own right. Most publishers will tell you that it simply doesn’t exist. A big part of its failure is due to the perception of NA as “YA with smut.” Ultimately, the public does not understand that NA is a category, not a genre. They see no value in creating NA because, when seen as a genre, it produces similar stories to YA. Until the public can learn to separate genres and categories, NA will continue to fail and YA will continue to suffer.

You sometimes see explicit books marketed to “older YA” audiences. They’ll have labels like “16+” to convey that the material is not suitable for everyone who falls under the YA category. However, YA is still YA. There is no real differentiation between “older YA” and “younger YA” in terms of publishing. Libraries and bookstores do not uniformly police this distinction. Authors, editors and publishers should consider that, when it comes to YA, a 12-year-old might always pick up their book.

Just as importantly, 12-year-olds are still an important part of the YA reader base, and they deserve to be treated as such. Instead of trying to split up YA into “older” and “younger”, authors and publishers need to focus more on promoting

NA as its own category and leave YA to the people it's meant for.

Ultimately, re-labeling categories is not going to magically fix the problem. The forces at play are too great to be stopped by a sticker on a dust jacket. What we have is a cultural problem, and it needs a cultural solution. Authors, editors and publishers of integrity should nudge adult readers to seek explicit content in the Adult section instead of pushing it into a space meant for kids.

It's never going to be possible to give YA a hard set of rules and conventions to follow, because there is a lot of subjectivity involved in defining what is appropriate for its audience. However, we can give some soft recommendations to follow so authors can write content suitable for everyone who falls within their target age range. A rule of thumb, to which I alluded above, is that if sex is presented primarily for the reader's pleasure, it does not belong in YA.

None of this is meant to shame people for what they read or write. If you're an adult who loves YA, great! I love YA. There is nothing wrong with reading books that fall outside of your age category. But as responsible consumers and producers of literature, we can make sure that there is enough space for all to enjoy the joys of reading.



Kaitlyn Diana is an Assistant Editor at Fair Observer. She is passionate about all things literature and received a Bachelor's in English Literature at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Kaitlyn is also an advocate for women's rights and has a minor in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies from VCU.

Does Taylor Swift Want To Be a Genuine US President?

Ellis Cashmore
September 21, 2024

Taylor Swift has conquered the entertainment world — will she dominate the political world also? Her recent endorsement of Kamala Harris may signal this new direction. In 2016, Donald Trump used a gargantuan audience and loyal following to achieve the presidency with no political experience. Swift could, too.

Imagine cleaning out your basement, finding what appears to be a charming but unremarkable painting, then scratching its surface to discover a Frida Kahlo self-portrait beneath. In 2012, Taylor Swift was a prominent country music artist with crossover appeal, but not a major force in entertainment. Then came the Red album and the genius began to appear. Comparisons with Mozart are now more commonplace and understood, and universities teach courses on her. She occupies the same kind of status as Madonna and Michael Jackson in the 1980s and 1990s and, earlier, Elvis Presley and the Beatles. The Kahlo is now visible. Is there yet another layer?

Swift's recent endorsement of United States presidential candidate Kamala Harris may conceal more than it reveals. After all, everyone knew her political allegiances lay with Democrats; none of her 284 million Instagram followers or anyone else would have been surprised that she wants Harris to win the forthcoming election. Maybe the endorsement is something more: advance notice that Swift intends to become a political presence in the future. If so, she could run for president in

2028. By then, she'll be 39 years old. John F. Kennedy was 43 when he was elected in 1960, making him the youngest elected president in US history.

A new day?

Preposterous as it sounds, remember: In May 2015, Donald Trump was known principally for the NBC television show, *The Apprentice*, which he had fronted since 2004. He'd made his political views well-known, taking out full page ads in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* criticizing US foreign policy in 1987. In 1999, Trump briefly explored running for the Reform Party's nomination for president in the 2000 election, though he withdrew.

So when Trump announced his candidacy as a Republican in June 2015, it came as an outrageous surprise. He'd never held political office of any kind. Only one other president had been elected without political experience: Dwight Eisenhower's background as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War II provided him skills that translated well to the presidency. He served two terms as president, from 1953 to 1961.

Eisenhower was a product of a different age in US politics. Trump is very much part of an age when the US struggles with a political bipolarity: Policy vs passion, logic vs emotion, wisdom vs relatability. Politicians are elected as much for celebrity appeal as leadership capability. Voters seem ready to believe they are much the same thing. How otherwise can we explain Trump's success in 2016?

Two years after Trump's election, Oprah Winfrey seemed poised to turn the 2020 election into a showbusiness extravaganza when she said she was "actively thinking" about running for president. At least, that was the inference from her

speech at the Golden Globes. "A new day is on the horizon," she prophesied. In 2018, Oprah was at her persuasive peak. She was arguably the single most influential person in the world and would have made a formidable contender, despite her political inexperience. Oprah was a rare celebrity, praised for her moral authority, venerated for her inspiration and respected for her support to countless women. She seemed kissed with purpose — her destiny was surely the White House.

Trump actually named Oprah as a possible running mate when he was considering putting himself forward with the Reform Party in 1999; it's doubtful she would have been interested. She settled into a kind of trusted advisor role, dispensing wisdom and assistance without showing any ambition for power. Today, Oprah has lost her momentum, though her coruscating endorsement of Harris was a reminder of her presence. She remains an interested party.

Public face and private life

Traditional politicians like senators and governors have, in recent years, lost immediacy. They project personae and exude authority in a carefully stylized and practiced manner, using the media in almost the same way Bill Clinton (president 1993–2001) or George W. Bush (president 2001–2009) did. By contrast, figures from entertainment know how to make themselves believable. They engage audiences by sharing ostensibly private insights and exchange the experiences that shape or scar them.

Swift, like other celebs, makes no attempt to separate her public face from her private life. She surpasses arguably every artist in history in her ability to share personal experiences through her music. Her fans wax about how her music speaks to them personally with insight and vision. Many of her fans are too young to vote now, but not in four years.

Some readers will think I've stumbled Lewis Carroll-like down a rabbit hole leading to a land of magic and strange logic. I remind them that in 2016, Trump secured 304 electoral votes compared to opponent Hillary Clinton's 227, winning the presidency. He may yet be re-elected. Swift will not feel intimidated by her lack of political worldliness, sophistication or practical knowledge. After all, Trump had none of these benefits.

In 2018, Swift publicly supported Democrats in her home state of Tennessee, causing a surge in voting registrations, especially from young people. It was the first sign of political engagement among her fans. The following year, she spoke out in favor of the Equality Act. In her 2019 music video for "You Need to Calm Down," she promoted the petition for the act. She was an active supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement as well.

So perhaps it makes sense for her to maintain her position on the sidelines and encourage advocates, but without risking what could be a damaging misstep. A-listers like Barbra Streisand and George Clooney have stayed in their own dominion while earnestly making their political preferences heard. This would be Swift's safest choice. After all, you can have too much of a good thing and no one in history has ever been as ubiquitous, audibly as well as visibly. Could audiences just get sick of her?

One of the verities of celebrity culture is that it values change, freshness and novelty. Swift has been on top longer than most. Maybe she recognizes this herself and is already plotting a segue into politics. It's not exactly a logical move: That would be to sidestep into movies. Not that this is without perils: Madonna crashed as spectacularly as she succeeded in cinema.

The sanest thing to happen to the US

Celebrity times demand celebrity politicians — or politicians who are prepared to greet Oprah's "new day" and entertain as much as govern. In showbusiness, Swift has reached Parnassian heights: astral record sales, unsurpassable box office and unbelievable social media followings. Artistically and commercially, she is at her zenith, cleverly integrating critiques of patriarchy into her songs when she conveys how even unmistakably successful women are still liable to run into misogyny.

But is it all just too trivial? The state of the world is grim and nothing Swift does will change that right now. But the winds are blowing in her direction: The post-Harvey Weinstein tremors have destabilized patriarchy and the #MeToo movement remains a force. Would Sean Combs have met with instant condemnation and been reassigned as *persona non grata* were his transgressions known ten years ago? Censured, castigated, deplored, perhaps; but probably not canceled, as he surely will be. The historical privileges of manhood are disappearing.

Will Swift feel like culture-hopping from music to politics? It may be a leap too far, but no one can ignore her unstoppable influence. Much, I believe, depends on the outcome of the November election. If Harris wins, Swift will devote more time to championing her, perhaps closing the distance between herself and the Democrats, but not maneuvering into the political mainstream. If Trump wins instead, Swift may take the leap of faith and embrace the impossible, as giddily disturbing as this sounds today. Given modern America's history, Swift's leap could be the sanest thing to happen to the US.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor and Celebrity Culture.*]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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

academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity.

Political Fragmentation Poses a New Challenge for the EU

Christina Keßler
September 23, 2024

The rise of far-right parties threatens to complicate EU policymaking. Ursula von der Leyen has secured another mandate at the head of the European Commission following the strong result of center-right parties, in the recent European Parliament elections. In this new term, she will have to navigate an increasingly fragmented political landscape.

In June, citizens across Europe went to the polls to elect a new European Parliament. Many analysts had warned of a sharp right-wing turn in voting ahead of the elections, but the reality was less dramatic. Still, the European Parliament elections indicated a shift. The zeitgeist has gone conservative. Progressive parties lost and radical

right parties made gains, while the strategic winner of the elections has been center-right parties. Europe also saw the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission President. She is up against a difficult task. Political fragmentation across the EU Parliament threatens to complicate policymaking.

Both global and domestic issues defined the election

The European election campaign is better understood as 27 individual campaigns rather than one common one. Campaigns typically focused more on domestic rather than EU-wide issues. This year, in several countries such as Germany, voters used the European elections to express unhappiness with the policies of the parties forming the current national government.

Climate change had dominated the last European election campaign in 2019 when school strikers, inspired by the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, brought the topic to the headlines. This time around, climate policy was hardly discussed. Instead, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought the topic of security and defense to the top of the agenda. In addition, domestic issues like the rising cost of living, energy prices and inflation took precedence amongst voters.

Concerns over immigration likewise played a big role. This is not a new development, as immigration has been a major topic already for the last decade. Anti-immigrant rhetoric was used in a lot of countries, including in those in which there is actually not a lot of immigration, such as the Czech Republic.

The center-right has risen in the ranks

Domestic issues such as the ones above ultimately garnered intense support for far-right parties in the

EU elections. However, despite the gains of far-right parties, the coalition of the center parties continues to hold a majority of seats in the EU Parliament. There has been a shift to the right, but overall the result of the European elections shows more continuity than disruption. This came as a relief to those predicting a far-right sweep of Parliament.

The European People's Party Group (EPP), a center-right group bringing together Christian Democrats and conservatives, emerged as the clear winner of the election. In total, the group comprises 188 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), or slightly more than 25% of seats. The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) remained largely stable, winning 136 seats. As recorded in the outgoing 2019 Parliament mandate, both parties continue to be the two largest groups in the European Parliament.

But the liberal Renew Group, which came in third in 2019, only won 77 seats and is now the fifth largest group after the extreme-right Patriots for Europe (84 seats) and the radical right Conservatives and Reformists (78 seats). Along with the Liberals, the other big loser of the elections were the Greens, who are now only the sixth biggest group with 53 members. Further, The Left in the European Parliament group and the extreme-right Europe of Sovereign Nations group comprise 46 and 25 seats respectively.

It is likely that the problem of the far-right on the European level will not play out in the European Parliament, but rather in the European Council, which assembles the heads of states and governments. Past mandates show that the far-right is a very incoherent bloc, especially when it comes to foreign and security policy. Internal disagreements make it difficult for the far-right to have any real influence on policy.

Already in the last few years, Viktor Orbán from the right-wing populist party Fidesz has often acted as a spoiler, or an obstruction, towards coherent policy. He has made it very difficult for EU leaders to find agreements, particularly when it comes to supporting Ukraine. As more far-right parties join governments at the national level across Europe, the problem of fractured policies is only likely to increase. Creating a solution to this problem falls on the shoulders of Ursula von der Leyen, who won another mandate as the EU Commission President.

Von der Leyen faced a challenging re-election

Despite the fact that the EPP, von der Leyen's party family, emerged as the strongest force, the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen was by no means a given. In order to become Commission President, a candidate must not just be nominated by the Council comprising the EU heads of state and government, he or she must also secure a majority of MEPs in the European Parliament.

In 2019, the lead candidate of the EPP had been German Manfred Weber. But in the aftermath of the elections, some heads of state expressed concern with his nomination, pointing to his lack of executive experience. Instead, the Council nominated Ursula von der Leyen in a move that came as a surprise to everyone. She went on to secure a very narrow majority in the European Parliament, winning just 383 votes in a secret ballot — only nine more than the required minimum.

This time around, heads of state and government agreed on the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen relatively swiftly. As part of a package deal that included Socialists and Liberals, the Council further agreed on the nomination of the Portuguese António Costa as President of the European Council and the Estonian Kaja Kallas as High

Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Political fragmentation will create a challenge

The real challenge von der Leyen faced was not the nomination — the problem lay in securing support from the European Parliament. The combined majority of EPP, S&D, and Renew, the traditional coalition of the center parties, is much smaller than in the previous mandate and several MEPs from those three groups explicitly stated that they were not going to vote for her. Von der Leyen faced a political conundrum — should she reach out to the radical-right Conservatives and Reformists, angering Socialists and Liberals? Or should she reach out to the Greens, angering her own EPP, which had turned against several Green policies during the last mandate?

In the end, von der Leyen pulled off the perfect balancing act. She managed to bring a majority of Greens to her side without turning her own party against her. In the speech that laid out her plans as Commission President, von der Leyen included promises to a lot of different groups. Ultimately, she was confirmed with 401 votes in favor.

In her last term, Ursula von der Leyen significantly strengthened the role of the Commission, shaping the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In her second term, she seeks to continue this work, this time with a special focus on bolstering the Commission's role in the realm of defense, economic security, and economic competitiveness.

But the next five years are unlikely to be smooth sailing. Europe's changing political landscape will make her job harder. In the Parliament, the increasing political fragmentation will make coalition-building more difficult. An increasing amount of legislation will likely need to pass with

ad-hoc coalitions that focus on specific issues instead of passing legislation through the traditional grand coalition of EPP, S&D, and Renew.

Henry Kissinger supposedly once asked, “Who do I call when I want to call Europe?” For now, this question seems answered. National leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have been weakened by the European election results, with their parties or coalitions suffering heavy losses. Instead, it is Ursula von der Leyen who has emerged with strength and confidence from the European Parliament election, ready to take on a leadership role as chief of the European Commission once more. Yet, the term ahead of her will be a challenging one.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



Christina Keßler is originally from Germany and currently based in Brussels, Belgium. She holds a master's in European Political and Governance Studies from the College of Europe, as well as a master's in Global Governance and Diplomacy from the University of Oxford. In the past, she has worked among others for the European Green Party and the Centre for European Reform.

Central Bank Independence Is Unbelievably Valuable for the World Economy

Masaaki Yoshimori
September 26, 2024

To ensure sound monetary policy and economic stability, central banks like the US Federal Reserve need their independence (CBI). Opposing this goal invites the risk of politicizing economic policy, which can raise inflation and cause instability. In our increasingly globalized world economy, CBI's role extends beyond national borders.

Central bank independence (CBI) is crucial for maintaining economic stability, particularly in a globalized world where political influence can lead to adverse outcomes like inflation and economic instability in the labor market. The relationship between CBI and globalization is evolving. In this piece, I explore the importance of independent monetary policy in managing global economic shocks, attracting foreign investment and maintaining long-term economic growth.

Furthermore, I believe opposition to CBI risks politicizing monetary policy. I recommend strengthening legal protections for CBI, enhancing the legal framework and prioritizing long-term stability over short-term political gains. Additionally, we should promote international agreements and cooperation among central banks to effectively manage global economic spillovers. These measures are essential for preserving the integrity and effectiveness of central banks in a rapidly changing global economy.

The role of central bank independence

Central bank independence is essential for maintaining a balanced approach to monetary policy, particularly in managing the trade-off between inflation and unemployment.

According to the Federal Reserve (or the Fed), the Federal Reserve System is “independent within the government.” It works within the framework established by Congress. By operating independently of the government, central banks can focus on long-term economic objectives rather than succumbing to short-term political pressures. This independence prevents governments from using monetary policy to achieve electoral gains, such as artificially lowering interest rates to stimulate the economy before an election.

Moreover, an independent central bank is better positioned to manage inflation, which is a critical component of economic stability. When inflation is allowed to rise unchecked, it can erode purchasing power, destabilize financial markets and harm economic growth. By maintaining a focus on price stability, central banks prevent these negative effects and actively create an environment conducive to sustainable economic development. This offers a hopeful outlook for economic growth.

CBI has long been regarded as a cornerstone of sound economic governance, particularly in an increasingly globalized economy. As nations become more integrated through trade, finance and technology, the ability of central banks to operate independently from political influence has become crucial for maintaining economic stability.

One of the key drivers behind the global movement toward CBI is the need to attract and retain foreign investment. In a globalized economy, countries compete for capital and investors seek stability and predictability in monetary policy. Central banks perceived as free from political interference are more likely to inspire confidence among investors. As a result, many countries, particularly emerging markets, adopted or strengthened CBI as part of broader economic reforms aimed at integrating into the global economy.

The experience of countries like Chile and South Korea in the 1990s illustrates this. Both nations, seeking to stabilize their economies and attract foreign investment, implemented significant reforms that enhanced the independence of their central banks. These reforms were instrumental in reducing inflation and fostering economic growth, demonstrating the positive impact of CBI in a globalized world.

During the Eurozone debt crisis that began in 2009, the European Central Bank (ECB)'s independence was critical in preventing the collapse of the euro. As several Eurozone countries, including Greece, Ireland and Portugal, faced severe financial difficulties, the ECB resisted political pressure from member states to engage in direct bailout financing. Instead, it implemented unconventional monetary policies, such as the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT) program. This provided a backstop for sovereign bonds without directly compromising its independence. This approach was pivotal in stabilizing financial markets and restoring investor confidence, helping to prevent the crisis from spreading further across Europe.

Donald Trump's opposition to CBI and the risks of weakening it

Former United States President Donald Trump has expressed his view that, as president, he should have more influence over monetary policy. He has suggested that his business success gives him better instincts than those at the Fed. He criticized Fed Chairman Jerome Powell for poor timing in policy decisions, asserting that central banking is largely based on "gut feeling."

During a press conference in August 2024, Trump asserted, "I think that, in my case, I made a lot of money. I was very successful. And I think I have a better instinct than, in many cases, people that would be on the Federal Reserve or the

chairman." Trump's business success, particularly in the real estate sector, where he has built a multi-billion-dollar empire, gives him a unique perspective on economic growth. Trump's preference for easy money and low interest rates reflects his background in real estate, where tight money can harm developers.

Trump's desire for more direct control over the Fed is reminiscent of historical instances where political influence over monetary policy led to disastrous outcomes. A notable example is US President Richard Nixon's influence over Fed Chairman Arthur Burns in the 1970s, which resulted in policies that contributed to the stagflation of that era — characterized by high inflation and stagnant economic growth. Trump's approach risks repeating these mistakes by prioritizing short-term economic gains over long-term stability.

Trump appointed Jerome Powell as Fed Chairman but later criticized him when the Fed did not lower rates. Trump also favors a weak dollar, believing it benefits exports; critics, however, argue that this approach harms Americans. Regardless, Trump would need a legal change to gain more control over the Fed. This is unlikely given the political risks and the Senate's role in confirming any Fed Chair.

Trump criticized the Fed's timing on monetary decisions. In particular, he noted that its models are outdated, still relying on a flawed tradeoff between inflation and unemployment. He pointed out that the Fed's policies, such as quantitative easing (QE) and the expanded balance sheet, have given it excessive influence over the economy. Trump believes a debate over the Fed's mandate and models would be beneficial. Economists, however, warn that focusing on easy money and a weak dollar could lead to more inflation and economic problems in a potential second term.

Trump's criticism of the Fed, particularly his calls for lower interest rates and more accessible monetary policy, reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of central banks. As a businessman with a background in real estate — a sector that thrives on low interest rates — Trump's preference for easy money is understandable but misguided when applied to national monetary policy. His critique overlooks the risks associated with such an approach, like the potential for inflation to spiral out of control.

Trump's advocacy for easy money is particularly concerning in the context of inflation. While low interest rates can stimulate economic growth in the short term, they also increase the risk of inflation if not carefully managed. The Fed's primary mandate is to balance the goals of maximum employment and price stability. However, political interference that prioritizes growth at any cost could lead to the abandonment of this careful balance, resulting in higher inflation and economic instability.

Additionally, weakening CBI could undermine the Fed's ability to respond effectively to economic crises. The 2008 financial crisis demonstrated the importance of a strong and independent central bank in stabilizing the economy. The Fed's swift actions, including quantitative easing and emergency lending facilities, were crucial in preventing a deeper recession. Political influence that hampers the Fed's ability to act decisively in future crises could have severe consequences for the US and global economies.

Weakening CBI can also exacerbate economic inequality, which is a growing concern in many advanced economies. When political figures influence monetary policy to achieve specific economic outcomes, like lower interest rates to spur growth before an election, the benefits often accrue disproportionately to certain sectors, like

those reliant on cheap credit. Meanwhile, the costs — such as higher inflation — can disproportionately impact lower-income households. Inflation erodes the purchasing power of fixed incomes and savings, which can exacerbate wealth disparities and strain the social fabric.

The Biden administration's commitment to CBI

The global shift towards CBI is not just a change in monetary policy but a significant evolution that carries the weight of history. It is a response to the devastating inflationary episodes of the 1970s and 1980s, a movement that was a deliberate rethinking of the central banks' role. This shift is rooted in the understanding that politically driven monetary decisions could lead to destabilizing and unsustainable economic conditions.

In the US, the passing of the Federal Reserve Reform Act (1977) marked a pivotal moment in this global shift. By enshrining the Fed's dual mandate — promoting full employment and maintaining price stability — Congress also took crucial steps to protect the central bank from political interference. Incumbent President Joe Biden's administration, building on Trump-era policies, has pursued significant investments in key industries through initiatives like the CHIPS and Science Act (2022) and the Inflation Reduction Act (2022). Some of these major industries include green energy and semiconductor manufacturing.

These initiatives demonstrate a strategic alignment of fiscal and industrial policy, aiming to strengthen domestic supply chains and promote technological leadership. While advocates argue that they enhance economic resilience and innovation, they also raise questions about the potential erosion of CBI. Central banks, traditionally insulated from political pressures, might face increasing demands to coordinate with

government-led industrial policies. This would challenge the delicate balance between fiscal and monetary objectives.

Though a more collaborative approach between fiscal and monetary policy could generate short-term economic benefits, it also risks compromising the central bank's ability to act independently to stabilize inflation and manage long-term economic health. This legislative move was significant because it showcased the importance of allowing the Fed to operate independently. It recognized that short-term political pressures could undermine the economy's long-term stability.

The US experience set a powerful example that soon influenced global economic policy. In 1997, both the Bank of England (BoE) and the Bank of Japan (BoJ) were granted formal independence. This signaled a major shift away from the historical norms of political control over monetary policy. Establishing the European Central Bank (ECB) in 1998 exemplified this trend. The ECB's creation marked a new era in European monetary policy: It replaced national central banks that had been subject to varying degrees of political influence, thereby promoting a standardized and politically neutral approach to monetary governance across the Eurozone.

Empirical evidence robustly supports the benefits of this move towards CBI. It has become increasingly prevalent among advanced economies, connecting with a significant reduction in inflation rates and more firmly anchored long-term inflation expectations. These outcomes tie directly to the enhanced credibility and predictability that independent central banks bring to monetary policy. They allow them to focus on long-term economic health rather than short-term political considerations.

The global commitment to CBI has only strengthened over time. A comprehensive analysis

of 370 central bank reforms from 1923 to 2023 reveals a resurgence in support for CBI since 2016. This underscores its continued relevance as a fundamental pillar of economic stability. The renewed commitment is particularly noteworthy given the complex and evolving challenges facing global economies today, reaffirming CBI as a critical tool in maintaining macroeconomic stability.

Within the Biden administration, the historical context of CBI serves as a crucial guide. The administration's steadfast support for CBI is not just a matter of policy preference, but a deep-rooted commitment to economic stability. In analyzing the Biden administration's commitment to CBI, it is essential to recognize the delicate balance between fiscal policy and monetary authority. CBI is often celebrated for its role in safeguarding economies from politically motivated monetary policy that could destabilize inflation control. The separation between monetary and fiscal policy has been vital in maintaining long-term economic stability. The Fed's autonomy is seen as critical to ensuring that monetary decisions remain focused on inflation and employment targets rather than short-term political gains.

The Biden administration wielded considerable influence over the economy using extensive fiscal policy measures. The American Rescue Plan Act (2021), the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, as well as strategic executive actions such as the release of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserves and student-loan debt forgiveness, reflect a pragmatic approach. They leveraged fiscal tools to influence economic outcomes in ways that monetary policy alone could not have achieved in such a short time.

While CBI remains a pillar of long-term economic stability, the administration likely recognized that, given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal measures were indispensable. The

unique conditions meant fighting inflation and stabilizing the economy required a broader, more immediate response — one where fiscal and executive action played a leading role, complementing rather than conflicting with the Fed's independence. This dynamic, while preserving the long-term ideal of CBI, also underscores the reality that fiscal policy and executive power can shape economic outcomes in ways that transcend central bank interventions alone. Therefore, reversing the hard-earned progress towards CBI risks rekindling the inflationary pressures that once wreaked havoc on global economies.

Enhancing coordination and the role of globalization

While CBI is crucial, improving coordination between monetary and fiscal policy is merited, as Trump's critique suggests. Fiscal policy, controlled by Congress and the executive branch, also significantly influences aggregate demand and inflation. Better communication and coordination between these two arms of economic policy could lead to more coherent and effective economic management.

One proposal to achieve this without compromising the Fed's independence is to include the National Economic Council director and the Congressional Budget Office director as ex officio nonvoting members of the Federal Open Market Committee. This would allow for better alignment between monetary and fiscal policies while preserving the Fed's autonomy in decision-making.

However, private conversations about economic stability are being held. The June 2024 meeting between the BoJ, the Ministry of Finance and the Financial Services Agency highlights a critical moment in Japan's economic policy. (Worth noting is the fact that the Minister of Finance, the

Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy and their designated delegates cannot vote. When attending Monetary Policy Meetings, they can express opinions, submit proposals and request the Policy Board to postpone a vote until the next meeting.) The yen's depreciation against the US dollar has raised concerns about its potential impacts on inflation and overall economic stability in 2024. The discussion about the BoJ's independence becomes particularly pertinent in this context. Though the BoJ traditionally operates with a degree of autonomy to implement monetary policy based on economic conditions, the yen's current weakness and its repercussions are stirring discussions of whether more direct government intervention is needed.

The independence of the BoJ is rooted in its mandate to focus on price stability and economic growth without undue political influence. This separation is intended to ensure that monetary policy decisions implement policy with the aim of maintaining price stability with long-term objectives, not short-term political pressures. However, there is a growing sentiment within the government to take more assertive actions. This is evidenced by recent statements from key figures such as Minister of Digital Affairs Taro Kohno, who has suggested hiking interest rates in response to the yen's weakness. Such proposals indicate that some policymakers view the BoJ's current policy stance as insufficient to address the immediate challenges posed by the depreciating currency.

The involvement of other members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) further complicates the issue. Its discussions about potential interventions, including those that could impact the BoJ's policy decisions, reflect a broader concern about the yen's trajectory. While the BoJ has a clear mandate and operational framework, the mounting pressure from the government to align monetary policy with broader economic goals raises serious questions about the feasibility

of maintaining its independence. If the government were to exert more influence, it could potentially undermine the BoJ's ability to focus on long-term economic stability. This would pose significant risks to the economy.

CBI is closely linked to controlling inflation, which is a primary concern in advanced and emerging economies. Independent central banks are better equipped to resist the political pressure to pursue expansionary monetary policies that could increase inflation. This is particularly important in a globalized economy, where trade and financial linkages can transmit inflationary pressures across borders.

Empirical evidence supports the notion that CBI is associated with lower inflation. Countries with more independent central banks tended to experience lower and more stable inflation rates. For example, the relationship between CBI and inflation control became especially evident during the inflationary period of the 1970s and 1980s, when many central banks were subject to political interference, leading to high and persistent inflation. This finding has been corroborated by subsequent research, which has shown that CBI contributes to the anchoring of inflation expectations, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of monetary policy.

The relationship between CBI and inflation control became particularly evident during the inflationary period of the 1970s and 1980s. Many central banks were subject to political interference during this time, leading to high and persistent inflation. Several countries, including the US and Germany, responded by granting greater independence to their central banks, resulting in a significant decrease in inflation.

Central banks navigate an increasingly complex global environment, balancing domestic objectives with the need to manage the global spillovers of

their actions. The independence of central banks is critical to ensure economic stability and long-term growth.

In a globalized economy, the actions of a central bank have implications that reach far beyond national borders. The US dollar's status as the world's reserve currency means that the Fed's policies impact global financial markets, international trade and the economic stability of other nations. The importance of a non-politicized Fed in maintaining international confidence in the US dollar cannot be overstated. It helps prevent capital flight, currency volatility and a potential shift away from the dollar as the dominant global currency.

Globalization has fundamentally altered monetary policy dynamics, particularly in the context of central bank independence. As economies intertwine, the actions of one central bank can have profound effects on others, amplifying the importance of independent decision-making. The growing complexity of global financial systems necessitates that central banks adapt rapidly to new challenges, such as capital flow volatility and cross-border financial risks.

One critical aspect of globalization is the transmission of economic shocks across borders. Central banks must be vigilant in mitigating these shocks while maintaining domestic economic stability. For instance, the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated how quickly financial turmoil can spread globally, underscoring the need for independent central banks to act swiftly and decisively. The crisis also showcased the importance of international cooperation among central banks; while this is necessary, it must be balanced with preserving domestic policy autonomy.

Looking forward, central banks must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining independence and participating in global monetary coordination. The potential for conflicts between domestic objectives and international pressures will likely increase, requiring central banks to adopt more sophisticated and transparent communication strategies. Ensuring that these institutions remain insulated from political pressures while engaging in necessary international cooperation will be crucial for maintaining economic stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Global Financial Crisis and central bank coordination

One historic economic event is especially imperative to study. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008–2009 marked one of the most significant economic downturns in recent memory, with worldwide impact. The crisis began in the US but quickly spread to other economies, highlighting the interconnectedness of global markets.

The US is one of the largest economies in the world, and its trade relations influence other nations' economies substantially. For instance, during the GFC, the collapse of US demand had a ripple effect, causing major slowdowns in export-driven economies like those of China, Germany and Japan. This exemplifies how shocks in the US “export” financial stress across the world, while the reverse influence is often less pronounced. The rapid transmission of financial shocks underscored the need for coordinated action among central banks worldwide to stabilize the global economy.

During the GFC, central banks took the following actions:

The Fed played a pivotal role by implementing a series of unconventional monetary policies,

including lowering interest rates to near-zero levels and introducing QE programs. These measures involved buying assets to restore liquidity to financial markets and support economic recovery. Faced with a severe sovereign debt crisis in several Eurozone countries, the ECB lowered interest rates and provided long-term refinancing operations to banks. The ECB later introduced the OMT program, which was crucial in stabilizing bond markets and preventing the collapse of the euro. The BoE reduced interest rates and launched its own QE program to support the UK economy. Its actions were coordinated with those of other major central banks to ensure a unified response to the crisis. The BoJ expanded its asset purchase program and maintained a low-interest rate policy to support the Japanese economy, which was also affected by the global downturn.

Central banks recognized that unilateral actions would be insufficient to address the global nature of the crisis. Therefore, they engaged in unprecedented levels of cooperation, particularly through these mechanisms:

Currency Swap Agreements: Central banks, including the Fed, ECB, BoE and BoJ, established currency swap lines to ensure that banks in other countries had access to US dollars, which were in high demand. This move crucially prevented a liquidity crisis and stabilized global markets. **Coordinated Interest Rate Cuts:** In October 2008, several major central banks, including the Fed, ECB, BoE and BoJ, conducted a coordinated interest rate cut to reduce borrowing costs globally and stimulate economic activity. **G20 Summits:** The G20, which includes both advanced and emerging economies, played a critical role in facilitating international coordination. The 2009

G20 summit in London prompted commitments to provide fiscal stimulus, increase resources for the International Monetary Fund and enhance financial regulation to prevent future crises. **Bank for International Settlements (BIS):** The BIS serves as a platform for central banks to exchange information, coordinate policy responses and discuss strategies for maintaining financial stability. Its role in fostering international cooperation was vital in ensuring a coherent global response to the crisis.

The coordinated efforts of central banks were instrumental in mitigating the worst effects of the GFC. The rapid implementation of monetary easing measures, coupled with international cooperation, helped stabilize financial markets, restore confidence and set the stage for a gradual economic recovery. The crisis demonstrated that in a globalized economy, the actions of one central bank can have significant spillover effects on others, making international cooperation essential.

The experience of the GFC showcases the importance of sustained international cooperation among central banks. As global markets become more interconnected, the potential for spillover effects increases, making coordinated policy responses critical for maintaining global economic stability.

Moving forward, central banks should continue to strengthen their cooperation through global forums like the G20 and BIS, ensuring that their policies are harmonized to prevent adverse cross-border impacts. Additionally, they should work together to develop frameworks for managing future crises. In an interconnected world, the stability of one economy often depends on the stability of others.

What is the solution?

The independence of central banks like the Fed is vital for ensuring sound monetary policy, economic stability and global financial confidence. While Trump's critique of the Fed highlights legitimate concerns about the need for better coordination between monetary and fiscal policy, his desire for more direct control over monetary policy risks undermining the very foundation of economic stability. A politicized central bank, driven by short-term political goals, would likely lead to higher inflation, economic instability and global volatility.

In an increasingly globalized economy, the role of central bank independence extends beyond national borders. The interconnectedness of global markets means that the actions of central banks can have profound spillover effects on other economies. Central banks must navigate complex global dynamics, where their decisions influence global capital flows, currency stability and international trade.

The solution lies not in reducing central bank independence but in enhancing the mechanisms for policy coordination while preserving the autonomy of institutions critical to the economy's long-term health. By maintaining a strong, independent Fed, the US can continue navigating the complexities of a globalized economy while safeguarding its economic future. Central bank independence can secure a stable and prosperous economic environment domestically and globally by focusing on policies like the Fed's dual mandate: maximum employment and price stability.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Masaaki Yoshimori is an economist. He was born in Ashiya and grew up in Kuwana, Japan. He belongs to the McCourt School of

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

Why Indonesia's People Will Fail to Transition to Green Energy

M. Habib Pashya
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Indonesia is attempting to reduce its gas emissions and embrace green energy. However, the country is uncommitted to this goal. Data indicate that Indonesia hasn't hit its milestone goals, its JETP scheme still needs to clarify itself and the energy transition can't be distributed equally. The transition will certainly fail.

On August 16, 2022, Indonesian President Joko Widodo spoke at the Indonesian House of Representatives Annual Session and the House of Representatives Joint Session. He conveyed the agenda of Indonesia Maju, the Indonesian Cabinet; a transition to green energy was one of the key agendas. Widodo expressed

great optimism in realizing an inclusive and sustainable Indonesia.

Previously, at the 2021 National Development Planning Conference, Widodo said that if Indonesia could implement this agenda, the country could achieve its national development.

Indonesia has made efforts to reduce gas emissions by switching from fossil fuels to green energy. At the 2022 G20 Bali Summit in Bali, Indonesia, the country launched the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). This partnership relies on a financing scheme of \$20 billion from the member countries International Partners Group (IPG) — European Union, United States, Japan, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom — and is coordinated by the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ). Each of them provided funds amounting to \$10 billion.

Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi handled diplomacy with other countries. For example, Marsudi met with the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt by agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding on the forestry sector; Norway is committed to assisting Indonesia with \$250 million in the context of implementing JETP. According to a statement from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, the current efforts make Indonesia optimistic about reducing its greenhouse effect from 29% to 41% by 2030.

Indonesia lacks commitment to green energy

Despite Indonesia's optimism, the country must overcome great challenges in carrying out the energy transition. The country has repeatedly issued statements regarding clean energy, but talk isn't enough; it must fulfill its commitments. Its primary energy remains driven by non-renewable fossil fuels. The Center of Economic and Law

Studies (CELIOS) released a study in 2024 showing that Indonesia's dependence on coal and oil is enormous. Two of the reasons are the economic price and the vast potential space for miners. This is why Indonesia still experiences an "addiction" to non-renewable energy.

The coal sector increased from 100.51 million barrels of oil equivalent (BOE) in 2018 to 167.41 million BOE just one year later. A figure in CELIOS's study shows a peak in 2022 of 299.19 million BOE. Although there is a decline in 2020 and 2021, it does not show a significant figure.

The weakness of Indonesia's commitment is plainly obvious when looking at private and state banks, which support the non-renewable project. Take the coal mining company PT Adaro Energy Tbk as an example. In May 2023, Bank Mandiri, Bank Negara Indonesia, Bank Rakyat Indonesia, Bank Central Asia and Bank Permata contributed \$1.75 billion for the construction of the Steam Electricity Power Plant (PLTU, abbreviated based on the Indonesian spelling) with 1.1 gigawatts in North Kalimantan.

According to Bhima Yudhistira, Director of the Center of Economic and Law Studies (CELIOS), this disbursement of funds shows that the rate of return for loan funds is still high. In fact, there has been a great deal of encouragement in the construction of the Adaro project to move away from coal. Several banks, such as CIMB Niaga Bank, Standard Chartered, Mizuho Bank and HSBC Bank, withdrew from the coal business.

The green energy mix target for 2030 reaches 44%. Harryadi Mahardika, Director of the Clean Transition Program, says that Indonesia's noncommitment toward the energy transition is also accompanied by an increase in the 35 Gigawatt Program electricity initiative. The majority of this remains dominated by coal-based PLTU.

In 2023, the publication Kompas revealed that out of Indonesia's total energy consumption the previous year, renewable energy made up only 12.3%. This is an increase of 0.1% from 2021. The data shows that Indonesia still needs to reach the government's target of 23% in 2025. The government even failed to meet the 15.7% target in 2022.

According to Amin Nasser, CEO of Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil company, reducing gas emissions is just a 'fantasy' for the country. Naseer predicts demand for gas will increase in the next few years rather than decrease. Therefore, Indonesia and other countries clearly lack commitment to the green energy initiative.

The JETP scheme needs crucial clarification

Another issue is that the JETP scheme has yet to be clarified. The IPG's financing will come in the form of debt. However, economists fear this could burden the fiscal sector, resulting in Indonesia entering a debt trap. In 2023, the data company Katadata found that 60% of Indonesia's debt will be concessional loans, 17% will be in the form of guarantees from the US and UK through the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, 14% will be non-concessional and the remaining percentage will be in the form of equity investment and grant funds. Additionally, the GFANZ group needs to share financing details. This can be dangerous if the Indonesian government is not careful.

The launch of the Comprehensive Investment and Policy Plan for the JETP (CIPP JETP) had little impact on the situation. Before its publication, Indonesia had launched its Energy Transition Mechanism (ETM) with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on November 3, 2021. In the CIPP JETP document, Indonesia decided that the Cirebon-1 PLTU, with a capacity of 1x660

megawatts, would retire early in 2035. The Pelabuhan Ratu PLTU would then retire in 2037.

Even though they are already in the ETM, these two PLTUs remain a priority for early retirement in the CIPP JETP document. According to the government, this pension policy is a compliance action to reduce global emissions. However, this step is repetitive — Indonesia has never been serious about solving environmental problems by diversifying other PLTUs.

Similarly, PLTU Suralaya and PLTU Paiton will be targeted for early retirement. However, Wahyudi Iwang, the Executive Director of WALHI West Java, pointed out that the early retirement schemes for PLTU Cirebon-1 and Pelabuhan Ratu do not reflect the principles of justice. Iwang stated that in the ETM scheme, the ADB did not inform the public of the decision's consequences. One way is to use technique co-firing. Based on reports and research results from the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air and the Institute for Essential Services Reform, this technique can only reduce emissions by around 20%. Fortunately, that will still make a positive impact on air pollution, and especially on public health.

The energy transition must (but can't) be equally distributed

The third problem to consider is that not all regions can make an energy transition. This is a negative trend in the context of the equal distribution of green energy. Researchers Media Wahyudi Askar and Achmad Hanif Imaduddin's study, "Indonesia's Energy Transition Readiness Index: Mapping Current Conditions and Navigating the Future of the Energy Sector," shows that DKI Jakarta occupies the top position with a score of 84.24, followed by Special Region of Yogyakarta (66.4), Banten (58.5), Central Java (55.22), West Java (55.19) and East Java (52.89).

Simultaneously, provinces outside Java cannot follow the energy transition trend, such as Papua, Central Sulawesi, Bangka Belitung and West Papua; the majority of them score below 40.

According to Askar and Imaduddin, provinces with high averages are supported by sufficient financial capabilities. For example, until 2020, as many as 90% of Solar Power Plants (PLTS) were still located on the island of Java. Provinces with low scores need help due to, among other things, the electrification ratio. When compared on a national scale, these provinces are below 99.2%.

Another challenge is human resources. Provinces with low scores tend to have low human resources for understanding foreign languages and technology, such as computers and electronics.

We can conclude that the Indonesian government's commitment to implementing a green energy transition needs improvement, especially when the government failed to implement mixed energy towards net zero emissions. Apart from the country's minimal commitment, the energy transition in Indonesia still needs to be characterized by unclear JETP schemes and equal distribution in each region. Based on this, it is obvious Indonesia is not ready to carry out the green energy transition.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



M. Habib Pashya is a master's student at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, majoring in International Relations. His research focuses on Indonesia–China relations, Indonesian foreign policy, and Taiwan–China–US relations.

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