

Transponder

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No.6 Elections



Bertelsmann
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About The Transponder

The Transponder is the Bertelsmann Foundation's biannual publication focusing on issues that impact the transatlantic relationship. The magazine features short-form and long-form articles, interviews, infographics and photo essays that explore topics related to democracy, technology and geopolitics through a transatlantic lens.

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About the Bertelsmann Foundation

The Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc., established in 2008, was created to promote and strengthen the transatlantic relationship. Through research, analysis, forums, audiovisual and multimedia content, we seek to educate and engage audiences on the most pressing economic, political, and social challenges facing the United States and Europe. Based in Washington, DC, we are an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank and the U.S. branch of the Germany-based Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Elections

Welcome to this special issue of Transponder magazine, dedicated to the seismic event that is the 2024 election year. Promising to be one of the most consequential election cycles in modern history, this issue aims to take you around the globe, exploring electoral topics and elections in Finland, Germany, Taiwan, India, Mexico, Spain, the U.S., and more.

The 2024 elections are poised to reshape the political landscape not just in the United States, but globally. With the stakes higher than ever, voters are being called upon to make decisions that will influence the direction of their countries for years to come. From the fiercely contested presidential race in the U.S. to pivotal parliamentary elections across Europe and other significant contests around the world, this year's electoral battles are defining the future of policies on climate change, security, economic recovery, social justice, and international relations.

As you navigate through the pages of this issue, we hope to equip you with a nuanced understanding of the forces at play in this mega election year. Whether you are a seasoned political enthusiast or a casual observer, our goal is to inform, engage, and inspire.

Happy reading!

Irene Braam
Executive Director
Bertelsmann Foundation

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How Much Political Violence can a Democratic State Tolerate?

Tell Us a Story

Written By
Kenneth Martin

On the night of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I was dancing the foxtrot. My ballroom partner and I were working on the heel turn, the most complicated step in the most beautiful dance. While I think someone occasionally snuck off to glance at the news on a half-open laptop, we were content to remain ignorant of the tallying's progress. The outcome seemed secure enough, and we would know the results soon anyway. We had voted, and there was nothing more to be done. But at least we could dance, and dance well.

As 48.2% of American voters discovered that night, sometimes elections that seem secure surprise us. I don't remember when the mood shifted, but the change from jovial and anticipatory to uncertain was unmistakable — as was the ensuing change from uncertain to worried to shocked and duntrodden. The night went on. People began to drop off the dance floor and crowd the laptop screen. By the end, we had forgotten all about the heel turn and the foxtrot. Donald Trump won, and there was no more dancing.

That is how I tell the story of the first presidential election I voted in as an adult. My first time voting in any election came much earlier, when I was in elementary school in the suburbs of Dallas-Fort Worth. I was eight years old in 2004, and like so many primary schools across the country, mine held a mock election: George W. Bush versus John Kerry.

I can't say for sure — no record of the election exists in our class yearbook — but I remember Bush winning over 90% of the vote. In the actual election, he won just 50.7%. What happens when



“No matter the odds of your preferred candidate winning, is it possible to enter the ballot box without some small measure of hope?”

you ask children in a conservative town to vote in a mock election they don't really understand? Surprise: they vote like their parents. Or, perhaps, they simply vote for the candidate who feels closer to home, the one they've seen in the stands at a Texas Rangers baseball game.

In a way, the mock election now seems like a cynical show of prowess in a place where conservatives have dominated the political landscape for several decades. The story being told to us youngsters seemed to be that Republicans win, and that's a good thing. I didn't even know what it meant to be a Democrat, to say nothing of a progressive liberal. But I knew I sure didn't want to be one. What a strange and wonderful surprise, years later, to realize that of course they were there, if hard to spot, all along.

More importantly, the mock election taught me to take voting seriously. Our teachers emphasized the gravity of voting, the importance of carrying out our 'civic duty', even if this was just a practice run. I remember dressing up, waiting politely and somewhat solemnly in line, dropping my makeshift ballot into a makeshift ballot box. I remember feeling proud to have done a seemingly small thing that, when combined with the small things my peers had done, made for something larger than ourselves.

I realized then how much dignity and depth of feeling there can be in voting. Voting can be a deep and strange pleasure; it can even be fun. What happens in the ballot box feels secret, and sacred. It is our civic form of prayer. As it demands that we think beyond ourselves and give up power to a

relative stranger, voting lights up the metaphorical imagination in a modest, mighty way. No matter the odds of your preferred candidate winning, is it possible to enter the ballot box without some small measure of hope? I find it unlikely that many people enter with despair, though that may come later, once the results are tallied. Political life, civic duty, and the small, seemingly humdrum actions we take as citizens: like dancing, like music, like poetry, these are creative pursuits, too.

**

How do you tell the story of an election? Why do those stories matter, and how can our stories differ so wildly? When a current presidential candidate facing multiple criminal and civil trials claims that the 2020 election was stolen and millions of his supporters believe him, I struggle to think about elections in a way that makes much sense. As I write, multiple wars rage, and college campuses are caught up in student protests more intense than any we have seen since the Vietnam War. These events make an election that's still several months away seem impossibly distant. How might we reframe the stories we tell to allow more room for hope, change, and meaningful action? For art and beauty, even?

When I think about elections, I think about Walt Whitman, America's great poetical father — and one of our great political ones, too. Whitman was always, to quote Helen Vendler, “pondering the empathetic possibility of union”. Civic life is bureaucratic, but it is also emotional, perhaps above all. Whitman understood the tense togetherness that underpins the American experiment, like the tension, irony, and resolution that animate great art. He knew about what he calls, in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the “terrible significance” of our elections, and he admired how seriously we Americans take them. He also, I believe, felt that many other aspects of life — art, music, work, family, love above all — are much more important.

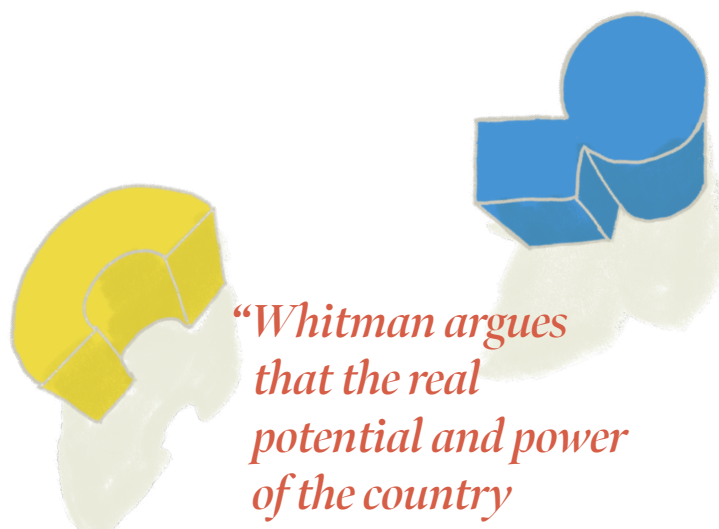
Very early in the preface, Whitman boldly declares that “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem”. He continues with a grand observation: “The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures but always most in the common people.”

Whitman is hardly taking a stand against elections or elected officials. But he is taking them down a notch. He reminds us that elections empower the people who elect more than they empower the people elected: even the President “takes off

his hat to them not they to him”. Whitman also spurs us to be cautious of politicians who are in the game only for themselves. Liberty will be lost, Whitman predicts, “when the swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city offices or state legislatures or the judiciary or congress or the presidency, obtain a response of love and natural deference from the people whether they get the offices or no”. Does any of that sound familiar?

Against the specter of corrupt and inept politicians, Whitman argues that the real potential and power of the country are found in the everyday actions of everyday people. Elections have their imaginative and even poetical aspects, sure, but poetry is *all around us*. Whitman goes a step further and insists — his greatest insight — that *it is us*. In an age when political campaigns are big business, when politicians are celebrities, and when many ordinary citizens feel powerless, these ideas are worth celebrating.

Elsewhere in the preface, Whitman enumerates characteristics of the “common people” that constitute, in his mind, “unrhymed poetry”. These are glorious reminders of our agency outside of politics, our ability to impact the shape and tenor of our world far beyond any election. Whitman celebrates our “deathless attachment to freedom”; our “delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul”; our “good temper and openhandedness”; and, in good Whitmanian rapid-fire, our “manners speech dress friendships”.

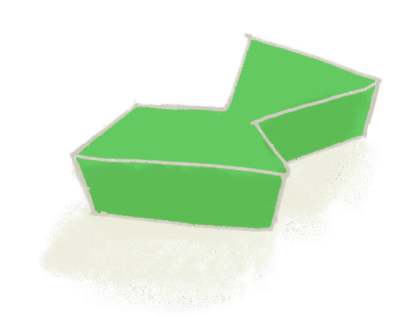


“Whitman argues that the real potential and power of the country are found in the everyday actions of everyday people.”

Whitman's words remind me that voting — the crucial business of free and fair elections — is merely the beginning, the bare minimum required to have a country worthy of the name. Upon that ground it's up to us, the “common people”, to create a society we wish to inhabit.

Live your life, Whitman says. Do your work, and do it well. Be friendly. In one of the most rhapsodic passages in American literature, Whitman gives his prescription for living: “This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families.” He ends the passage by imploring the reader to “re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem”.

Whether you're a firefighter or doctor, civil servant or teacher, accountant or minister or gardener, Whitman's words shine all these years later. Our country depends, it's true, on elected officials to do their jobs well, but it depends much more on “all that is well thought or done this day” by ordinary people — the politically active and the apolitical alike. Part of the genius of the framers was limiting the power of the elected and ensuring their



“The power rests with the people, and not only when we step into the ballot box every four years.”

relatively speedy turnover. Even the most deranged, power-hungry president we have ever seen could not do too much damage. He certainly could not diminish the dignity and poetry of our “very flesh”. The power rests with the people, and not only when we step into the ballot box every four years.

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Voting can be empowering, but thinking too much about elections can be depressing. It makes me crave the pleasures of making and experiencing art, a force that always outlasts tyrants and banishes despair. Maybe that's why I can't resist turning to Whitman, who combines patriotic depth of feeling and a real political flair with dedication to the labors and rewards of plain living, which is also exalted living.

All of this puts me in mind of a haunting poem by Robert Penn Warren. In “Tell Me a Story”, Warren asks an imagined interlocutor to make art that is spiritually edifying in a politically charged moment. The storyteller whom Warren addresses may even be the reader: “In this century, and moment, of mania, / Tell me a story.” Warren's century and moment of mania were different from our own, but the quiet intensity of the lines is at home in any time and place of war, uncertainty, and despair.

The troubled speaker desires something with imaginative flavor — something, perhaps, simply to take his mind off his troubles, and the world's troubles: “Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.” But at the end, the speaker reveals that he's after not just distraction. He wants pleasure, too: “Tell me a story of deep delight.”

The poem makes me think of my eight-year-old self who voted in that mock election. What would I tell him about voting now, 20 years later?

I would say something like this: Go vote, and feel whatever sense of civic pride and dignity you can. Don't forget that voting is also the easiest and probably least impactful way to be involved in your community, just a first step toward bringing about a kinder and more beautiful world.

These next words are much more important. Do your work, write, speak up, listen, read, think hard, take good care. Trust that the story is in your hands. Tell that story, and make it one of deep delight. And when times get tough, as all too soon they will, don't stop dancing. •





Mexico, Morena
and the 2024 Election

Still the People's Choice?

Written By
Samuel George



López Obrador
campaigns
in Oaxaca.
(Photo from
documentary film
"The People's
Choice")

*“Perhaps true
representative
governance was on the
horizon. Perhaps they
could dare to dream.”*



“This is our moment!” A middle-aged man seated near the back row stood up to exclaim. “This is our time to form a government! Our time to win!” He emphasized his words punching the air with his fist. Around him, other villagers murmured and nodded in approval. “But I’m also afraid,” he added, vulnerability trickling into his voice, “I’m afraid that the mafia of insiders is going to cheat us again.”

It was an early evening in June 2018, up in the hills that surround the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca. Othón Cuevas, a candidate for Oaxaca’s state senate, was seated in front of a group of villagers from his native state for a campaign event. He represented Morena, a relatively new political party spearheaded by Presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

By that point in 2018, Morena was gaining rapid momentum across Mexico. As support for López Obrador waxed, many Mexicans began to believe that real change was possible. Perhaps true representative governance was on the horizon. Perhaps they could dare to dream.

The audience member continued, “I just hope that if we win the government, that we will still be able to count on you.” He finished with his finger pointing at Cuevas. This particular event was held in some manner of dirt field; perhaps by day it functioned as a soccer pitch. That evening, however, it drew around 80 villagers to hear the politician’s vision for Morena leadership. It was dark out. The few makeshift lights that had been arranged were trained directly on the candidate.

“It is possible to be in politics without being corrupt,” Cuevas responded. Like the Morena campaign itself, his voice was powerful, confident, and gaining force. “Look, Andrés Manuel doesn’t have some magic wand. He will need our help. This country can’t change until we change ourselves. I’m saying that our conscience is worth more than some piddling bribe.”

The audience responded with euphoric applause, followed by slogan chanting. But pure rapture followed Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s march to the presidency. It was unclear if Mexicans agreed that the new president did not have a magic wand that would fix the country.

The people’s choice

In 2018, I traveled through Mexico in the weeks leading up to the country’s national elections. I had the opportunity to document events big and small for what would ultimately become our Bertelsmann Foundation documentary “The People’s Choice: Mexico, Morena, and the 2018 Election”.

What I saw stunned me. Across the country, I observed unbridled optimism. Happiness. Hope and belief. Prior to this experience, these were not words many would have associated with how Mexicans felt about their government.

After all, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had governed the country from 1929 to 2000. Theirs was a sham democracy with one PRI president passing the baton the next, throughout the decades. These years of single party rule embedded a deep-seated culture of corruption in Mexican politics. A cynicism set in among regular folks who realized they had little capacity to hold their leaders accountable.

The ascension of Vicente Fox of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) to the Mexican presidency in 2000 proved that the PRI’s stranglehold on power could be broken. But any optimism generated by that election was mostly squandered over the next decade. By 2012, wealthy political insider Enrique Peña Nieto had led the PRI back to power. By 2018, Peña Nieto’s presidency mercifully wound to an end, mired in corruption and violent cartel scandals. His approval rating in 2018 stood at 18%.

Given this backdrop, the visceral hope that filled the streets in June 2018 came as quite a shock. What exactly was driving it? The answer was simple: the presidential candidacy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or AMLO to his supporters. AMLO had long been a figure of modulating relevance in Mexican politics. In 2006, he just barely lost a bitterly contested presidential election. In 2011, he formed the Morena party, and by 2018 its popularity coursed through the country.

Internationally, analysts struggled to explain the man. Some saw a firebrand socialist in the mold of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. For others, the sexagenarian leftist reminded them of Bernie Sanders. Some saw an outsider populist — a Mexican Donald Trump; to still others, the big crowds full of hope and change recalled Barack Obama. In short, the experts did not quite know what to make of him.



Othón Cuevas campaigns in the hills of Oaxaca.



Othón Cuevas (right) shares a smile on the campaign trail.



“AMLO represented a rejection of the corruption, poverty, and violence that laced Mexican society...

But domestically, he emerged as a superstar. AMLO represented a rejection of the corruption, poverty, and violence that laced Mexican society. He gave people a reason to believe.

For the documentary, I followed the campaign of Othón Cuevas, a stout, middle-aged man with an easy smile and a bright energy, as he ran for a seat in Oaxaca’s state senate as a Morena delegate. “I am convinced that our current socioeconomic model has fully run its course,” he told me during a brief respite in his hectic campaign schedule. “The president is corrupt. The governors are corrupt. The senators are corrupt. The mayors are corrupt. We are fighting a corruption that has invalidated us as human beings.”

As I shadowed Cuevas through villages around the state, locals flocked to his Morena banner. For them, the party heralded a full break from the broken political system of the past. “We’re not asking for handouts,” one elderly woman told him in the street. “We are asking for jobs! Opportunities!”

When AMLO won the presidency on the evening of July 1, 2018, Mexico convulsed in celebration. In Oaxaca, I saw people crying in happiness and disbelief. Fireworks tore through the sky while mariachi bands led parades down the streets. On ubiquitous televisions, we watched elated voters mob AMLO’s car in Mexico City as the candidate inched towards his campaign headquarters to declare victory.

It was a profound moment to witness, especially from a populace that had faced so much hardship. How could you not love democracy in a moment

where it made people so happy? When the act of voting seemed to empower so many?

Despite all this, I also had a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. How could President López Obrador possibly live up to such lofty expectations? The only comparable phenomenon I had seen in my lifetime was the meteoric rise of Barack Obama, and the optimism he generated. Ultimately, that optimism did not sustain. How could it? The hope betrayed, that era ultimately gave way to the anger and grievance that rendered the presidency of Donald Trump.

In Mexico, could one man truly bring about the promised change to end corruption, curtail violence, and unlock a country’s economic potential? If not, would the optimism sour? And if it did sour and dissipate, what would replace it?

An underwhelming presidency

Six years later, Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s presidency has wound to a close — as Mexican presidents serve six-year terms and cannot stand for reelection. On June 2, 2024, Mexicans elected Claudia Sheinbaum, also of AMLO’s Morena party, as the country’s next president. With Mexico heading into a new era of Morena leadership, post-AMLO, I wondered what had become of the elation that had swept the country.

For perspective, I thought to start by asking Othón Cuevas. But this effort served as a sad reminder of just how turbulent the intervening period has been: I learned that he had succumbed to COVID-19 in 2020, just a matter of days after his mother had, as well.

While it’s not possible to draw conclusions from a single case, Mexico did struggle to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus. The World Health Organization recorded over 330,000 COVID deaths in Mexico, and the country faced the second worst case-to-mortality ratio, according to Johns Hopkins University, behind only Peru.

As the Wilson Center’s Duncan Wood told me, “The Mexican government’s response to COVID was particularly lamentable. First of all, there was COVID denial by the president. Then there was his refusal to wear a mask. There was the fact that he didn’t believe in the science. He showed the Mexican people he would rather use an amulet to protect him from the virus than a mask.”

Analysts see this as part of broader inefficiencies of the AMLO administration. Francisco González of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies underscored that the suboptimal performance was not just reserved to mismanagement of the pandemic: “Basic education, housing, public health — we saw very poor results across the board. Most things have not changed much since 2018.”

Where AMLO had produced results, the achievements appear transactional, as opposed to transformational. “He raised the minimum wage,” Wood explained. “He raised pensions. He dramatically increased the cash transfer system within Mexico. So, some people are happy because they’re getting more money from the government than they used to.”

González echoed this sentiment, explaining, “People stick with him more for the money than

anything else. And the threat is, if his party is removed from power, these programs might disappear as well.”

Meanwhile, Nallely Cuevas, Othón’s daughter, drew attention to the economic advancements made in Southern Mexico during AMLO’s presidency — historically a poorer part of the country.

“We’ve seen important investment in the south,” she insisted. “The construction of a train route, the building of a refinery, all these projects are taking place. And that is improving the quality of life in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Tabasco, areas that have high poverty indexes.”

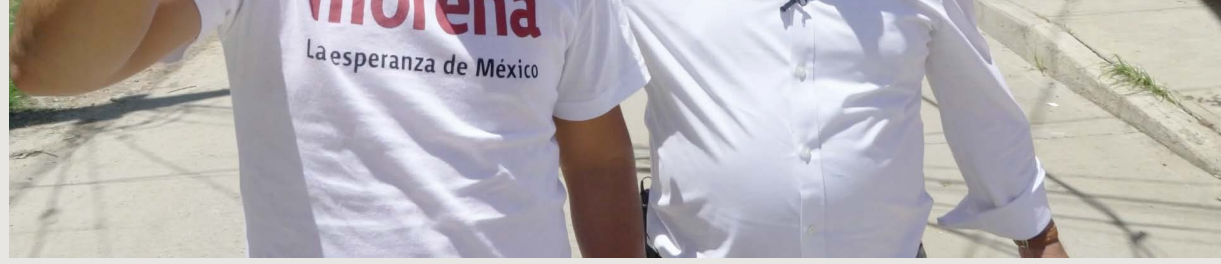
Polarization

As these conflicting narratives indicate, the overwhelming sense of optimism that existed in Mexico in the run-up to the 2018 election was no longer fully present as the country geared up for the 2024 election. Rather, it has been replaced by a troubling level of polarization. The country is divided between those who still support AMLO, the individual, and would like to see his party retain power, and those disenchanted with the movement.

In the run-up to the election, an opposition emerged featuring many professionals and academics that had thought AMLO was worth a shot, but quickly found his performance underwhelming, if not concerning. As election season heated up, both sides dug into their corners.

In the end, that opposition underperformed. As election results poured in on June 2, it became clear that Morena’s had achieved a convincing victory.

...he gave people a reason to believe.”



A woman sheds a tear of joy after López Obrador secured the presidency in 2018. AMLO has maintained his personal connection with his loyal following.



Mexicans waiting for true democracy may have to wait longer still. (Photo from documentary film "The People's Choice")



Not only did President-elect Sheinbaum achieve a greater percentage of votes than López Obrador himself, but her party also won seven of nine governorships, a large congressional majority, and, according to the *New York Times*, a supermajority in at least 22 of 32 state legislatures. It seems that, even if some intellectuals had left the Morena fold, the masses remained fully behind the party.

Coming full circle

In 2024, the biggest concern many have is that the Morena party has gained such deep control over Mexican institutions and the electoral apparatus that free and fair elections are in jeopardy. CSIC's Ryan Berg and Gerardo Penchyna Cárdenas write that AMLO has acted with "blatant disregard" for the country's National Electoral Institute, part of an overall approach they found "recalled the worst type of excesses from Mexico's undemocratic past".

"Morena has undermined the integrity of the electoral institutions," Duncan Wood told me. "They have continually attacked them. Also, a large number of the governorships have gone to Morena. Having that control throughout the country means that they are better able to control election outcomes. So, it is almost a bookend."

It is a demoralizing observation. And hearing it, my mind wandered back to the man in the back row at the political rally that night in Oaxaca: "I just hope that if we win the government, that we will still be able to count on you." He said those words to Othón Cuevas specifically, but he was referring to Morena as a whole. Was the promise of Morena already broken?

Even in the highest quality democracies, it would have been difficult for the Morena party to deliver the transformative change it promised. Adding in the complications of the coronavirus, Morena appears to have made little headway on Mexico's deeply ingrained problems. If anything, the party has simply taken the reins of its flawed system, and is positioned to harness it to maintain power for his party. That positioning was strengthened by the outcomes of June 2, and some fear that Morena could close its grip on power.

Mexican voters have given Sheinbaum and Morena a clear mandate. The question becomes, how will she use it? And if life for Mexicans does not improve, will they sour on the democratic process? Othón Cuevas had tried to warn people that even a beloved figure like Andrés Manuel López Obrador did not carry a magic wand. But how many voters took that message to heart? ●

The Pioneering Path to
Women's Suffrage

From Start to Finnish

Written By
Sara Leming

On a hot summer's day in early July, 1848, the well-respected American women's suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady-Stanton was invited for tea by her good friend Jane Hunt. Over the steaming cups, Cady-Stanton, Hunt, and a few other women — including the prominent Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott — voiced their frustration about women being unable to vote. Their discontent with the male-dominated society sparked the idea to host the very first Women's Rights Convention. Soon after, the five women sent an advertisement to the local newspaper that invited both women and men to join them in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss the social, civil, and political condition of women. The inaugural Women's Rights Convention took place just over a week later from July 19-20, 1848, and was attended by over 300 participants.



The Convention marked the beginning of the American Women's Suffrage Movement. Over the next 72 years, activists marched together on packed city streets, picketed the White House and collected petitions of support. Some were arrested and jailed for the cause. Women leaders such as Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells, and Alice Paul developed creative strategies to keep the momentum going. The strategies included an automobile procession to lobby Congress and launching the "Suffrage Specials" where supporters boarded a train from Washington DC to the Pacific Coast to recruit citizens to join their cause. On August 18, 1920, following the seven-decade fight, women gained the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was ratified. Although it became part of the United States Constitution, the 19th Amendment was overshadowed by discriminatory laws in the south that prevented many black people from voting until the mid 1960's; however, it was still a huge step forward.

Still today, the women's suffrage movement in the United States is internationally renowned, and its heroines are remembered for their persistence and courage. Yet, 15 other nations were a step ahead and granted women suffrage prior to the United States. Finland stands out in particular as a trailblazer. The Nordic nation was the first country in the world to grant women both the right to vote and the right to stand for election, over 13 years before the United States. Meanwhile, New Zealand gave women the right to vote in 1893 but they were not able to stand for election until 1919. Australia passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act in 1902, giving some women the right to vote and stand for election. However, it wasn't inclusive to all citizens. This makes Finland the first to achieve both simultaneously. While this was a landmark achievement, the change went almost unnoticed internationally. Even today, the story of Finnish women's suffrage is hard to come by outside of the Nordic country. Yet it is an important piece of history that deserves recognition — as do the women who made it happen.

The Nordic trailblazer

From 1809 to 1917, Finland functioned as a grand duchy that was formally part of the Czarist Empire but enjoyed political autonomy. In 1899, as part of a Russification campaign, Czar Nicholas II sought to revoke Finland's independent status, and brought Finland under his governance. The Czar's decision was widely unpopular among Finns and sparked national outrage. Both the Conservative and Socialist parties supported a politically autonomous Finland and, while they disagreed on most other

topics, the two groups collaborated over the next few years to rebel against Russia.

On October 29, 1905, Finnish railway workers in Helsinki walked off the job in an attempt to put pressure on the Czar. Their actions were intended to secure new labor reforms; instead, it sparked one of the most influential historical movements in Finnish history, known as the "Great Strike". By the next day, a majority of Finnish citizens were participating in the strike, which effectively paralyzed the labor market of the primarily rural and industrial nation. In the spirit of camaraderie, both wealthy men and women working as maids joined the movement. Throughout the week, citizens attended town hall meetings where they discussed their rights in society. In a meeting in Vyborg, Finland on October 30, women's suffrage was first included in the demands for the resolution of the strike and the idea quickly spread around the country. By the fifth day, Czar Nicholas II was forced to reestablish the pre-1899 status quo and promised additional civil liberties. However, the Czar stopped short of guaranteeing women's suffrage and did not specify whether women would be able to participate in the next general election. At the time, only wealthy upper class men who owned property had the right to vote and stand for election, equating to only 15% of the population.

The two political parties that had banded together quickly dissolved their alliance following the announcement by the Czar. The Conservatives and Socialists in Finland fundamentally disagreed on universal suffrage, which had become a central point of societal contention, especially after the Czar's vague statement that left the topic of women's suffrage unaddressed. Women who participated in the strike were angered and frustrated by the Czar's lack of clarity.

By this time, two leading protagonists had emerged on opposing ends of the Finnish Women's Suffrage Movement. Miina Sillanpää was one of the main leaders of the Finnish League of Working Women that represented the Socialist stance on universal suffrage, which advocated for the right to vote for all citizens. On the other side of the issue was Alexandra Gripenberg, who led the Finnish Women's Association and shared the Conservative party's view that only women with the same education and wealth qualifications as the small percentage of men who were allowed to vote, should be able to do so. While both women were considered feminists by their followers, only one of them would go on to be recognized in modern day Finland as an icon for women's suffrage and civic engagement.

“The demand of women for the vote and to run in elections will be silenced only when it is granted.”

- League of Working Women (1905)

The opposing feminists

Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg was born in 1857 in Kurkijoki, Finland, to a wealthy family of the Swedish nobility. As a child she learned Swedish, Russian, Finnish, German, French, and English — a skill that would significantly help her later in life and in her career as a journalist. When she was a young adult, Gripenberg became a member of the newly founded Finnish Women's Association, which only accepted members who were upper middle class or owned property. In 1887, Gripenberg embarked on a trip across the Atlantic to conduct research on the American women's movement and because she was selected by the Finnish Women's Association to represent their nation at the International Women's Council that was held in Washington DC. Gripenberg's stance was in line with the Finnish Women's Association and believed that only women that were highly educated or those that owned property should be given the right to vote. She believed that lower class women were ignorant and prone to immorality and needed the guidance of their morally superior upper-class sisters; before being granted suffrage rights. Nonetheless, she represented Finland many times on an international scale and formed friendships with global women's suffrage leaders like Elizabeth Cady-Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Still, her opinion of who deserved the right to vote excluded a large portion of Finnish society.

On the other end of the suffrage movement, Miina Sillanpää was born in 1866, during a period of famine in Jokioinen, Finland, a small countryside town in the south of the country. Sillanpää was one of nine children and grew up in poverty. She received very little education and began working in a cotton factory at the age of twelve. During her

later teenage years, she was offered a position as a domestic maid near Helsinki. Sillanpää made the decision to leave her home and move to the Finnish capital region, a decision that would shape not only the rest of her life but the future of Finland. After settling into her new position and city in 1898, she became active in society and started the Servants' Association, an organization that worked to improve the position of all working women in society. Sillanpää aligned herself with the Socialist party and worked alongside the League of Working Women.

Following the Great Strike, Miina Sillanpää and her fellow League of Working Women leaders feared that the lack of clarity from the Czar would lead to working women — if not all women — being denied the right to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections in 1907. The group of leaders wasted no time and organized over 230 meetings throughout the country to rally support for women's suffrage. In total, 41,333 Finns joined the discussions. Fittingly, Sillanpää asked that men support their cause by staying at home to cook and care for the children, so that their wives could attend the meetings. The attendees agreed to call for a second nationwide strike if women were excluded from the upcoming elections. On December 17, 1905, the League of Working Women led a protest that extended through 63 towns with over 22,000 participants and published a National Women's Declaration that stated: "A powerful cry is echoing across our country at this moment, from the large cities to the villages, showing that the majority of citizens support the heartfelt wishes of women. The demand of women for the vote and to run in elections will be silenced only when it is granted."

Adding to the momentum, the Socialist party backed Sillanpää's cause and continued to protest,

threatening another strike. In early 1906, the Parliamentary Reform Committee confirmed that both women and men aged 24 and above would have the right to vote and stand for office in the next general election — regardless of their educational or economic circumstances. While the Parliamentary Reform Committee was composed of elite men, the unrelenting work of Miina Sillanpää, the League of Working Women, the Socialist Party, and the working class triumphed. On July 20, 1906, the new electoral law of Finland, titled "the Parliament Act of the Grand Duchy of Finland", was signed.

The historic 1907 Finnish election was held from March 15-17. Despite the cold temperatures and snow on the ground, thousands of Finnish citizens traveled by tram, carriage, and even on skis to cast their ballots for the first time. The turnout was 70.7% with 62 women candidates, 19 of whom were successfully elected to the National Assembly, known in Finnish as the "Eduskunta". Of the 19 women, both Miina Sillanpää and Alexandra Gripenberg were elected and served in the first class of women elected officials. Despite all the progress, Gripenberg often expressed her dissatisfaction that lower class women could now legally vote and stand for office. She wrote that she feared that lower and middle class politicians would hurt the campaign for women's suffrage worldwide. In the meantime, working class politician Miina Sillanpää went on to become the first female Minister of Finland. In addition, Sillanpää started an organization to shelter single women and their children, cementing her long lasting legacy of creating opportunities for disadvantaged Finnish citizens. In 2016, the Finnish government declared that on October 1 of every year, Finnish flags will be raised to honor Sillanpää for her commitment to civic participation and women's suffrage.

Finland's path forward

The story of Finland is unique. Not only were all women granted the right to vote and run for election, but also all men, making Finland the first fully functioning democracy where all citizens could directly participate. Modern day Finland continues to be a trailblazer for women's rights. Current female leaders in the Finnish legislature and ministerial cabinet make up 46% of the elected positions. Women's empowerment is celebrated in Finnish society and there is even a special emoji on the Finnish keyboard, called "Girl Power", which commemorates Finland's leadership in equal rights. To mark 100 years of Finnish Independence, in 2017 Finland launched the "International Gender Equality Prize", which honors a person or organization setting an example for gender equality. The first award was given to former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who donated the 150,000 euro prize to a Nigerian organization that advocates for the rights of women and young girls. In 2019, Finland made international headlines when Sanna Marin became the world's youngest Prime Minister at age 34 and led a coalition made up of all women from five political parties. While these are all shining examples, Finland still has work to do to continue to improve gender equality, in areas such as paternity rights, the gender pay gap, and violence against women.

In some respects, Finland's suffrage experience explains why the Northern European country has continued to be a frontrunner in gender equality. The fight for equality has been a part of Finland's identity since the country became independent. Finland's success can be equated to a simple notion, but one that can't be taken for granted: viewing women's and men's rights as human rights. •

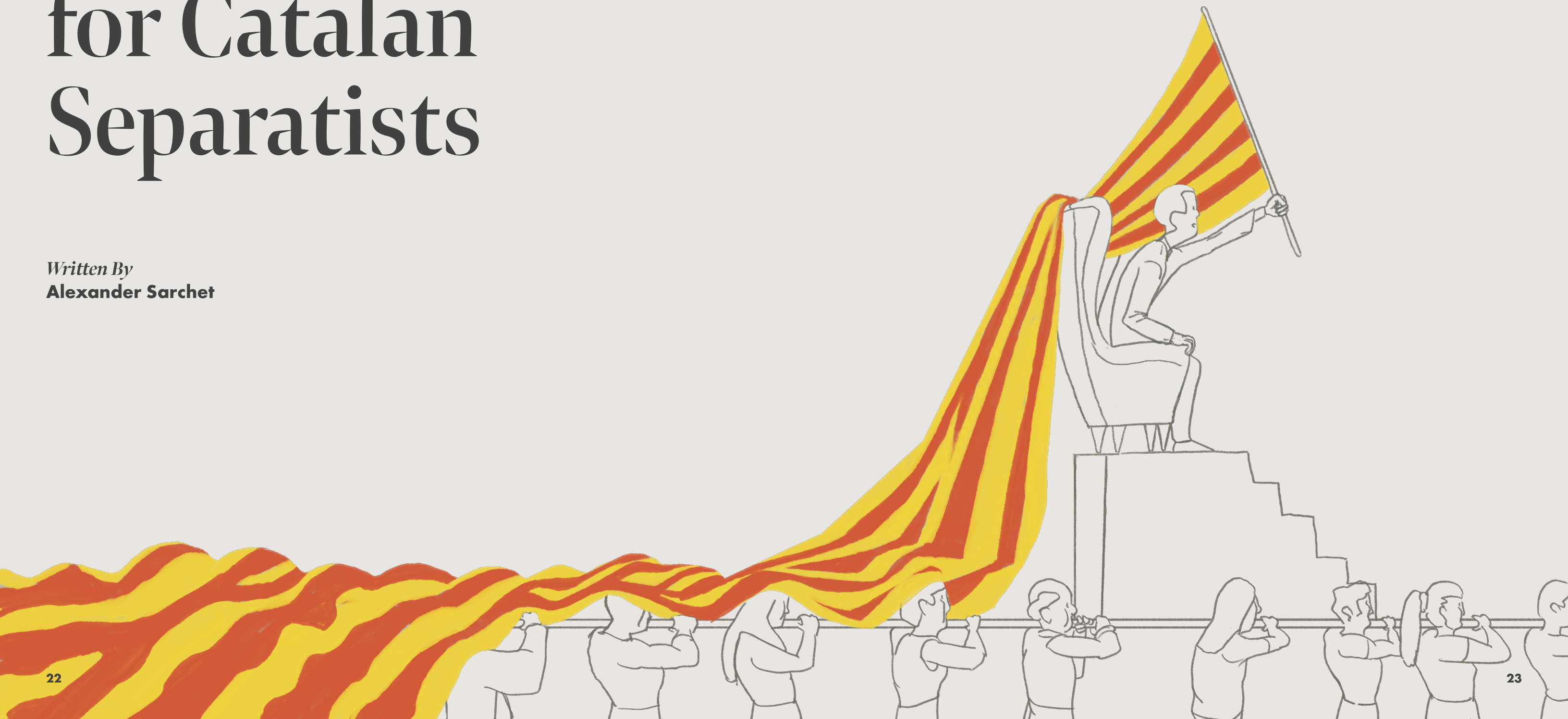
“Finland’s success can be equated to a simple notion, but one that can’t be taken for granted...”

...viewing women’s and men’s rights as human rights.”

“Amnistía” for Catalan Separatists

Written By
Alexander Sarchet

*“Hundreds of thousands of protestors
marched on the streets of Barcelona under
the slogan ‘Catalunya, nou estat d’Europa’”*
(Catalonia, new state in Europe.)



For many in Spain, the Catalan separatist crisis was a thing of the past, after Catalonia failed to gain independence and the organizers of the movement faced legal repercussions. However, Catalan independence has become a pivotal issue again since last year's Spanish general election. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez secured a narrow reelection by agreeing to form a deal with Catalan pro-independence parties granting amnesty for past separatist efforts. However, the majority of Spaniards disapprove of Sánchez's maneuver, still rueing the dramatic pro-independence events of October 2017. While amnesty deals have proven in the past to be an effective method of ending longstanding feuds — both in Spain and around the world — they have also been known to unintentionally fan the flames. In order to succeed, Sánchez's deal must find a way to balance both sides' interests with those of their constituents.

“El procés català”

Though Catalan separatism can be traced back to the 19th century, the recent phase largely began in September 2012 with a public demonstration during the National Day of Catalonia. Hundreds of thousands of protestors marched on the streets of Barcelona under the slogan “Catalunya, nou estat d'Europa” (Catalonia, new state in Europe). Later that year, elections were held for the Parliament of Catalonia, and Artur Mas of Convergence and Union (CiU) entered his second term as President of the Government of Catalonia. In an agreement between CiU and the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the two parties pledged to hold a referendum for citizens to cast their votes on the issue of statehood.

Attempts at holding the promised referendum were impeded by the Constitutional Court of Spain, which ruled the act unconstitutional — even after it was rebranded as a “participation process”. On November 9, 2014, the 9-N referendum was held with two questions on the ballot: “Do you want Catalonia to become a state?” and if yes, “Do you want this state to become independent?” With

about 37% turnout, 80.8% of participants voted for an independent Catalan state, 10.1% for a non-independent Catalan state, and 4.5% against a Catalan state.

After this vote, the desire for a more legalized referendum continued to brew in the minds of Catalan leadership. To pave the way there, the 2015 elections for the Parliament of Catalonia were framed as a plebiscite on the independence issue. A coalition of various pro-independence parties known as Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes) won 39.6% of the vote and the plurality of seats in the Parliament of Catalonia. The leaders of the coalition took it as an electoral mandate to continue forth with plans for a Catalan state, now with Carles Puigdemont as the new President of the Government of Catalonia. Puigdemont boldly announced an independence referendum to be held with or without the approval of the Spanish government, further polarizing Spain and Catalonia — as well as pro- and anti-independence Catalans.

In the months leading up to the October 1, 2017 referendum, a tense tug of war took place. At one end of the rope, the Parliament of Catalonia made

various attempts at legislation to establish post-independence state institutions. Meanwhile, at the other end, the Constitutional Court of Spain ruled these laws unconstitutional. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy tried to reassure Spain that the referendum would not happen. In the days ahead of the 1-O referendum, the Spanish government arrested 14 organizers and shut down more than 100 pro-independence websites.

Less than an hour before the polls opened, the Catalan government announced new rule changes in anticipation of police crackdowns, allowing citizens to vote at any polling location and with ballots other than those officially provided. The National Police Corps and the Civil Guard raided more than 400 polling locations in a violent attempt to seize ballot boxes and interrupt the referendum. With 43% turnout, the independence option won 90.2% of the vote, although these results were heavily contested due to the irregularities of the day. The Spanish government received public and international criticism for using violence against hundreds of civilians, while Catalans who were against independence resented the separatists for bringing chaos to their communities, in line with the anti-independence attitude across Spain.

On October 27, 2017, the Parliament of Catalonia declared independence from Spain, with the absence of the opposition parties — who refused to be present as they considered it an unconstitutional act. The Spanish government under Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy quickly assumed direct control over Catalonia, fired Carles Puigdemont and his cabinet, dissolved the Parliament of Catalonia, and scheduled new elections for December. In the aftermath, Puigdemont and several other ministers fled to Brussels. Some ousted ministers were arrested in Spain, some who had fled Spain returned to comply with the law, and Puigdemont remained mostly in Belgium and tried to establish a makeshift government-in-exile.

In 2019, 12 Catalan independence leaders were put on trial before the Supreme Court of Spain. Nine were sentenced to 9 to 13 years in prison for sedition; four of these leaders were also found guilty of misuse of public funds. The other three leaders were found guilty of disobedience and were sentenced to pay a fine. In June 2021, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez pardoned the nine jailed Catalan leaders in the hopes of creating a new “era of dialogue and understanding”, but did not overturn their bans from holding public office. The Spanish government also removed sedition from its

“Even with the best of intentions, amnesty deals have proven to revive old tensions.”

“Sánchez can learn from the Tories’ attempts to move past the Troubles: 25 years was too soon to move on so abruptly.”



penal code. “El procés català” effectively ended in 2022 when the ERC-Junts coalition split up due to ideological differences on non-independence issues.

The 2023 elections and the aftermath

In May 2023, Spain held regional and local elections resulting in a disappointing set of losses for the left-wing bloc, which lacked national support from Catalan left-wing pro-independence parties. The next day, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), dissolved the parliament and announced a snap general election for July 23. It was his hope that he could catch the opposition off-guard and achieve a victory for his coalition.

In the end, the right-wing People’s Party (PP) under Alberto Núñez Feijóo won 137 of 350 seats, a plurality in the Congress of Deputies. In September, Feijóo attempted to form a coalition government with far-right Vox and some of the regional parties. However, he found it impossible to accumulate a majority of seats without the support of the seven members of pro-independence party Junts per Catalunya (Together for Catalonia).

In November, it was Sánchez’s turn to form a coalition using his 121 seats for PSOE. While promising Spaniards that party discussions would be a transparent and constitutional process, he won the support of Junts and a slim coalition majority

by agreeing to draft a comprehensive amnesty deal for those involved in the 1-O Catalan referendum and subsequent declaration of independence. In the months following, Sánchez and the Catalan leadership, including Puigdemont, held thorny negotiations over what exactly the amnesty deal would entail.

In March 2024, a final draft of the amnesty deal was presented with the support of PSOE, Junts, and ERC. Puigdemont, who has been a Member of the European Parliament for Spain since 2019 while residing in Belgium, indicated that the amnesty deal was not the end of Spanish-Catalan conflict resolution. To Puigdemont, the amnesty deal was just one of several necessary conditions before true negotiations could commence. Shortly after the presentation of the proposed amnesty deal, Puigdemont expressed hope of returning to Spain under amnesty and winning another election bid for President of the Government of Catalonia.

Amnesty: what is it good for?

From domestic turmoil to full-on civil wars, amnesty deals have been a longstanding solution across world history for healing divides and collectively moving forward as a country. However, even with the best of intentions, amnesty deals have proven to revive old tensions just as well, as in the case of the recent Northern Ireland Troubles Legacy and Reconciliation Bill. The Troubles lasted from

the 1960s until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which established a power-sharing self-government for Northern Ireland. Since then, care has been taken in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain to reflect and make amends for the violence that killed 3,500 people.

However, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced in 2021 the proposed Legacy and Reconciliation Bill, which sought to ban new prosecutions for crimes related to the Troubles. The Tory government argued that enough time had passed since the Troubles and that new inquiries were unlikely to lead to new convictions.

The Legacy and Reconciliation Bill was criticized by families of the victims, human rights organizations, all of the major Northern Irish political parties, and the United Nations, who claimed that it would absolve killers. To these opponents of the legislation, granting amnesty would dig up the memories that had haunted them for years, only to leave them without judicial resolution. More than 1,000 of the killings have never been solved, leaving many surviving relatives without recourse to seek prosecution and punishment by law.

Despite fierce opposition through debates and protests, the bill passed the British Parliament in 2023. A few months later, it was ruled non-compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights by a Belfast judge. Although the

Tories continue with their plans to implement the provisions of the legislation, granting conditional immunity or amnesty is clearly an unpopular policy decision among people affected by the Troubles, from all sides.

Will Sánchez’s gamble pay off?

No two amnesty deals are alike, but they do share some similarities that allow us to compare their effects. The Northern Ireland Legacy and Reconciliation Bill parallels Pedro Sánchez’s attempts at a Catalan separatist amnesty package. Both proposals were met with a great deal of public backlash from those with deep resentment against those who would be absolved. However, with a PP-dominated Senate of Spain that vowed to challenge the bill’s legitimacy, Sánchez’s hopes to pass the amnesty deal seemed ill-advised. In the end, the bill was passed after months of debate by a narrow margin, although it is likely to face legal challenges as its provisions are implemented.

Although the Troubles and El procés are distant in their levels of violence, they are both alike in how the public harbors strong emotions for the past. Sánchez can learn from the Tories’ attempts to move past the Troubles: 25 years was too soon to move on so abruptly. And much like sociopolitical conflict in Northern Ireland, the Catalan independence movement traces its origins back centuries. The healing process for Spanish-Catalan reconciliation will take a long time, much longer than the seven years since the 1-O referendum. Trying to grant amnesty has worked to varying degrees of success in countries such as South Africa and the United States, and even during the post-Franco Spanish transition to democracy in the 1970s. However, it is not a policy that can be implemented hastily, and especially without across-the-aisle consent — which was absent from the British and Spanish attempts.

As the second-largest region of Spain by population, Catalonia’s local politics often become national politics. As such, the reverberations of any deal regarding the region are felt across the nation. The 2022 ERC-Junts split left the Government of Catalonia unstable, prompting a snap election for May 2024 in which the pro-independence bloc took a serious hit. Coupled with the European Parliament elections the following month, Catalans reacting to the amnesty deal will soon pave the way for the new phase of the Catalonia-Spain-Europe relationship. Whether that phase will prioritize independence again is up to them, but it so far seems to be an issue that they want to leave in the past. ●

Democracy Now, or Later?

Written By
Courtney Flynn Martino

Over the course of one freezing weekend in January 2024, 1.4 million Germans stretching from Berlin to Munich, Cologne to Dresden, took to the streets to protest the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Armed with hats, gloves, and signs ranging from clever wordplay such as “Fascism is no alternative,” to more straightforward messaging like “The AfD is dumb,” the German people seemed to have hit their breaking point with the far-right party. The weekend before, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock attended a “Defend Democracy” rally against right-wing extremism held outside of Berlin, showcasing the impact of the backlash from top to bottom in the political system.



“Individuals determined to be insufficiently integrated into German society would be forced to leave the country, even if they hold German citizenship.”

The plan targets refugees and individuals with a migratory background, and it is unclear who gets to decide what exactly it means to be unintegrated — likely those gathered around the meeting table. Up to two million of the remigrated would be sent to a “model state” in North Africa, a concept frighteningly reminiscent of the Nazis’ plan to deport four million Jews to Madagascar during World War II. Even the location of the meeting was shrouded in shadows of Germany’s past, occurring less than five miles from the site of the 1942 Wannsee Conference, where a different master plan on the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” led to the mass murder of millions.

Amid these shocking revelations and the immediate negative public response, many in Germany believed that the time had come for an extreme solution to an extremist problem: banning the Alternative for Germany. The legal foundation for this had been building for several years, particularly after the branches of the AfD in the eastern states of Saxony, Thuringia, and Saxony-Anhalt had all been deemed “definitively right-wing extremist” — the highest threat determination — by their respective state Offices for the Protection of the Constitution. As a consequence, certified right-wing extremist organizations are subjected to higher levels of surveillance, including of individual members.

The most recent case in December 2023 determined that “without a doubt” the state-level AfD party in Saxony has pursued “anti-constitutional goals”. The youth chapter of the AfD, the Young Alternative, was given the same designation in February 2024 by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), citing that the youth group’s activities contributed to a “general degradation” of Germany’s democracy. The national-level AfD is one rung below their more radical eastern brethren, labeled a “suspected case of far-right extremism” by the BfV in 2021. The AfD appealed this designation for a second time in March 2024, after losing their initial plea in 2022. After days of contentious hearings against the backdrop of 4,200 pages and 116 hours of video evidence, a decision was rendered on May 13, upholding the initial judgment. Although the AfD has already announced they would also appeal this ruling, if anything, the party has only become more radical in recent years — not less.

Banning parties left and right

Given the staggering amount of anti-constitutional evidence both analytical and anecdotal against the AfD, a ban may feel inevitable. However, the threshold for banning a political party in Germany is extremely high, and has only occurred twice in the history of the Bundesrepublik. In 1952, the Federal Constitutional

“Radical, anti-democratic parties may exist in Germany, so long as they remain inconsequential enough to fail.”

Court banned the Socialist Reich Party — widely seen as the successor to the Nazi Party — and in 1956, the Communist Party of Germany was prohibited. Article 21 of Germany’s Basic Law states that “Parties that, by reason of their aims or the behavior of their adherents, seek to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany shall be unconstitutional.”

The rigorous legal process centers around three main conditions. First, the party must participate in the dissemination of anti-constitutional ideas. Even so, merely propagating ideas that challenge the democratic system is not enough to warrant a ban. The party must also combine their anti-democratic stances with actions that actively seek to undermine Germany’s free democratic basic order. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a party is only subject to a ban if it can be proven that they actually have the ability to achieve their anti-constitutional aims. That means that radical, anti-democratic parties may exist in Germany, so long as they remain inconsequential enough to fail.

This was the case of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), against whom prohibition proceedings began in 2001. The NPD, rebranded in 2023 as The Homeland, is an anti-NATO, anti-EU, neo-Nazi party founded in 1964 as the successor to the ultranationalist German Reich Party. Although the party never achieved the necessary 5% of the vote share to be represented nationally in the Bundestag, it has been admitted to state parliaments nearly a dozen times — most recently in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania in 2011. After years of no developments, in 2017, the Federal Constitutional Court

ruled that despite the NPD’s anti-constitutional platform, it lacks the influence to achieve their objectives. In 2019, the Bundestag, Bundesrat, and Federal Government submitted a petition to instead strip the party of all government funding, if an outright ban could not be enforced. In January 2024, just two weeks after the bombshell remigration report, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that The Homeland would not receive state funding or any tax relief for six years. For a party of only 3,000 members with no policy-making abilities, this loss of funding is tantamount to a ban. By the time funding is theoretically reinstated in 2030, there will likely be no party left to fund.

To ban or not to ban?

For those looking to combat the anti-democratic impact of the AfD, the lessons of The Homeland provide a roadmap with three clear options: ban the party, strip it of funding, or hope the recent public backlash carries through to the polls and the problem solves itself. Option three, while the most democratic, does not look promising. A January 2024 survey by public broadcaster ARD, released shortly before the Correctiv report, found the AfD polling at 22% nationally, second only to the opposition Christian Democrats at 31%. A month later, the AfD had fallen to 19%, but was still the second-most popular party, where it has remained. If the threat of German citizens being forcibly deported was not enough to significantly impact polling just weeks after the fact, it is doubtful that the outrage will carry through to the states holding elections this fall — let alone to next year’s federal elections.

Unconstitutional extremism

The impetus for this sudden surge of public dissent was investigative outlet Correctiv’s uncovering of a secret meeting held in Potsdam in November 2023, headed by Austrian far-right political activist and leader of the ethnonationalist Identitarian Movement, Martin Sellner. Several AfD politicians and close party collaborators were in attendance, along with two members of the center-right Christian Democrats.

Invitations for the meeting hinted at the unveiling of a “master plan”, orchestrated by Sellner. After a glowing introduction by the meeting host, far-right activist and retired dentist Gernot Mörig, Sellner took to the floor. During his presentation, Sellner guided the participants through this plan, which centered on the concept of “remigration”, more aptly known as involuntary repatriation. Under this plan, individuals determined to be insufficiently integrated into German society would be forced to leave the country, even if they hold German citizenship.

“To take away the party that nearly a third of eastern voters believes best represents them will alienate AfD supporters at best, and radicalize them at worst.”

However, if state elections can be seen as national bellwethers, the three eastern states holding elections this year, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, should provide the best indication of maximum AfD voter reach. The AfD polls consistently higher in states that made up the communist former East Germany, as compared to their western German counterparts. A March 2024 survey put the AfD at 28% of the vote in Brandenburg, 30% in Thuringia, and 34% in Saxony. In all three states, the AfD is the leading party by a comfortable margin.

Nationally, the AfD is holding at 18%, due to both the remigration blowback and recent accusations of collusion with both Russia and China. These scandals initially hurt the AfD in the run-up to the European Parliament elections, even getting them expelled from the far-right Identity and Democracy grouping. However, following the death of a police officer in Mannheim at the hands of a 25-year-old Afghan migrant just a week before the election, national concerns about migration and security led to the AfD netting 16% of the vote. This made them the second most-popular party behind the center-right CDU, and put them ahead of every party in the current national governing coalition. When added to

the fact that the party is polling 6% higher than at the same point in 2019, it is likely that the AfD will increase their share of the vote in the next Bundestag election.

If the AfD continues to succeed at the polls, this leaves banning or defunding — both of which require state intervention and carry ethical considerations for liberal democracies. To ban a political party, even one looking to dismantle the very democratic order the country was founded on, is an inherently undemocratic act that infringes on voter expression. Although banning the AfD may bolster the long-term democratic health of Germany, the short-term consequence is millions of disgruntled AfD voters. This problem is further complicated by the AfD’s high support among eastern Germans, many of whom survived decades under an oppressive authoritarian political regime and now have lower trust in democratic institutions.

The latest edition of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, released in 2023, found that of the thousands of eastern Germans polled, a majority of respondents called for the return of “strongman” or “strong party” leadership. This, coupled with less than half of respondents claiming to be satisfied with their experience of democracy in their everyday lives, creates an incredibly fragile political dynamic. Eastern Germans are already vastly underrepresented politically. Despite making up 20% of the population, eastern Germans hold less than 6% of parliamentary state secretary positions and lead just 8% of civil service departments in the government. To take away the party that nearly a third of eastern voters believes best represents them will alienate AfD supporters at best, and radicalize them at worst.

Nevertheless, banning the AfD would not only cause shockwaves in eastern Germany. The AfD placed second in the October 2023 elections in the western German state of Hesse, and finished a close third in Bavaria. A February 2024 ARD survey found that just 37% of Germans nationwide would support proceedings to ban the AfD, with 51% against. Furthermore, any prohibition proceedings would take years, if not decades to resolve; in the case of The Homeland, it took 23 years from first initiation to final judgment. The AfD is guaranteed to be on the ballot several times over before any decision could be reached, most notably the next Bundestag elections in September 2025.

It is unclear what course of action both the German government and electorate will take when it comes to the AfD and broader right-wing extremism. What is clear is that German politics are changing in the most dramatic way since the post-war era, and decisive action seems unlikely before the next federal election in 2025. Germany will have to decide which is the more egalitarian course of action: listening to the will of the people now, or preserving their democracy for later. •

“To ban a political party, even one looking to dismantle the very democratic order the country was founded on, is an inherently undemocratic act that infringes on voter expression.”



The BJP in Kashmir

**Benefits and Disadvantages of
Another Modi Regime**

Written By
Shwetha Rao

The 2024 Indian elections stood as a pivotal moment, drawing international attention to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its leader, Narendra Modi, who was seeking a third term as Prime Minister after over a decade in power. The 28 Indian states voted for seats in the country's parliamentary body, the Lok Sabha, which ultimately determines which party and respective Prime Minister lead the country. The BJP and Modi underperformed in the polls, securing only 240 seats in 2024 as opposed to their 303 in 2019. As such, Modi has to create a coalition with other prominent Indian parties to secure his party's parliamentary majority, creating challenges to achieving his agenda. Since the BJP narrowly slid into victory through a meager margin over the opposing party Indian National Congress (INC), Modi's right-wing ideology could have been both the reason behind the tight race, and also his ultimate victory.

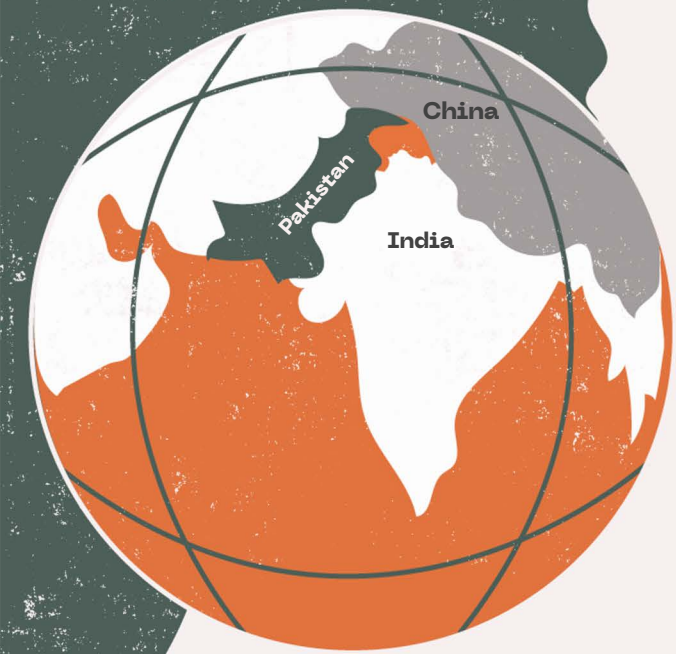
Modi's agenda is to create a developed and prosperous Hindu-centric nation, which is exemplified through the region of Kashmir. Jointly owned by India, China, and Pakistan, the region is one of the most contentious in the world. The seven-decade long dispute has dragged Kashmiri citizens through violent struggles and perpetual instability, as larger powers use their land and people as pawns to achieve political objectives.

Pakistan

China

Jammu and Kashmir Region

India



“Kashmir has a strong strategic location, at the borders between China, India, and Pakistan, offering leverage in regional politics as well as a buffer zone against external threats.”

The conflict over Kashmir grew during the Hindustan Partition. The former ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, initially opted for independence, aiming to protect the cultural and economic identity of his constituents. However, amid rising tensions between the two new countries, Pakistani militias invaded the area. The Muslim-majority demographic of the region led the newly-formed Pakistani administration to believe that Jammu and Kashmir should logically be part of their state. The land dispute and religious conflict helped incite the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947-1948. The violence and hostility quickly pressured Maharaja Singh to accede to India, with the promise of protection and stability. Since the partition, Kashmiri citizens have been embroiled in internal debates, reflecting the larger regional debates over religion, culture, and politics. After the region joined India, stability and peace were not actualized in Kashmir. Imbued with frequent attacks from Pakistani militias and retaliatory fire from Indian soldiers, the region of Jammu and Kashmir became a battleground for the countries to express their animosity towards one another.

The most recent turmoil has drawn international attention — Narendra Modi’s revocation of Article 370 from the Constitution during his previous leadership in 2019. The Article’s abrogation led to the creation of two separate Indian union territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. Article 370 was put into place at the end of 1949, shortly after the end of the first Indo-Pakistani War. The provision aimed to protect the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmiri citizens. The Article bestowed “special status” to Jammu and Kashmir, which allowed the region to maintain a higher degree of autonomy than other Indian states. As such, the region previously followed its own constitution, flew its own regional flags, and most importantly, allowed permanent residents special privileges over Indian citizens of other states. Kashmiri-Indian citizens enjoyed special rights: that only permanent residents can buy land, run for local government positions, or win educational scholarships. It had also forbidden foreign residents from permanently settling on the land. Many of these provisions aimed to maintain the demographic integrity of the area, keeping the Muslim-Kashmiri culture intact.

Modi’s move to revoke Article 370 was met with mixed reactions from Indian citizens in the region. Supporters believe the territory could benefit from being integrated, with more opportunities for economic and infrastructure development. Opponents argue this would not positively impact the majority-Muslim population, as their cultural identities and economic privileges could be stripped. The recent elections, for which poll analyst Prashant Kishor semi-accurately predicted another landslide victory for the BJP, will determine the livelihoods and development of the people of Kashmir.

After all, India’s long-standing attachment to Kashmir is motivated by a host of different factors. Primarily, Kashmir has a strong strategic location, at the borders between China, India, and Pakistan, offering leverage in regional politics as well as a buffer zone against external threats. While this offers an extra layer of protection for Indian states south of Kashmir, the people living within Kashmiri borders are at even greater risk. Additionally, India values the region’s natural resources highly through strong financial incentives, as Kashmir contains much of the nation’s supply of some critical minerals, including lithium, coal, sapphire and graphite. Finally, many Indians consider the area simply an integral piece of India; according to the Indian Constitution, Jammu and Kashmir is an essential component of its national territory.

The 2024 Indian general elections involved two main political parties facing off with contrasting agendas on Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP’s main opposition has been the center-left party of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress (INC). The INC was Modi’s strongest national competitor in the Indian Parliament, gaining 99 seats in the Lok Sabha, almost twice as many as the previous 2019 elections. It has based its platform on key themes such as social justice and economic liberalization to address poverty and unemployment, with a fundamental focus on democratic ideals and human rights. Most importantly, the INC claimed that, if it had won the elections, it would “immediately restore statehood to Jammu and Kashmir”, as stated in their Nyay Patra, the party’s manifesto. This change would reinstate the previously enjoyed special privileges in the region: most importantly, the residency rights. Despite the INC’s promise to fight for social justice, the party experienced severe shortcomings and downfalls following their years in power from 2004 to 2014. The former party in power was marked by severe corruption scandals, in which government figures misdirected funds, engaged in bribery, and created financial irregularities.

As a result of the major flaws and scandals surrounding the INC party, the BJP was unquestionably believed to be leading the race to the elections. Modi himself had claimed he would garner 400 seats in the Lok Sabha. Voters were drawn towards Modi and his party because of two principal factors: the BJP’s commitment to economic development and growth, and their promises to uplift and encode Hinduism within the political culture of India.

The first aspect of the BJP’s agenda and its persisting popularity is to stimulate the economy of India, which has won the party national acclaim, and serves as the reasoning behind some Kashmiris support for Modi. Throughout the entire country, the party has implemented policy changes reflective of the nation’s need for

“Despite the glowing reports from BJP’s administration, Kashmiris feel their experiences are not being disclosed and the true inequities of the region are being hidden.”

190,000 houses in the region. In addition, the National Multidimensional Poverty Index has found that Jammu and Kashmir have experienced a significant decline in multidimensional poverty, including a decrease in child and adolescent mortality. Union Home Minister Amit Shah declared the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Jammu and Kashmir has more than doubled within the last 4 years, and that “the economy grew faster than the national average in recent years”. Additionally, Prime Minister Modi has implemented multiple infrastructure projects, including the region’s first electric train, and multiple labs and halls for the Indian Institute of Technology Jammu university. In his own words, “Article 370 was the biggest roadblock in the development of Jammu and Kashmir.”

The second facet of the BJP’s national agenda involves the concept of Hindutva, a political ideology attempting to establish synonymy between Hindu and Indian culture. In a majority Hindu population, appealing to the ultra-religious Hindu voting bloc has proved a successful strategy for the BJP. PEW Research found that the BJP-leaning Central and Northern regions of India are also the regions most likely to believe: “Religion is very important in their lives.” Modi has achieved this support through aligning himself tactfully with the culture’s priorities; his administration has married religious ideology with political ideology, using the power of divine influence to garner political support.

One of the most well-known illustrations of this tactic is Modi’s commitment to building the highly-contested Ram Mandir. This issue revolves around a disputed site in Uttar Pradesh, which Hindu nationalists claim as the birthplace of Lord Ram, although Muslims had asserted their right to the site where the Babri Masjid mosque had once stood. Modi’s choice to facilitate building the temple, including leading the consecration of the temple in early 2024, exemplifies his party’s Hindutva agenda — and cemented support from the ultra-religious Hindu voting bloc. However, along with the devastating national underperformance, the country was shocked when the BJP lost the state to the INC-allied Socialist Party. Despite his greatest public relations efforts to win over Hindu voters, voters in Uttar Pradesh (which is one of the most poorly performing economies in North India) were disenchanted with the level of poverty and economic inequality under the BJP’s regime.

Indeed, many believe that Modi’s promises of economic development have not positively impacted all Indian citizens at equal rates. Although the economy is twice as large, the economic inequality is indisputably immense. In fact, Bloomberg estimated in 2024 that the top 1% holds more than 40% of the country’s income, compared to the 20% held before independence. The World Inequality Lab published a report on Income and wealth inequality in India, reporting that there is “suggestive evidence that

the Indian tax system might be regressive when viewed through the lens of net wealth”. In addition, the number of billionaires in India have nearly tripled in the past decade under Modi. Analyzing the demographics of impoverished citizens, many studies have found that “Muslims have become the least upwardly mobile group in India.”

These trends of inequality are amplified in the Muslim-majority region of Jammu and Kashmir. The region is classified as the eighth-poorest state in India, with a poverty rate above 10%. Despite the glowing reports from BJP’s administration, Kashmiris feel their experiences are not being disclosed and the true inequities of the region are being hidden. In June 2023, Mission Statehood Jammu Kashmir activists took to the streets to protest the new laws after the abrogation of Article 370. They argued that Kashmiri residents should not begin paying property taxes, and that youth unemployment has skyrocketed. Multiple other regional political groups, including the District Youth Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), also held protests against rising unemployment. The AAP activists issued a statement saying that “the BJP is delivering hollow slogans and promises”. Despite Modi’s promises to win Kashmiris over, develop infrastructure, and stimulate peace, the BJP did not even compete in the state. Jammu and Kashmir voters cast their ballots for the INC and other parties, including the People’s Democratic Party and Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party. Omar Abdullah, the former chief minister of Kashmir, stated, “If people were happy with the abrogation of Article 370, the BJP wouldn’t have hesitated to fight,” and that, “they don’t want to expose themselves, and to save their face, they have decided not to contest.”

Finally, the residents of Jammu and Kashmir are concerned over the potential of losing their cultural and religious demographics as a result of the changing residency laws. In fact, up to 25,000 domicile certificates have been awarded to outsiders, which allows them to claim residency and government jobs, a privilege previously reserved for only Kashmiris. Omar Abdullah had tweeted, “All of our misgivings about the new domicile rules in J&K are coming to the fore,” highlighting the BJP’s overt Hindutva nationalist agenda. In January and February 2023, a farmers’ movement, Jammu Kashmir Kisan Tehreek, protested the forced evictions of indigenous farmers. The farmers’ group claimed residents’ homes were demolished to make land for big industrialists, in an effort from the government to quell the region’s mafia presence. However, the protesters argued it is impoverished civilians who are enduring the real consequences.

Over time, the loss of autonomy and cultural identity has disenchanted Kashmiris from India’s government. The Center for the Study of Developing Societies runs semi-annual National Elections Surveys, and found in

“The protesters argued it is impoverished civilians who are enduring the real consequences.”

2019 that out of 24,236 individuals around India, 59.0% of participants are “fully dissatisfied” with how Narendra Modi has handled the situation in Jammu and Kashmir in the last 5 years. In addition, Freedom House demoted Kashmir from the status of “Partly Free” to “Not Free”, “due to the Indian government’s abrupt revocation of the region’s autonomy”. Although the BJP may face greater challenges in accomplishing their Hindutva agenda, all of these factors could spell disaster for Kashmiris under the upcoming Modi administration. As well as the region being the country’s only Muslim-majority state, new policy changes could keep indigenous residents in poverty while bringing in more affluent out-of-state residents, artificially raising the region’s wealth and permanently changing the historical demographics and culture. On the other hand, if the BJP administration and pending coalition fulfill their commitments to developing Kashmir’s economy and protecting its residents, Kashmiris could enjoy safety and prosperity for the first time in their lifetimes. •

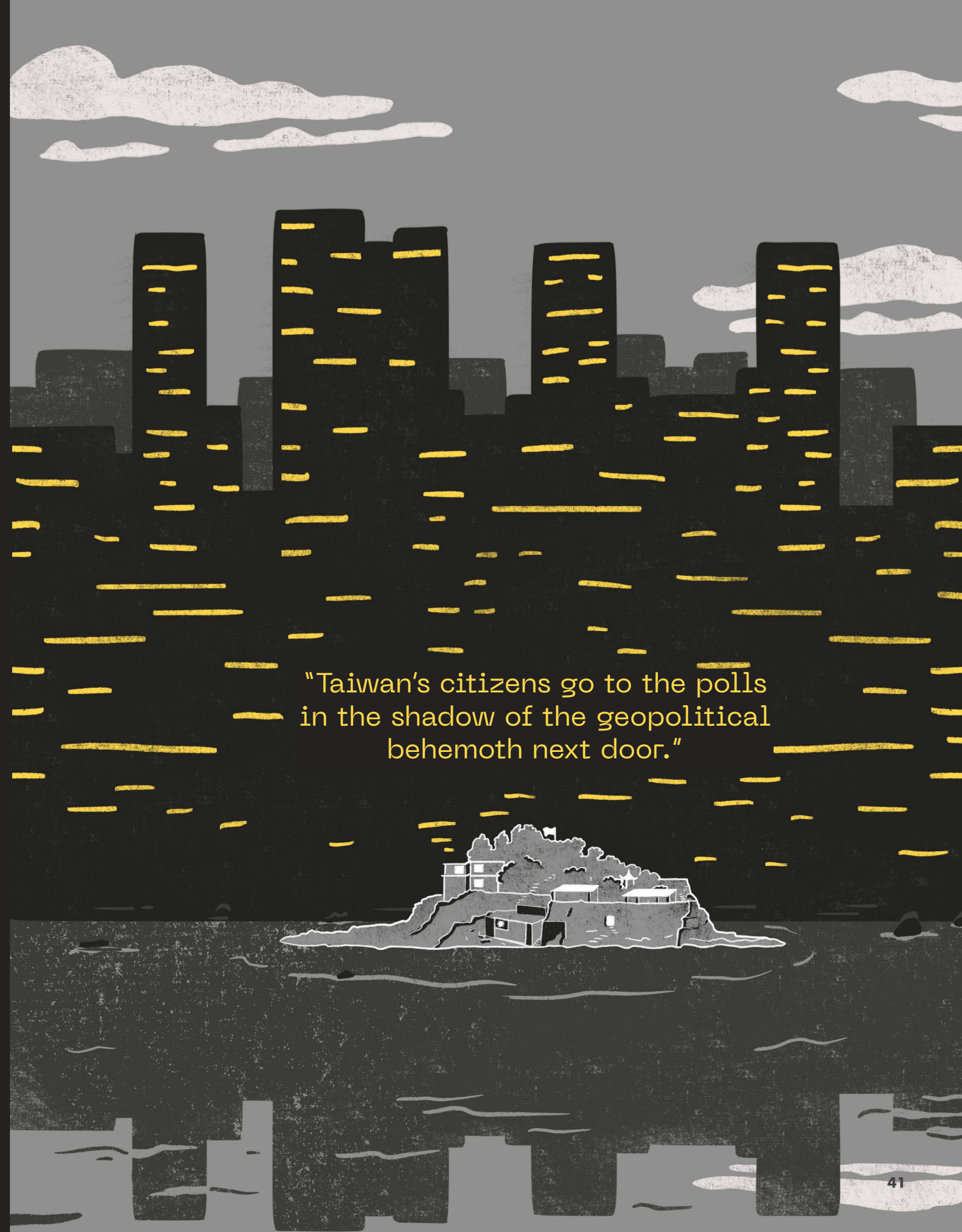
Frontline of Democracy

Kinmen and the Fate of Cross-Strait Relations

Written By
Tony Silberfeld

At a distance, this particular beach has all of the hallmarks of an island paradise. The soft sand, gentle waves, and a warm breeze make for a particularly inviting environment for residents and tourists alike. But a closer look reveals that this shoreline is unlike any other on the planet. As the water recedes from the coast of the Kinmen Islands, large, rusted anti-landing spikes come into full view. A relic of the Chinese Civil War of the mid-20th century, these defenses are a reminder of the threat that remains just a stone's throw away from this strategic part of Taiwan. Sitting just four miles from the metropolis of Xiamen in the People's Republic of China, Kinmenese — as the locals are called — are bathed each evening in the neon lights projected from the nearby skyline, home to more than four million Chinese. Despite their close proximity, ethnic and cultural ties, and their once-shared history as part of China's Fujian province, the narrow body of water separating these two entities provides a precarious buffer between authoritarian China and democratic Taiwan.

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"Taiwan's citizens go to the polls
in the shadow of the geopolitical
behemoth next door."

Taiwan is ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit as the top democracy in Asia, and tenth in the global standings of democratic nations. Yet, despite the strength of its domestic institutions, Taiwan cannot ignore the external influence exerted by Beijing — especially during the elections held every four years. From sorties flown overhead and naval provocations at sea, to cyberattacks and economic coercion, Taiwan’s citizens go to the polls in the shadow of the geopolitical behemoth next door. For those in Kinmen County, the picture of cross-strait dynamics is never strictly black and white. The January 2024 elections brought all shades of gray into focus.

“Many in the international community continued to recognize the government in Taiwan as the legitimate government of China,

a geopolitical dynamic that Mao could not allow.”

Back to the future

Before delving into the 2024 elections in Taiwan, it’s worth revisiting the history that brought us to the situation today. In 1919, Sun Yat-sen established the Kuomintang, known as the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). Two years later, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The power struggle between the two parties on mainland China during the 1920s and 1930s was temporarily held in check by their shared opposition to the threat of Japanese occupation. Following Japan’s defeat in 1945, the ideological differences and naked pursuit of political domination in China brought the KMT and CCP into direct conflict. Led by Chiang Kai-shek, the nationalist forces engaged in a full-scale civil war against Mao Zedong’s communists for the hearts, minds and territory of China. The CCP’s appeal to workers drew popular support away from the KMT — who were seen by that time to be catering to an elite, corrupt class of rulers. By 1947, CCP forces gained the upper hand in the civil war, taking strategic cities and towns throughout the country. Mao’s coup de grace was struck in 1949, when the communists gained full control of the Chinese mainland, forcing Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalists to flee to the main island of Taiwan to establish a rival government in Taipei. At this time, many in the international community continued to recognize the government in Taiwan as the legitimate government of China, a geopolitical dynamic that Mao could not allow.

On October 1, 1949, Chiang Kai-shek established the Republic of China (Taiwan), which includes the Kinmen Islands. If the communists were to have any hope of dislodging the KMT from Taiwan, they would first need to conquer Kinmen, just miles off the coast. With that in mind, the People’s Liberation Army sent upwards of 10,000 soldiers into Kinmen against an overwhelming force of 40,000 Nationalists. In just three weeks, Mao’s army was forced to retreat to the mainland, leaving Chiang in power in Taipei, and in control of Kinmen. Deterred, but not defeated, Mao would make two further attempts to take this strategic location in the years ahead. In 1954 and again in 1958, the People’s Liberation Army fired 470,000 shells at Kinmen, killing 600 on the island. For the subsequent 34 years, Kinmen remained highly militarized with up to 100,000 Taiwanese troops on the ground in case the CCP had any further notions of taking the territory by force.

Following World War II, Chiang Kai-shek used the specter of a Chinese invasion to assert absolute authority in Taiwan and maintain martial law for decades. During this period, there were brutal

purges against opponents of the KMT, and concurrently a push to draw young, educated minds back to Taiwan to focus on growing the economy. As the country began to diversify its economy in the 1980s, the space for greater diversity of political thought grew as well. In 1986, opposition to the KMT coalesced into a new political party called the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which would work in subsequent years to erode the KMT’s stranglehold on the levers of political power in Taiwan. Finally, in 1992, Taiwan held its first democratic election. While the KMT managed to retain power, the DPP emerged as a viable opposition party. Though it would take another eight years before Taiwan would elect a DPP president, Chen Shui-bian, ending half a century of KMT dominance.

With the introduction of a new regime in Taipei, the prospect of constructive engagement with Beijing emerged. The KMT had clung to the notion that it would one day unite China under the nationalist banner, while the DPP accepted the status quo (despite some rhetorical flourishes in the name of independence over the years) and sought to leverage that reality to improve cross-strait ties. In 2001, officials in Taipei and Beijing began direct negotiations to establish links between Xiamen and Taiwan’s Kinmen and Matsu Islands. Known as the “Mini Three Links”, this agreement would establish postal, transportation and trade routes between China and Taiwan. In the years to follow, these links would serve two purposes: to ease the diplomatic tension between these neighbors and to increase the economic bonds between Kinmen and mainland China. It also created two distinct experiences for Taiwanese with respect to China: one in Kinmen and another in Taiwan’s main island of Formosa.

Moderation on the ballot

In the January 2024 presidential elections, there were three main candidates: Lai Ching-te from the DPP, Hou Yu-ih from the KMT, and a third-party entrant in the form of Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP). Lai won the three-way race, but will be forced to govern without a majority as the simultaneous election results for the Legislative Yuan gave Lai’s DPP just 40% of the vote, with 33% and 26% to the KMT and TPP, respectively. With no majority for either of the major parties, the TPP will be in the position of kingmaker in policy decisions and has indicated that it may exercise that power on a case-by-case basis.

However, in the lead-up to the elections, there was a predictable set of dynamics at play in advance of the January elections that are built upon the shared



China

Taiwan

Taipei

Xiamen

200KM

Kinmen Islands

10KM

history of these islands existing in the shadow of its neighbor and biggest threat. Taiwan is thriving economically as the 14th richest country per capita on the planet. It has a global economic champion with TSMC producing approximately 90% of the world's advanced chips, providing Taiwan with an economic trump card vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China, which is highly dependent on their chips. It also benefits from an American security umbrella to help deter potential Chinese aggression, allowing it to prioritize its resources on economic development. None of that, however, prevented China from making 1,700 air incursions into Taiwan's air space in 2023, not only as a show of dominance and might, but to remind Taiwanese voters of the potential consequences of a poor choice at the ballot box.

In Kinmen County, voters may feel conflicted. Many Kinmenese believe that Taipei ought to compensate them for serving as the frontline against Chinese aggression for decades, yet most find themselves in more precarious economic circumstances than their counterparts in Taipei. According to *The Economist*, "Kinmen's average disposable income in 2021 was roughly \$13,200 compared with \$21,800 in Taipei." Its economy is highly dependent on tourism, nearly half of which comes from the Chinese mainland, so the vicissitudes of politics can have a dramatic effect. This combination of factors sets Kinmen apart from other parts of Taiwan, where the results of each election can yield a clear and present danger.

For Kinmenese, the desire for stability and engagement with China remains the most prevalent motivator of voting behavior. Notwithstanding all major candidates making campaign stops in Kinmen, the 2024 election results followed traditional patterns. In fact, many view candidates from Taipei as disingenuous, using Kinmen as campaign props during the election season. At the same time, the shared history with and proximity to mainland China lend themselves to many locals identifying as Chinese, with cross-strait marriages

and family connections to Xiamen fairly common. This cultural affinity, however, is tempered by the overwhelming support for a democratic form of government. Recent observations of the promises broken by Beijing in Hong Kong to the "one country, two systems" principle gives Kinmen pause when the prospect of unification with or absorption by China becomes imminent. That fear became more pressing during this election campaign as candidates debated the possibility of building a bridge connecting Xiamen with Kinmen, seen by some as a Trojan Horse trotting in from Beijing. In the end, Kinmenese voted overwhelmingly for the KMT candidate with 60% support, followed by the TPP with 28% and the DPP with 10%. Kinmen left little doubt that it has no appetite for even a passing mention of independence, and prefers to choose the middle road between independence and unification.

Gateway to conflict?

In 2023, CIA chief William Burns testified before the House Intelligence Committee with an ominous warning that sent shockwaves around the globe. He indicated that Chinese President Xi "ordered his military to be ready to conduct an invasion of self-governed Taiwan by 2027". Military strategists believe that any operation of that nature would begin with a landing on the Kinmen Islands. For the Kinmenese, it is an existential reality they confront each night when they look across the water with a clear view of Xiamen.

The English translation for Kinmen means "golden gate" which naturally begs the question: "a gate to where?" In the case of Taiwan, Kinmen is a portal that can lead in one of two directions. One that maintains the status quo to ensure peace and prosperity on both sides of the Taiwan strait. The other that leads to invasion and ruin. In the meantime, though they may pose a hazard to tourists and sunbathers, Kinmenese might want to keep the landing spikes on their beach. At least for now. •

"Kinmen's economy is highly dependent on tourism, nearly half of which comes from the Chinese mainland, so the vicissitudes of politics can have a dramatic effect."

INTERVIEWS

With the 2024 Class Bertelsmann Foundation Fellowship

Democracy? Let's Talk About it

Written By
Chloe Ladd

In a series of interviews, the Bertelsmann Foundation engaged with four of its current Fellows to explore their perspectives on democracy in 2024. As the world faces a pivotal super election-year, these conversations shed light on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for democratic governance. Each Fellow shared their unique viewpoints on the state of democracy, elections, and what is at stake.

These responses express the personal opinions of the interviewees and not those of their respective employers.



Alexander Kleibrink

About Alexander Kleibrink

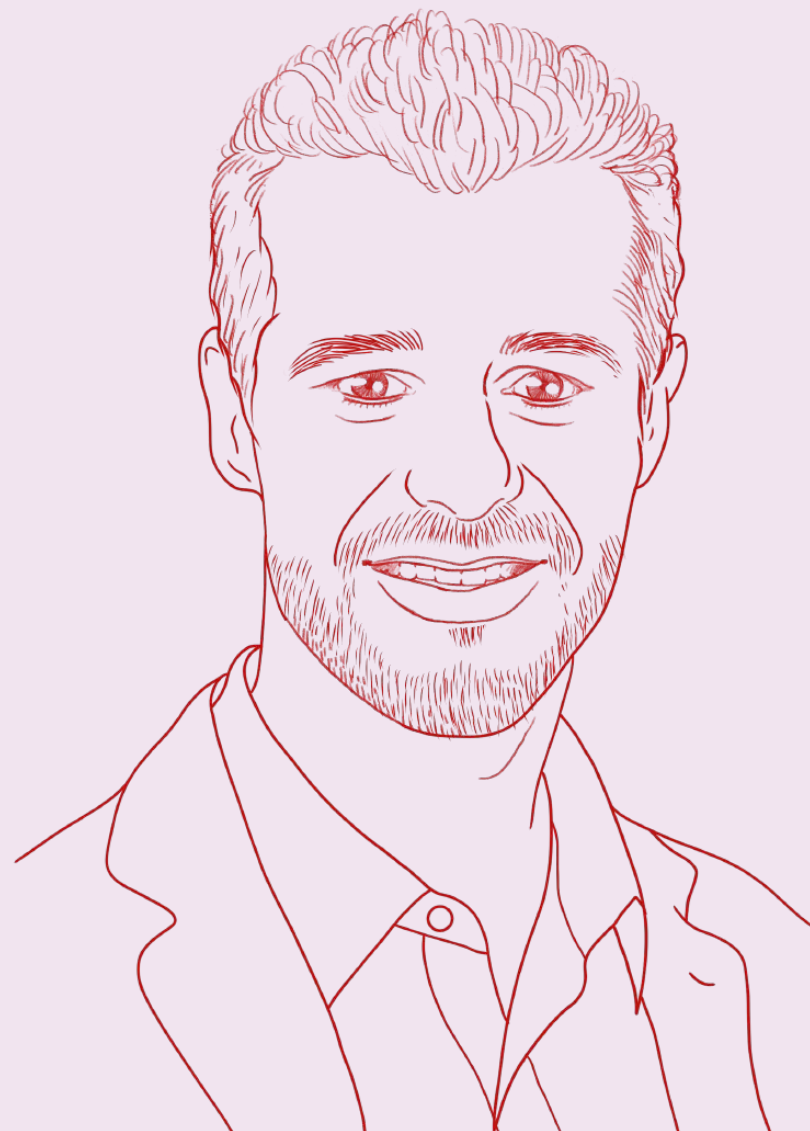
Alexander Kleibrink is a senior policy professional working on place-based development and innovation policies. Currently, he is part of a team setting up the new German agency for innovation and transfer at the Ministry of Education and Science.

What does it mean to live in a democracy?

People might not outwardly feel democracy in their daily lives, but they will feel if they have a good job and if their material needs are met on a daily basis. It's always a bit dangerous to just focus on those aspects which are about material life. It's important, but it's only one aspect of democracy. The other aspect is how you feel as a person, as an individual being part of the community. Being able to have a voice in your community and being free to say what you think.

There's some literature on this from the German scholar Fritz Scharpf. Scharpf discusses the notion of democracies needing both input legitimacy and output legitimacy. You have to deliver on what you promise and offer a good life to citizens, but you also have to ensure that the input into the process is good, so that individuals feel they are actively participating in their democracy.

It's just really important to balance those two things. And democracies need both.



“You have to deliver on what you promise and offer a good life to citizens.”

How has technology profoundly impacted democracy?

I think the biggest innovation we have seen in this context is social media. It has an impact on all of our lives now.

One of the biggest issues with social media is the balance between open discourse and ensuring accountability. In democracies today, and there has been an ongoing discussion in Germany on this, debate around identity and social media is strong. I didn't like the idea originally, but I think in the end, one basic rule for social media should be: you can always voice your opinion, but we want to know who you are.

People are no longer liable. You can't go on the street or on TV and say anything you like without showing your face, and yet we pretend that this kind of internet space is a lawless, free space floating around.

One solution could be to make it compulsory to check IDs for individuals who register on platforms and verifying if the ID is legitimate. Of course, many would say: that's an intrusion into freedom of the internet. I think you need a mechanism to really allow transparent discourse, like social media, but then you can't hide behind hate speech.

There's this famous quote by a German constitutional lawyer that says liberal democracies can't guarantee for the conditions they need to survive. They support free expression; they support all these freedoms. But of course, these same freedoms can turn against democracy in the worst case.

Is democracy the best form of governance?

Well, so far, we haven't found a better system. But the bigger question to me is: how does the modern political system interact with the current economic system? This shapes democracy.

This is much more critical because to me it's about looking where you place importance. If you say that individual freedom is of utmost importance — then you are left with democracy.

I think the main problem we are currently facing is that we have the same democratic principles and mechanisms in place that we've had for over 100 years. But are they still fit for purpose? I mean, do they really work the same way they worked 50 years ago?

We need new mechanisms. We've talked about citizen councils, reducing the voting age, or changing school curricula to talk about democratic issues. You have to experiment with these things. And this will all take time. •

Andrew Kolb

About Andrew Kolb

Andrew Kolb serves as IFES's Director of Strategic Communications and Advocacy, leading the organization's efforts to tell powerful democracy stories and contribute to narratives of democratic resilience. As the world experiences its biggest election year in history, Kolb is focused on shining a spotlight on the state of democracy as people around the globe are experiencing it today.

What makes you optimistic about democracy?

People are willing to go to remarkable lengths to defend their democracies. The extreme examples are places like Myanmar — where people are not only fighting back against the junta, but rethinking local governance in areas they have reclaimed. In Ukraine, quiet institutional reforms around electoral processes and anticorruption efforts are progressing despite the hardships of war. The fact that people continue not just to believe in the ideals of democracy, but to do the nitty-gritty work of democratic governance under conditions like these is a huge source of inspiration and confidence.



“Politicians have always gone to great lengths to control their image - at what point does AI cross a line beyond what good lighting or Photoshop can do?”

2024 is a super-election year, which elections are you paying attention to?

Where to begin? With over 70 countries representing half the world's population voting this year, there is no shortage of fascinating stories to watch.

Indonesia and Pakistan both had elections earlier this year where AI played a noteworthy role. In Indonesia, President-elect Prabowo's campaign used AI to soften his image. Politicians have always gone to great lengths to control their image—at what point does AI cross a line beyond what good lighting or Photoshop can do? In Pakistan, former Prime Minister Imran Khan used AI-generated videos to campaign from prison, where he is currently serving a 10-year sentence for corruption. Is that the same thing as a letter from jail — or does it enter uncanny valley?

And this year will have no shortage of elections with big geopolitical consequences. From the Solomon Islands to Moldova and Georgia, tensions between big global actors are in play at the ballot box. And importantly, not all of these geopolitical tensions are focused on Europe and the United States — the Maldives' recent elections were framed in terms of orientation towards China or India.

One of the most interesting elections so far this year has been in Senegal, which, like many elections this year, can serve as something of a litmus test for the health of democracy. The President canceled the scheduled elections, and the constitutional council made him put them back on the calendar, and

the opposition won. In this case, the democratic system of checks and balances worked.

Is democracy the best form of governance?

Yes. But it's important not to be glib about this. It clearly is not obvious to many people that democracy is a better form of government than other alternatives. Global polling data shows decreased faith in democracy, particularly among young people. By one measure from Swedish research institute V-Dem, 42% of the world's population lives in some form of electoral autocracy. Not all of these countries hold legitimate elections, but there are plenty of places where people are — with their eyes open — choosing leaders with authoritarian tendencies.

There is plenty of hard data to show that democracy delivers better long-term outcomes on every facet of governance from education to public health. That knowledge doesn't change these worrying trendlines. So those of us who believe that democracy is the best form of governance for offering peace and prosperity, for giving citizens lives of dignity and freedom, we have our work cut out for us in changing the narrative. •

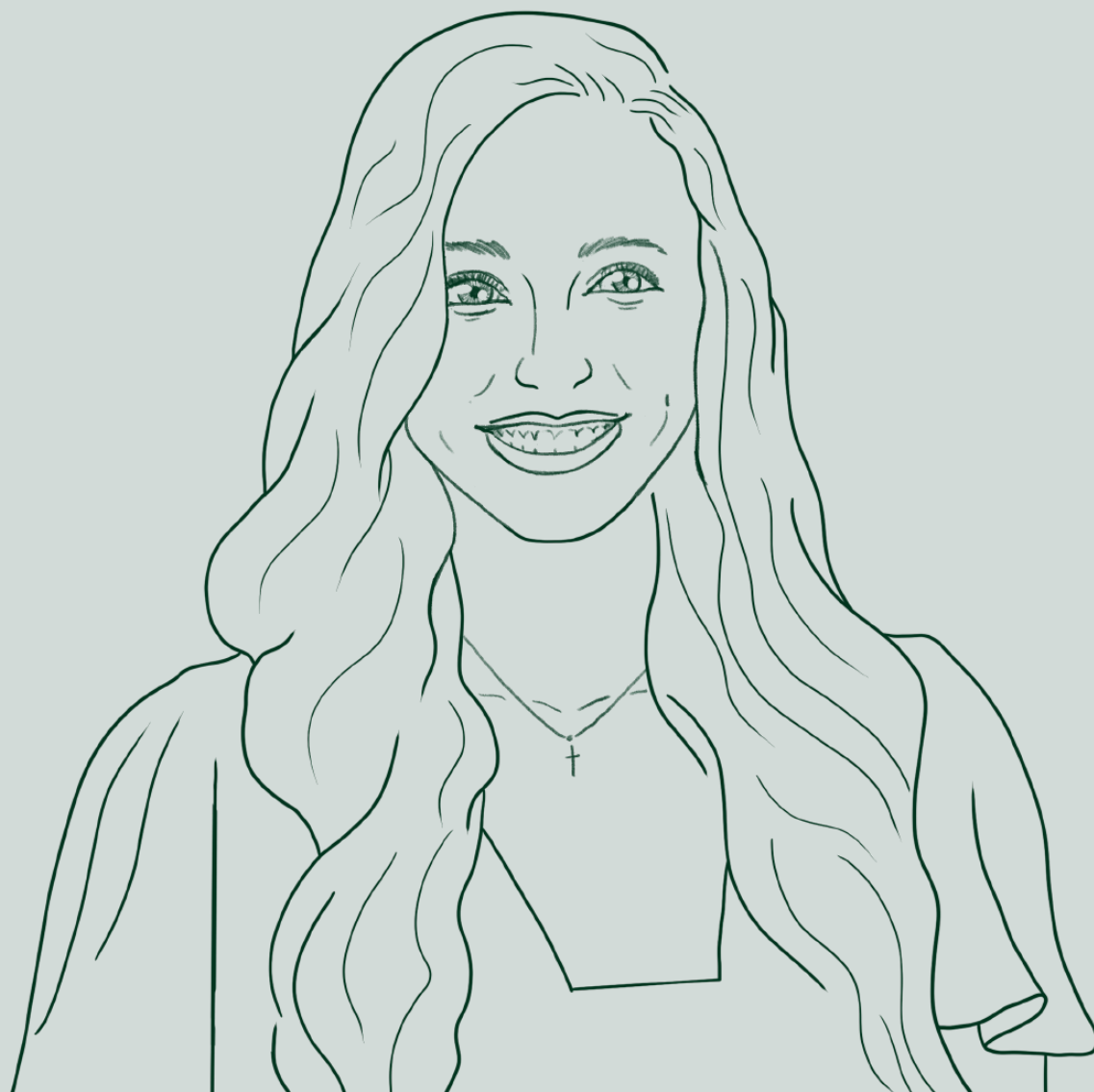
Kelsey Ritchie Frierson

About Kelsey Ritchie Frierson

Kelsey Ritchie Frierson is a Congressional Innovation Fellow, where she works on Capitol Hill as a tech policy advisor focused on artificial intelligence. She most recently was the Lead Client Solutions Manager for Logically AI, a tech startup that uses AI/ML to identify foreign influence campaigns online.

What makes you optimistic about democracy?

It remains the most resilient system devised to empower individuals and ensure that governance reflects the collective will of the people. Its emphasis on accountability, transparency, and the rule of law fosters an environment where diverse perspectives are heard, debated, and integrated into policy decisions. Additionally, democracy's inherent checks and balances mitigate against the concentration of power, fostering a dynamic environment where innovation and progress can flourish. While imperfect, democracy stands as a resilient and pragmatic testament to humanity's capacity for self-governance and collective advancement.



“When citizens lose faith in the democratic process, they become disengaged, disillusioned, and susceptible to manipulation by populist or authoritarian forces.”

How has technology changed our democracies?

Social media has had a profound impact on democracy, presenting both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, social media platforms have democratized access to information, providing a platform for diverse voices to be heard and for marginalized communities to organize and advocate for their rights. They have also facilitated unprecedented levels of political engagement, enabling citizens to participate in discussions, mobilize for social causes, and hold governments accountable in real-time.

However, social media's impact on democracy is not without its challenges. The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on these platforms has distorted public discourse. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement often prioritize sensational content over accuracy, leading to the spread of conspiracy theories and divisive rhetoric. Moreover, the echo chambers created by social media algorithms can reinforce existing biases, fragmenting societies and hindering constructive dialogue.

What is the biggest threat to our democracies?

The biggest threat to democracy lies in the erosion of public trust and confidence in its efficacy. When citizens lose faith in the democratic process, they become disengaged, disillusioned, and susceptible to manipulation by populist or authoritarian forces. The contemporary information environment, characterized by the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, exacerbates this challenge. False narratives and polarizing rhetoric can undermine the shared understanding essential for democratic discourse, leading to the entrenchment of divisive ideologies. To safeguard democracy, it's imperative to address information-related threats, promote media literacy, and cultivate a culture of critical thinking and civic responsibility. ●

Slavina Ancheva

About Slavina Ancheva

Slavina Ancheva is a Policy Adviser and Team Leader for Member of the European Parliament Eva Maydell. During her time at the European Parliament, she led the work on the Artificial Intelligence Act, the world's first-ever law on AI, and assisted MEP Maydell's work on several other digital files such as the Digital Services Act.

What makes you optimistic about democracy?

When I see the people of Georgia out on the streets rallying in support of EU membership, or the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in 2013, it serves as a reminder of the price people are willing to pay for democracy. I am optimistic when I see what democracy symbolizes to many of these people: hope, prosperity, freedom, the promise of a better life. It serves as the same symbol for me, coming from a post-Communist country where many saw democracy and EU membership as the only path towards progress.

On the other hand, we cannot deny that many who once believed in the promise of democracy are now disillusioned, having not felt any of these rewards materialize. As Madeleine Albright said: "While democracy in the long run is the most stable form of government, in the short run, it is among the most fragile." We have a duty to make sure democracies deliver for people. That the promises of hope, prosperity, and freedom are not just empty words but tangible effects that can be felt in people's everyday lives.



“I am optimistic when I see what democracy symbolizes to many of these people: hope, prosperity, freedom, the promise of a better life.”

How has technology changed our democracies?

The increasing use of Artificial Intelligence in elections has the potential to either harm or help our democracies. For the time being, the former seems more likely. Disinformation and fake news have been around for decades but AI tools can take this phenomenon to a whole new level. Malicious actors now no longer need to hire people or troll farms; they can use generative AI to spew out false and harmful content at an unprecedented rate. This must be tackled both at the system level — by allowing watermarking techniques and requiring clear disclaimers for such content — but also at the social network level, where much of this content is left to spread.

One could also imagine the flip side: A future in which AI allows political parties to gather in real-time the opinions of their voters or in which AI-enabled government services increase citizens'

trust in institutions. Both of these realities are possible which is why we need both regulatory and non-regulatory measures in place to enable the positive impact of AI on democracy.

2024 is a super-election year, which elections are paying attention to?

The EU and U.S. elections are probably top of mind for all — myself included — due to their tremendous importance in determining domestic political agendas on ambitious climate and tech goals but also foreign policy leanings, including when it comes to support for Ukraine. However, in our focus on these elections, we must not forget that many other countries are also heading to the polls. This is why India in particular is of interest to me, given it is the most populous among those going to the polls and due to its increasing importance in the geopolitical space as a “middle power” with expanding influence. •

How Much Political Violence can a Democratic State Tolerate?

Written By
Hanna Begun

On an average winter's morning, the grounds of the U.S. Capitol are quiet, its flag solemnly flapping in the wind. But on January 6, 2021, following a rally near the White House where President Trump made claims of voter fraud in the election outcome, his supporters made their way to storm the Capitol. Today, the Capitol insurrection stands as a significant moment in U.S. history, as it is the most violent, extremist response to an electoral outcome to date. The crowd at the insurrection numbered at least 10,000 people, with 2,000 actually making it inside the Capitol building. Thanks to extensive,

real-time news coverage, the whole world watched on as Americans stormed the Capitol with the intent to threaten or harm government officials.

It was particularly shocking to see this event take place in the U.S., a country that proudly portrays itself as a model of democracy. The Capitol insurrection is an example of unabashed political violence in a democratic society, which in turn leads to a larger debate on just how normalized certain types of political violence have become in the United States today.



The root of the problem

Individuals who commit electoral or political acts of violence believe they are justified because they view it as a way to have their voices and opinions heard by the government. Elections are landmark events which are watched and reported on worldwide. With all eyes on the 2020 U.S. presidential election, when the outcome was not what they wanted, the insurrectionists saw an opportunity to force change and make the global community bear witness. Rather than accepting the outcome of a civil, democratic election, these individuals choose to make change according to their own agenda. In a 2022 Harvard case study, 8% of the rioters surveyed stated that the desire to start a civil war or an armed revolution was their main motivation to storm the Capitol building. In the same study, 20.6% were motivated to take part in the riot because they supported Trump and another 20.6% were motivated because of Trump's fraudulent claims that the election was rigged. By committing such violent acts, these individuals attempt to destroy democracy in a way that reshapes the government to fit their extreme political views. The concept of pushing for change in a democracy can be seen as exercising one's civic duty to create a transformative impact, but when it comes at the cost of harming or threatening those with differing beliefs, there is no equivocation in signing a petition or walking in a peaceful protest versus violently inciting an insurrection.

In the aftermath of the 2021 Capitol insurrection, the driving factors that lead an individual to threaten and commit acts of violence in the first place become clearer. Individuals that commit these violent political acts have often experienced isolationism — the feeling that civic and political leaders do not include them. It's likely that these sentiments were heightened among the future insurrectionists in 2020 as a result of pandemic restrictions and protest movements where they felt their personal interests were not represented, such as Black Lives Matter. Once isolated, people and communities can then become "breeding grounds" for radicalization and violent extremism, which can then lead to a distrust of mainstream society and governance.

The MAGA mindset

This ties into another driving psychological factor that led many to the Capitol that day: seeking a sense of purpose and belonging. Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) narrative of government corruption inspired certain individuals to participate in an insurrection that became a historical event. With Trump's support and alleged avocation for the insurrection, these violent individuals found legitimacy in their cause. MAGA creates a sense of community for like-minded individuals, as Trump endorses violent speech. For instance, during

a 2015 campaign rally, MAGA supporters physically assaulted a Black protestor during Trump’s speech, in which Trump remarked that the individual “should have been roughed up”.

When the idea of starting an insurrection was forming in alt-right Facebook groups and secret messaging channels, it symbolized an opportunity for members to live out this shared sense of belonging in an offline context. John Strand, a former model and actor from California who participated in the Capitol insurrection, shared in a social media post: “I am incredibly proud to be a patriot today, to stand up tall in defense of liberty & the Constitution, to support Trump & #MAGAforever, & to send the message: WE ARE NEVER CONCEDED A STOLEN ELECTION.” But ultimately it doesn’t actually matter if it’s Trump leading the call, so long as there is a person in power to act as a figurehead and unify these lone voices. When a prominent leader of such a movement condones political violence, it resonates on a personal level and justifies the actions of bad actors.

In 2021, more than 9,600 direct threats were leveled against members of Congress. The uptick of violence against politicians spans from voicing dissatisfaction with individual policies to an overall attempt to overthrow the government. In September 2020, 13 men orchestrated a plot to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the Governor of Michigan. Nancy Pelosi’s husband, Paul Pelosi, was attacked in October 2022 by a right-wing conspiracy theorist who broke into their home and hit Pelosi with a hammer, just days before the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. These instances of political violence reveal growing tensions between citizens and elected officials, indicating a breakdown of trust and communication.

Tackling the intolerable

Since the Capitol insurrection, the U.S. government has created its first National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, and implemented strategies in the military and intelligence community to expand capabilities to combat violent extremism. However, the strategy does not sufficiently address the matter at hand: the rise of violent extremist attacks. It lacks a definite, concrete plan to maintain a threshold to counter violent groups and individuals such as the Three Percenters, and instead calls for the assessment of “potential legislative reforms”. At the time of writing, the national strategy has not been revisited since its initial release in 2021.

As a democratic state, the U.S. cannot merely arrest individuals who threaten political or electoral violence without ensuring protection through due process, even for those committing violent attacks against the very system. The U.S. has to find ways to counter violent electoral and political extremism while respecting the First Amendment, which prevents law enforcement from

surveilling or investigating American citizens based solely on their personal political views. Nevertheless, governments must take action in combating electoral or political extremism and enforce a standard to hold people responsible for advocating for political violence. In June 2023, the FBI and DHS attempted to tackle this issue by releasing their Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism. One activity listed in the report is a course for employees that provides training on privacy and civil liberty laws and the fundamentals of protecting First Amendment rights during investigations.

Mounting political violence carries with it long-term risks beyond individual safety and physical violence. Without decisive action against people who commit electoral or political violence, we risk allowing threats to evolve and thereby limit voters’ options. As different politicians make or announce legislation that extremists disagree with, violent individuals will find new channels of retribution. If national governments do not lower the threshold for action against political violence, there will be a rise of manipulated media, which seems likely to be a challenge for the U.S. to tackle in the lead-up to the upcoming presidential election.

With ever-evolving threats and limited courses of action, democratic governments risk losing or having limited political officials willing to run for office. Against the risk of political violence, certain political officials — from diverse backgrounds or with certain political leanings — may become discouraged from running for office. Suffice to say, if violent extremists successfully scare political officials from running for office, it would leave primarily candidates that align with the extremist agenda, resulting in the deterioration of a proper democracy. The diverse set of voices that democracy is meant to uphold would be silenced.

Tuesday, November 5th

No one can predict what violence could come as a result of the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. Nonetheless, individuals and international governments alike should prepare for anything. In March 2024, Trump said that there will be a “bloodbath” in the U.S. if he does not get reelected as president in November. Conversely, if there were to be a second Trump presidency, the fight for a healthy democracy would be challenged. Society as a whole should establish a line of how much political extremism people will accept before it becomes a concern, while maintaining individual rights to privacy and freedom. With the rise in political threats, and the expansion in the variety of threats, the upcoming elections will challenge the U.S. in the measures it is willing to take to protect the democratic process — and the people involved. •

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We have [had] the same democratic principles and mechanisms in place for over 100 years ... are they still fit for purpose?

-Alexander Kleibrink page 48

