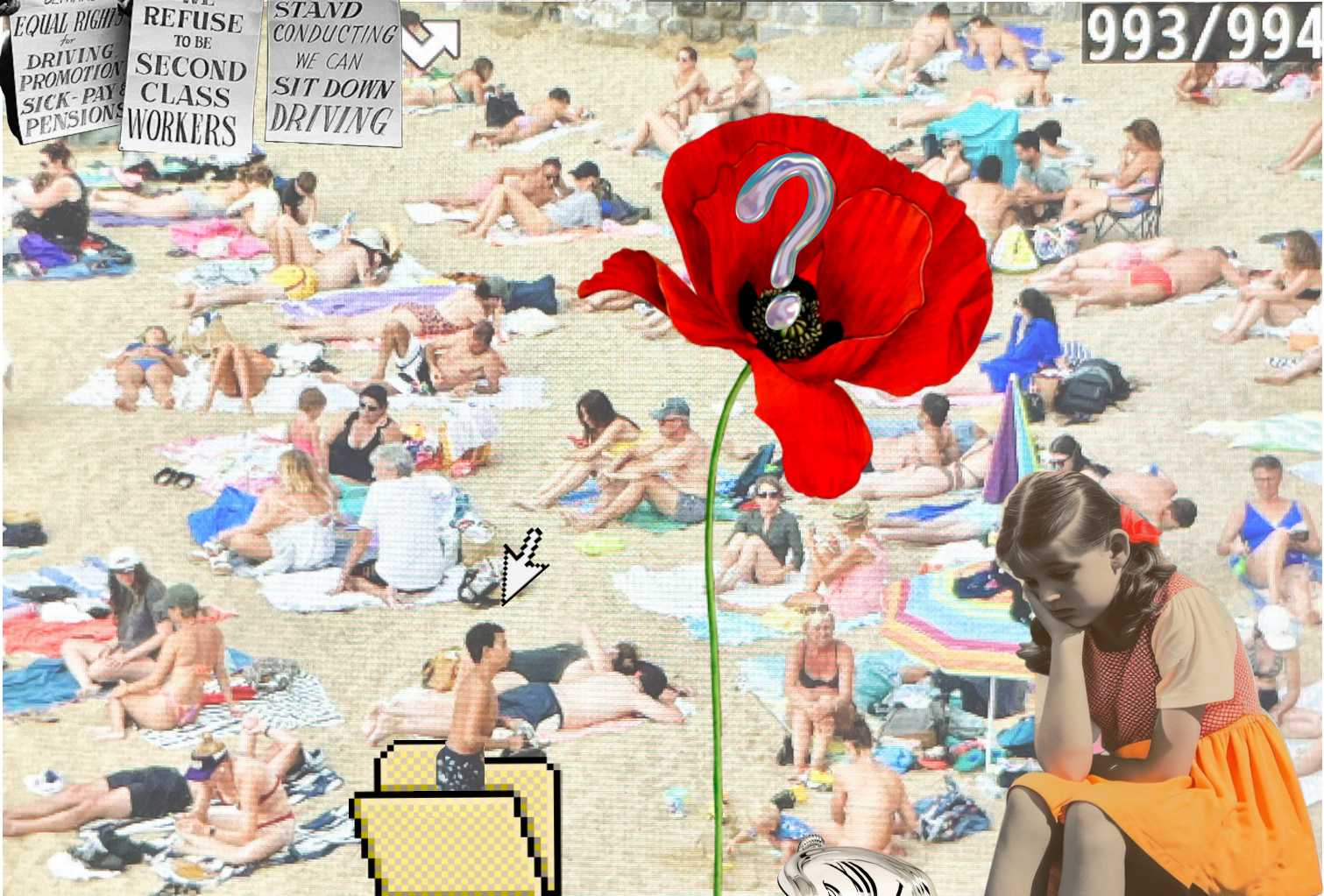
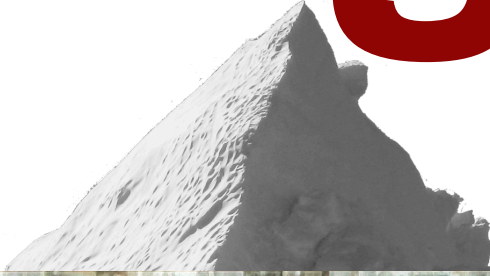


Dialogue

Issue 28

Spring 2025



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Change

dear reader,

The second issue of the year is entitled 'Change', a fitting theme encapsulating the fluidity and the rapidly transforming nature of the current global socio-political landscape. The decline of the Pax-Americana and the new Trump administration, the War in Gaza and the climate crisis mark critical points of change in our global history. Differently from previous issues, this edition aims at exploring 'Change' through four central themes: Media & technology, Identity, Democracy, and Perception. Each theme serves as a lens through which we examine the dynamics of transformation on the individual and collective level. From the evolving role of media and technology in shaping public discourse to the ongoing struggles for inclusive identity and representation, and from critiques of the current liberal electoral democratic order to the nuanced ways in which perception influences societal change; this issue invites readers to navigate the complexities of change in our contemporary world.

This is the final issue with our current team of incredible editors who have dedicated the past year in the creation of these issues and the last time we'll be working with a talented group of writers who have contributed their valuable insights on these relevant discussions. This experience has been a wonderful opportunity and it has been incredibly rewarding to highlight contemporary issues that we feel should be brought to the forefront of the dialogue within the university community. It is our hope that this collection of articles provokes conversation and further thought on the changing structures and processes that define our world today. However, most importantly, we hope that you enjoy reading.

sincerely,



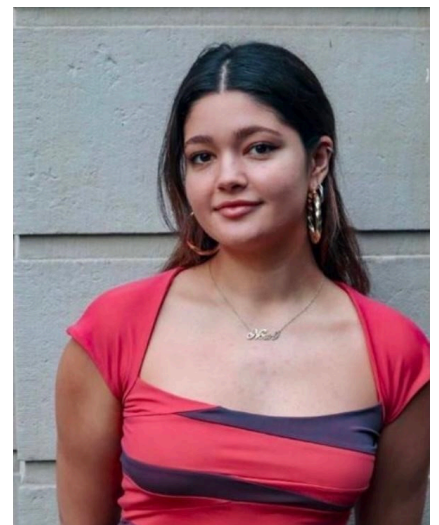
Laetitia Pangerang
Editor in Chief



Nour Lejmi
Editor in Chief



Laetitia Pangerang, Editor in Chief



Nour Lejmi, Editor in Chief

It has been said that no man can step in the same river twice. Could it be said that no man can ever feel the same as in his past, could his views ever hold the permanence they seem to in the moment - will we ever understand the world in the way we do now?

Change, turbulence and uncertainty might be the 3 best words for describing the 21st century. From the invention of the iPhone to the advent of quantum computing with new states of matter, from the end of history to the re-emergence of inter-state war and from the unity of modern connection to the disruption of disinformation and division. The world has changed and will continue to do so in a number of ways we could hope to predict or understand.

Even the Politics society, to which we all owe so much, has been subject to massive change over the past 2 years. With a new mentorship scheme, international trips, a new publication, 2 new podcasts and doubled production of the dialogue it is clear that some change can be a force for good. The question remains, how can we move in the right direction? How do ensure change is not regression but progression?

Though this dialogue is no panacea it is a deeply revealing compilation of awe-inspiring articles to get you thinking about exactly this. We are not in complete control, yet we are not completely devoid of agency. In broaching the diverse and varied set of articles ask yourself how you can install positive change, what you will contribute to next year and fundamentally how the world will change with you in it, at the helm, not on the wayside of your own life.

I personally have changed, the society truly has been the making of me as a person, it has given the confidence, the skills and the network to pursue ambition previously unimaginable to me.

So.. Be the change...

Josh Robinson
President, KCL Politics Society

with thanks to our editors and writers

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identity

changing
identities

Mind the accent

How immigration is reshaping the British soundscape



Going to university in London, the diversity of the student population is extremely visible. Amongst those who are British born, how audible is it? Sure, many home students will be able to discern Northerners from Southerners, perhaps through the pronunciation of anything with an 'a' in the middle of it. Beyond that, it becomes increasingly unintelligible where in the country one could be from. Why is that so? It seems linguistics may have the answer, in the emergence of 'Multicultural London English' (MLE).

MLE is a dialect that could potentially be dominant in Britain, spoken predominantly by young working-class professionals from areas with high levels of immigration. Even if this particular dialect feels unfamiliar, it is

hard to argue against the notion that accents across the country are starting to blend in subtle ways. There are many reasons for this: migration, commuting patterns, and cultural shifts, to name a few. This poses an important question: should the evolution and increasing prevalence of MLE be viewed as a positive shift in inclusive representation, or the harmful loss of regional accents?

MLE's Linguistic Roots, Features, and Potential Causes Explained

For much of the 20th century, the widely-recognized Cockney accent represented the working class in East London. In recent decades, this accent has been steadily declining, due to the ever-evolving MLE, a dialect shaped by social change and

immigration. Cockney has clear, defined grammatical and phonetic features, e.g. the dropping of 'h' sounds ('ouse instead of house') and rhyming slang, for example. MLE, on the other hand, is constantly developing, with its defining features blended together in the melting pot of linguistic influences it derives from: Caribbean, South Asian, and West African communities, among others.

Much like its diverse influence, the spread of MLE far beyond London's borders is not just due to immigration and migration, but also the greater accessibility of London, in a phenomenon known as 'time-space compression'. Time-space compression refers to the set of processes that cause the relative distances between places (i.e., as measured in

Steve McQueen's year 3 exhibition

terms of travel time or cost) to contract, effectively making such places grow 'closer.'" This concept is part of the "shrinking world" idea, and the expansion of the commuter belt, faster trains, and transport projects such as the Elizabeth line are making the distinction between regional accents less clear. Someone from Essex, for example, may spend a lot of their formative years in London, gradually learning speech patterns from peers at school and work. Over time, the blending of these influences results in a more unified sound. An expanding commuter belt decreases the time in which more people can reach and work in London, thus allowing more people to merge in this hotpot of accents and dialects. Or, as a study discussed by the BBC suggests, "...the increased movement of people result[s] in greater contact between dialects, the growth of universal education and literacy, and people buying into the idea that there is a 'correct' or 'standard' way of speaking." A Threat to Britain's History or the Future of a More Inclusive Country?

Some communities may believe that MLE heralds the erosion of Cockney and other traditional London accents which are considered to be linguistic landmarks of local identity. Others, however, might view MLE as a true reflection of a modern London, where everyday communication is shaped by the various people with diverse backgrounds that call London home. Interestingly, along with the emergence of the MLE and its association with East London comes perceptions that MLE is synonymous with the so-called 'roadman' accent associated with youth slang and street culture. This is a huge oversimplification, ignoring the fact that although MLE incorporates elements of slang, it is spoken by a wide range of Londoners across different socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, it has been noted to be growing in popularity in other urban hubs, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool.

Out with the old, in with the new: cultural erasure or cultural development?

Representation matters. That itself is very hard to debate. Does everyone want it though? It is such oversimplification and even stigma which leads to accent softening, which occurs when people tone down their regional accent to potentially sound more 'neutral' or perceived as 'smarter' in professional and social settings. The loss of regional accents should not be solely attributed to the rise of MLE because existing social stigmas rooted in classism and racism against certain accents have helped to accelerate this loss. Take the Scouse accent for example. I come from an area not far from Liverpool, and have had conversations in which people tell me that it is good that I do not sound Scouse, expressing their own distaste towards the accent. It is no secret that there is some classism that accompanies this view, underpinned and exacerbated by

the north-south divide following deindustrialisation towards the end of the 20th century. Nowadays, the outlook has evolved more positively, but does not erase the deep-rooted unconscious biases some people still hold and the validation that people seek by softening the way they speak.

So, does blending and mixing accents into a new dominant dialect strengthen national unity, or does it erase historical distinctions that once defined regional identities? The answer lies in perspective. From one perspective, MLE is an inclusive and natural progression of language, embracing the reality of Britain's diversity. From another, and unsurprisingly, some might perceive this linguistic shift as a loss of tradition (especially in relation to Cockney), risking the loss of parts of British heritage, too. Language is inextricably linked to identity, and for those who associate Cockney with a sense of belonging and local pride, its decline may feel like a diminishment of their cultural roots.

I however, view MLE as a beacon of cultural enrichment instead of a loss. The loss of the regional accents proves that they are no longer representative of Britain. If MLE has evolved from the same diversity that shapes our food choices, healthcare system, student populations, and more, how can we ignore its role in modern British identity? Regional accents play an important role in wider British identity and are etched into the history of the nation's social fabric. Those accents aren't gone yet, but it would be foolish to ignore that times are changing, due to a variety of influences. Today's speech patterns reflect a more interconnected, multicultural Britain compared to previous generations, whose speech was largely determined by geography and class. Through this emerges a shared linguistic identity among young people regardless of their ethnic background and class, compared to their immigrant parents, who were more easily distinguished by their country of origin. Moreover, it increases social cohesion and is a step in the right direction for a more accepting and representative society.

Conclusion

Exploring these behavioural nuances, migration has clearly introduced new influences into speech, but the speed of change also depends on how willing people are to embrace or resist these shifts. Immigration, time-space compression, and accent-softening all contribute to the loss of regional accents and a shift towards MLE. Cultural enrichment or loss of traditional linguistic identity? Both can be true simultaneously, but fundamentally, this cultural shift is an enrichment that is more representative of Britain as we know it. The decline of traditional accents does not erase their historical significance - it simply redefines what it means to sound British today.



Steve McQueen's year 3 exhibition

Ananyaa Gupta

Global South countries are not *developing*, they are *healing*

Development is not a destination: it's a narrative and it's time to rewrite it.

In global discourse, countries from the Global South are often reduced to a single, limiting label: *developing*. According to the World Bank, the term “developing countries” refers to the 135 countries classified as low- or middle-income, whose 6.7 billion people constitute 84% of the world’s population. This classification, based largely on Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, divides the world into a rigid scale: low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high income. Far too often, *developing* is just a kinder, less honest way of saying *poor*, *unstable*, or even *hopeless*. While it might reflect some aspects of reality (economic struggles, fragile institutions...) it oversimplifies the complex histories and current challenges these nations face.

As humans, we love to label, group, and rank things. However, when these labels are rigid, one-dimensional, and rooted in historical bias, they do not merely describe the world, but they begin to shape it. The term *developing* is far from neutral. It implies a hierarchy, as though the world is some kind of race where some countries are ahead, and others are lagging behind. But is that really the full picture?

Many of the countries called *developing* today were once thriving economies, until systems of colonialism, exploitation, and corruption set them back. Nearly all 135 modern *developing* countries have experienced colonisation by a Western (including the

Japanese) power. This imperial domination led to a “reversal of fortune” where the resources of the colonised were stolen or traded in an unequal way, and wealth was extracted from prosperous colonies to fuel the growth of their colonisers. Historian William Dalrymple recalls how when the British East India Company first entered India in 1600, Britain was only producing 1.8 percent of global GDP, while India was producing 22.5 percent. Therefore, India being a *developing* country today while the United Kingdom is *developed* ignores the fact that the current status quo is a result of historical exploitation rather than inherent economic superiority. This framing ignores how colonial exploitation was the backbone of Britain’s rise to power, while India was left to rebuild from the devastation caused by centuries of foreign rule.

This colonial legacy of theft and inequality still haunts many nations in the Global South. Whether in the form of unfair trade deals, ongoing resource extraction, or entrenched poverty, these nations are not trying to catch up with the Global North: they are trying to *heal* from the damage caused by colonialism. This reality is often overlooked, particularly by those in the Global North, who rarely take responsibility for their historical and continued role in hindering the political, economic, and social evolution of the Global South. The rhetoric of *catching up* reinforces a patronizing attitude, assuming that the nations of the

Global North represent the ideal model of development to which the Global South should aspire.

The current global system continues to perpetuate this distorted narrative. The very label of *developing* is weaponized by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to justify intervention in the economies and political systems of these nations. By categorizing nations in this way, these institutions often position themselves as external saviors, making decisions about foreign aid, investment, and policy without considering the historical context that has shaped these countries. The IMF imposed on member countries to implement austerity and debt-prioritized policies which not only aggravate debt and poverty, but also leads local governments to neglect the population’s need. In the light of Kenya and Argentina’s 2024 anti-austerity protests, more and more people are realizing that most economic policies imposed by western-influenced institutions are in fact a form of structural violence that prioritizes debt repayment over public welfare, exacerbating poverty and governmental negligence. This pattern of intervention reflects a broader trend in which financial institutions often dictate the economic policies of developing nations, often exacerbating social and economic inequalities. Rather than fostering genuine partnerships, this system reinforces an unequal power dynamic that disregards the



sovereignty and agency of the nations it labels as *developing*.

Within the broader category of developing nations, there are subcategories that often carry even more negative connotations. One of them is the *poor* countries subcategory, including South Sudan, Congo, Yemen, or Haiti. GDP-wise, those nations are indeed not wealthy nor are their economies thriving. But why? South Sudan's troubles, for example, can be traced to arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, while Haiti's impoverishment stems from centuries of exploitation and foreign intervention. In this sense, South Sudan, Congo, Yemen or Haiti are not poor because of some inherent flaw. It would be more accurate to say that they have been *impoverished* by arbitrary borders, foreign intervention, and by an international system that perpetuates a racial hierarchy between nations and people. The same is true for many so-called developing nations whose present struggles are rooted in histories that are conveniently overlooked and/or deliberately ignored, simply because discussions on colonialism and past cycles of violence are still too uncomfortable for its beneficiaries.

Having grown up in Dakar, Senegal, I have had the privilege of seeing another side of what many would call a *developing country*. My view of Dakar is a city vibrant with creativity, intellect, and ambition, far from the impoverished, struggling place that often

gets depicted in international media. Dakar is a hub of art, culture, innovation, and passionate political debate. It's a thriving city, but it is often reduced to a singular narrative of poverty and need. A narrative that fails to acknowledge the resilience, culture, and potential that flourish in these cities.

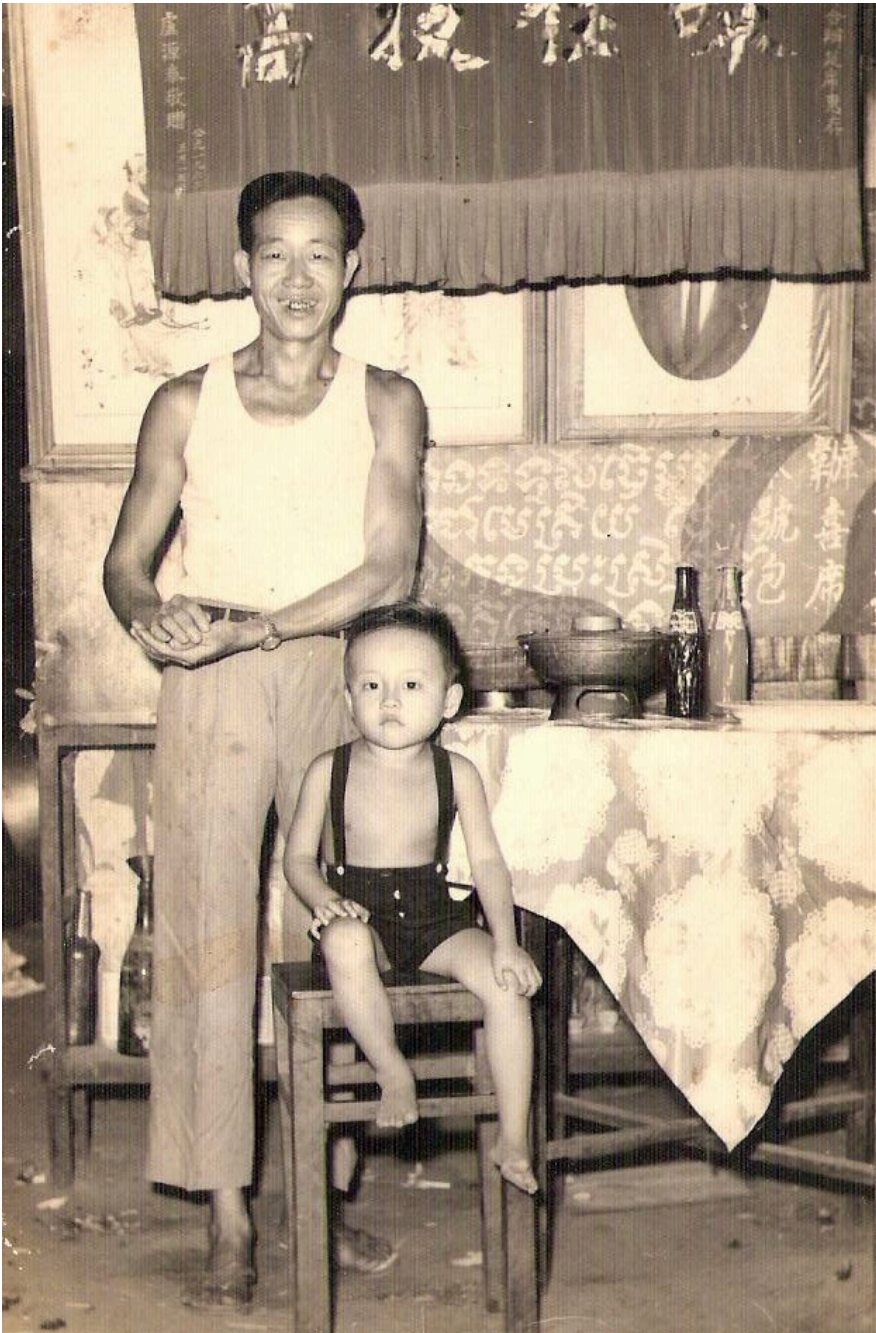
Hence, the *developing* label oversimplifies reality. Cities like Dakar are economic and cultural powerhouses. They are not following a single trajectory of "development"; they are evolving on their own terms. Yet, the world still sees them through a Western lens, judging them not by their strengths but by what they supposedly lack.

More problematic than the word "developing" itself are the assumptions and biases the term carries. What if we stopped seeing development as a single path defined by the West? What if we acknowledged that different countries have different strengths, different measures of success? What if the world allowed nations to define themselves instead of imposing outdated categories on them? I am not denying the challenges present in the Global South. Economic disparities, governance issues, social inequalities or atrocious violence—those issues are real. But these issues exist everywhere, including in so-called developed nations. We should reject the idea that countries should be primarily defined by their struggles, rather than their potential.

Change begins with language, but it does not end there. We need more nuanced media representation. Representation that tells the full story is vital, as are global policies that treat the Global South as equal partners, not charity cases. And most importantly, the rest of the world needs to listen to the voices of people who actually live in these so-called developing countries, allowing them to shape their own narratives

Yasmine Mbaye

Peeling Back the Band-Aid



Reclaiming Our Stories in a Globalised World

“Cambodian born and raised?” – I have never expected so many looks of surprise in response to my usual confirmatory nod. Seemingly, appearing *monocultural* in a world deeply infatuated with diversity is a double-edged sword. To some, it might seem plain, unremarkable, and even uninteresting. Yet, this reaction simply mirrors the paradox embedded within contemporary notions of diversity, which largely revolve around western understandings of the concept, reducing anyone who appears monocultural to being uninteresting, made worse when the so-called monoculture is not particularly well-known.

There is a familiar sting when someone says, “Wow, I didn’t know Cambodia was a country.” Although it is tempting to give these comments the benefit of the doubt and attribute them to ignorance, rather than malice; they serve as a reminder of the dissonance between the popular narrative of the interconnectedness fostered by globalisation and the everyday experience of those who exist on its fringes. This gap between perception and reality is a small-scale of a larger truth: we are shaped by forces beyond our control, with invisible threads of power and hegemony dictating how we see ourselves and one another.

Cambodia: a minority among minorities

Situated in Southeast Asia, Cambodia is a small country with a population of approximately 17 million as of 2023. Fifty

years ago, this number was 8 million and quickly plummeted to just 6 million by 1979. This staggering decrease was not merely a coincidence, but a small part of the aftermath of the Genocide that continues to weigh down generations of Cambodians decades later.

It all began with a glimmer of hope when a supposed “liberation” army arrived, promising to “rescue” Cambodians from *feudalism*, the alleged reason behind the country’s political turmoil. However, a more accurate analysis would reveal the political turmoil was largely due to Cambodia’s involvement in the Vietnam War under coup leader Lon Nol’s leadership, which exacerbated the fragile conditions at home. This initial hope proved fleeting, quickly dissolving into a far more harrowing reality. From April 1975 to January 1979, Cambodia endured one of its darkest periods, as the world looked on in silence. The Communist Khmer Rouge took control of the country, forcibly evacuating cities nationwide, including the capital, Phnom Penh. Racial discrimination was a persistent aspect of the genocide. The Khmer Rouge implemented discriminatory policies that targeted three minority groups: the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Chams (an Austronesian ethnic group in Southeast Asia). This segregation was part of their larger effort to create a homogeneous society, which they believed was necessary to achieve a socialist revolution based on the principles of “classlessness” and “equality.”

In *The Power of Names*, psychologist Mavis Himes writes, “Through our proper name, we greet the world, and the world, in turn, greets us.” My grandfather, born to a Teochew Chinese father and Cambodian mother, changed the way he greeted the world by changing his Chinese name to a Khmer one, to defend against how the world would have greeted and treated him otherwise. It was a survival strategy he learned to adopt after witnessing fellow Chinese Cambodians vanishing one after the other. His story, like so many others, remains largely untold, even amidst the extensive coverage of the genocide. Over time, I have come to understand that this is due to and emphasises the importance of representation and the idea that someone who appears monocultural can hold many cultural layers within what appears to be a “single” identity. At first glance, it is easy to assume that a single story defines a person or a culture, but the reality is far more complex, should people care to look. Hegemony often pushes us to accept the Western narrative as universal, overshadowing the richness and variety of other perspectives. Yet, it is the personal stories, like my grandfather’s, that challenge and hopefully help widen this singular view. These stories fill the gaps, weaving together a fuller, more authentic tapestry of world cultures; one that honours the diversity and depth often hidden beneath the surface.

Hegemony and Orientalism

The International Relations theory of hegemony explains how dominant powers maintain control not just through force, but through the shaping of narratives and norms. In this framework, the stories of the marginalised are often suppressed or rewritten to fit the agenda of the powerful. Cambodia’s history, for instance, has been largely defined by external forces—from the covert U.S. bombings, and foreign academics narrating our story, to the global silence during the Khmer Rouge regime. This erasure is not accidental, it is a product of a hegemonic system that prioritises certain voices while silencing others. For the longest time, Cambodia’s history was narrated by academic sources from foreign countries as opposed to Cambodians themselves, ultimately shedding a more favourable light on the global silence that lasted during the Khmer Rouge Genocides and other war crimes. For example, international history literature largely ignores the covert bombings carried out by the U.S. under Operation: Breakfast wherein the U.S. knowingly bombed Cambodia lands without regard for international treaties or respect for sovereignty just to achieve their sole objective of targeting suspected Viet Cong forces. The entire bombing campaign was referred to as “Operation: Menu” internally, alluding to the fact that, to politicians like Henry Kissinger, killing hundreds and thousands of civilians was simply a normalised routine, much like picking items on a menu. By generating their own narrative, dominant powers grant themselves the power to narrate history and to make themselves look better while glossing over their more negative efforts.

Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism further illuminates how the West has historically narrated the East as the “other” that is exotic, yet also backwards and inferior. Although the term originally referred to the work of the orientalist—a scholar well-versed in the languages and literature of the East—an evolution of the concept, post-Second World War, associated the term with a corporate institution designed to stereotype and marginalise the East. This lens has shaped how Cambodia and its people are perceived, reducing a rich and complex culture to a series of stereotypes or, worse, a blank space on the map nobody knows.

My grandfather’s decision to change his name to a Khmer one during the genocide was not just an act of survival; it was a response to a world that had already decided his identity was negligible for the crime of being born to parents of the wrong country. In a sense, my world, my family, and my people only begin to wake up when I fall asleep. Cambodia’s larger story remains in the shadows, despite its efforts to reach out and make itself known to the West. But this is not unusual, as the Western world tends to

move forward with its own priorities, overlooking the struggles, histories, and realities of the Global South. Ultimately, the Global South is left in the “night” while the Global North advances into the “day”. It is convenient to adopt the belief that the world has advanced past the point where there exists a significant divide between the voices of the Global North and those from the Global South. However, it is important to acknowledge the numerous untold, or deliberately ignored stories stemming from those consistently marginalised by the threads of power and hegemony. Perhaps, in amplifying these stories, we can begin to bridge the gap between perception and reality, not just for Cambodia, but for all those who exist on the margins of the global narrative. It is a political act that demands we question who holds the pen when history is written and decides which stories are remembered.

Sinamaline Khuong

**de
mo
cracy**

**changing
democracy**

Does Your Vote Matter?

*In conversation
with Amelie
Abass from
Make Votes
Matter*



The UK's electoral system is fundamentally broken. Our parliament is one made up of MPs who may as well have each scraped more votes than the other candidates in their respective seats. Keir Starmer's landslide majority of 158 was won with just 33.7% of the popular vote - the lowest of any majority party on record.

Make Votes Matter is a national movement to change this. I met Amelie, a 22-year-old campaigner for Make Votes Matter, at a London Young Greens event last month. She is a bubbly, confident, and incredibly busy student and activist. Our conversation touched on her journey; the reasons that students get into politics, our generation's widespread disillusionment in democracy, and what pushes her to keep pushing for change in our political system.

FW: 'So you are a single mom, a student, and campaigner for not only Make Votes Matter but also the Green Party. I'd like to start with you telling me a bit about how you got into each of these roles and what that journey has been like for you.'

AA: 'I honestly never really expected my life to turn out the way it has. I was raised with the idea that I was gonna end up doing music. And then, my life did a complete one-eighty when I got pregnant at 19.'

'I believe there's two kinds of people in the world who get into politics. The first kind is going to benefit from the political system and exploit it. The second kind is the person that has been let down by the system, and wants to see it improved. And in my case, that is why I got into politics. Because getting pregnant at 19 made me realize that I wanted to help change the system.'

'I found that the Green Party reflected my political ideas - so I joined. And then, I came across proportional representation, and that introduced me to Make Votes Matter.'

FW: 'So, proportional representation! You've touched on being motivated to get involved with

Make Votes Matter after seeing how few seats the Green Party has, but proportional representation is a very salient issue. The latest YouGov polling has nearly half of Brits in support of the measure, but it rarely gets any airtime. Speaking to most people that I know, they're worried about the housing crisis, stagnating wages and wealth inequality. Recent polling also shows that young people have decreasing faith in democracy and would favour more authoritarian governments. So why does your issue matter now?'

AA: 'First of all, there is very little awareness [...] People don't have an understanding of the system enough to know whether they agree with it. People across the political spectrum feel ignored by politicians. A lot of people feel like their vote doesn't matter or their views aren't represented. And that leads to disillusionment, disengagement in politics and loss of trust in democracy.'

'But that word democracy, what does it actually mean? We're losing hope in this democratic system because it's simply not democratic.'

'There is another way of doing things. The current system is a First Past the Post system, which essentially means within a constituency, as soon as someone representing a party, gets [more votes than any other candidate] then any other vote ceases to matter. And people live in places that have held the same seats for decades.'

'Under First Past the Post, in the last election, quite shockingly, six in 10 people didn't get the MP they voted for. That's insane. Isn't it?'

'[...] We're living in a time where the Labour Party has this landslide majority, which doesn't reflect their slim share of the popular vote. We've just had one of the most unrepresentative elections in the history of British elections. People are day by day losing hope and don't know what to do.'

FW: 'So bringing it back to education, it's often quite confusing, and it feels like a very

radical shift talking about changing the electoral system. We vote, but we don't think about how our vote is translated into winners and losers. What would happen if the government started supporting your cause?'

AA: 'So Make Votes Matter doesn't have an official position on what an exact version of proportional representation The UK should adopt. We're calling for a national commission for electoral reform that would look at international evidence and decide what kind of PR would work best in the context of the UK. Whatever system is decided, the most important thing is that we want to adopt the basic principle that seats in parliament should reflect the votes that each party gets nationally, and that all votes should matter regardless of where you live.'

FW: 'First Past the Post produces governments with power. In Keir Starmer's case, a supermajority. But in countries like Germany and Israel, we've seen bizarre coalitions of five different parties. In Israel's case, a coalition which has inflated the influence of far-right minorities. This can be related to similar claims of democratic deficits that we see in our current system. How do we reconcile this desire for strong, efficient government with a desire for a proportional system?'

AA: 'One of the main issues with strong two party governments is that people are expecting one party to solve all the problems there are. But whatever party you vote for, the majority of people aren't in complete support of every single thing the party says or does. And with a coalition government, what you're introducing is an opportunity for parties to pick up the pieces on issues that other parties aren't prioritizing.'

'[...] each of [the main] parties represents and focuses on something different. Under PR there's gonna be less people complaining that one party isn't doing everything.'

'Politics under proportional representation



would become less transactional, and more about helping people.'

FW: I recently spoke to a caseworker for an MP about this interview, and she touched on some of the themes you've covered. Specifically, though, she was curious - how do you maintain that constituency link and sense of support under proportional representation? You've touched on the idea of safety MPs being less attentive to their constituents. Is that something that matters to you in a proportional electoral system?'

AA: 'Even in proportional systems like Single Transferable Vote, constituency link doesn't go down the drain. It's more about making the area that represents you a little bit bigger so that there are multiple MPs representing you in parliament.'

'Nothing that could ever be done will make Britain a perfect democracy because you can't have a perfect democracy. What we are trying to implement is a situation that will make democracy better and more representative for everyone.'

'I'm a Green Party member, and my MP is Lib Dem, but he's very, pro proportional representation. So I've been able to campaign and have support from my MP.'

'And it's made me realize that the lack of being on the same 'side' politically really doesn't matter. The thing that matters the most is kind of what you're working towards. Constituency link is important, but what's

much more important is a democracy in which what you're voting for actually gets taken into account.'

FW: 'As a member of a party that bears the brunt of a broken electoral system, it's very easy for you to shout about how we need electoral reform. And then as parties get bigger, as we've seen with Reform UK, their support for it immediately falls away. That coupled with proportional representation as a salient issue makes me wonder: how do you retain hope that you can build a cross-party consensus on this?'

AA: 'Most Labour members and voters understand that proportional representation benefits everyone'

'In opinion polls, more than half of Labour supporters consistently say that they would prefer a PR system. They understand that it would be a fairer, and better for the country. So it's time for Keir Starmer to listen to his own voters and also back PR. The Conservatives have historically benefited from first past the post, but they should also be worried. The rise of Reform means that the Tories could soon be left with just a handful of MPs even if they get more than 20% of the votes.'

'That's why I think everyone, not just the smaller party, should be thinking and speaking out for PR, because in these unstable times, first past the post is just gonna lead to more chaos, polarization, and

distrust in the system.'

The fight for proportional representation, especially in Britain, has been a long one. Campaigns for proportional representation have existed for over a century, attempting to chip away at the oh-so-entrenched two-party system. This conversation touched on just a few of the issues with our archaic First Past the Post system.

British politics was, in many ways, built to be accusatory, competitive, and uncooperative. Indeed, the House of Commons is divided into two by red lines, each two swords lengths apart from the other. Asking questions about our voting system is essentially questioning the very nature of our national politics - what it is and what it ought to be. Do we strive for a disproportionate two party system which leaves most people disillusioned? Or a system in which voters get what they vote for, and are truly free to choose with who to place their support?

What my conversation with Amelie drove home, though, was the public indifference and cynicism that an accusatory two-party system can create. People simply don't feel substantively heard. As foreign as it may seem, winning the fight for proportional representation could be key to fixing an increasingly undemocratic system.

Florence Wilson

The Rise of the Techno- Class

*An American
Broligarchy.*



The American Revolution was fought to free the people from a monarchy and class of distant elites, coalescing in the formation of a grand democracy. Two and a half centuries later, power is back in the hands of unelected elites—except this time, instead of royal families, it's SpaceX and Tesla shareholders. Enter: 'the Broligarchy', a fusion of Elon Musk and Donald Trump's unique form of government, where tech moguls and political power brokers unite to shape policies and steer the nation's course in unprecedented ways. In a world where CEOs moonlight as statesmen and governments behave like startups, the White House has become less a seat of power and rather a boardroom where geopolitics is simply another market of disruption. With Trump back in office and Musk lurking in the West Wing, traditional governance is being rebranded. And Musk is not merely a backer—he is embedding his ethos of disruption into governance itself, in favor of technocratic dominance. At Trump's first inauguration, tech titans—Zuckerberg, Bezos, Pichai, Musk—stood as symbols of a new order. Seeing this as more than merely opportunism, historian Janis Mimura warned of "techno-fascism": an amalgamation of corporate and state power, where technology becomes a tool of political domination. No longer would industry lobby the government—it would become our government. In this essay, I explore how technocratic elites consolidate power by eroding institutional safeguards, embedding corporate

Source: Bloomberg/Getty Images

infrastructures in public governance, and reengineering democratic norms. But at what cost? As the lines between state and market dissolve, we must ask: Is this the inevitable future of governance, or its undoing?

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Enter: 'the Broligarchy', a fusion of Elon Musk and Donald Trump's unique form of government, where tech moguls and political power brokers unite to shape policies and steer the nation's course in unprecedented ways. In a world where CEOs moonlight as statesmen and governments behave like startups, the White House has become less a seat of power and rather a boardroom where geopolitics is simply another market of disruption. With Trump back in office and Musk lurking in the West Wing, traditional governance is being rebranded. And Musk is not merely a backer—he is embedding his ethos of disruption into governance itself, in favor of technocratic dominance. At Trump's first inauguration, tech titans—Zuckerberg, Bezos, Pichai, Musk—stood as symbols of a new order. Seeing this as more than merely opportunism, historian Janis Mimura warned of "techno-fascism": an amalgamation of corporate and state power, where technology becomes a tool of political domination. No longer would industry lobby the government—it would become our government. In this essay, I explore how technocratic elites consolidate power by eroding institutional safeguards, embedding corporate infrastructures in public governance, and reengineering democratic norms. But at what cost? As the lines between state and market dissolve, we must ask: Is this the inevitable future of governance, or its undoing?

Musk's investment in Trump's return is precise, his influence unavoidable. He bankrolls the campaign with half a billion dollars, but his true currency lies in his structural power. His social media empire does not merely reflect public discourse—it engineers it. By monopolizing the digital town square, he shifts narratives, frames debates, and dictates the limits of acceptable thought. This is not just personal ambition but the enactment of a larger technocratic libertarian policy design, which presents a blueprint for executive overreach, aiming to dismantle regulatory barriers and merge state power with corporate interests. In this framework, Musk is, more than a beneficiary, an architect shaping a system steering towards logs of clientelism. All in

all, the destruction of institutional order is the precondition for his brand of technocratic rule.

Yet this is not ideology alone. Musk's empire is a creature of government patronage. In February 2025, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) selected SpaceX's Starlink to upgrade its air traffic control communications network, this decision raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest, given Musk's influential role in the current administration. However, the state could not regulate him, it depended on him. SpaceX, Starlink, and his AI enterprises stand to gain as government oversight dissolves into corporate control. To portray the worst, Government functions would be outsourced to corporate interests. The distinction between state and business would dissolve.

Trump's space colonization rhetoric is not idle. It signals control over the next frontier of geopolitical power, driven by Musk's technocratic vision. President Trump's recent commitment to sending U.S. astronauts to Mars, declaring it America's "Manifest Destiny," underscores a strategic move to assert dominance over the next geopolitical frontier, an anticipation to become hegemon in the next 'Space Politics' (Fakiolas, 2009). This ambition aligns with the administration's National Space Policy, which emphasizes leading an innovative and sustainable program of scientific discovery, technology development, and space exploration. Dismissing this as speculation ignores Trump's governance model: dismantling agencies, purging civil service professionals, consolidating power. Musk does not merely align with this vision—he accelerates it. His companies will not operate alongside democratic institutions, they will replace them.

These systemic fractures spell a devolution worse than a traditional oligarchy. It is the culmination of an ideology that views democratic constraints as obsolete. One of Musk's ideological allies has openly questioned whether democracy and technological progress can coexist. The answer, for him, is clear: the future belongs to those unshackled by regulation, oversight, or collective will. Elon Musk's deep integration into national security is exemplified by his advisory role in the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), where he has influenced significant workforce reductions across federal agencies. Musk's efficiency apparatus presents an additional risk to U.S. national security through its mass dismissal of federal employees. This consolidation of power underscores concerns that forthcoming advancements in automation, AI, and space

militarization may not merely reflect Musk's input but could indeed follow his blueprint.

His self-anointed corporate titles declare authority beyond state constraints, with the true threat being the erosion of checks and balances. With Trump already in office, Musk no longer operates in the shadows of political power; he stands at its center. His presence in the Oval Office, captured in the recurring press conferences that blurred the line between public service and private profit, marks a historical shift. This is not advisory influence—it is direct rule, an era where industry does not lobby the state but absorbs it.

The American state, once the arbiter of power, is now a subsidiary of the market, its institutions hollowed out and repurposed as instruments of private empire. Project 2025 is not governance—it is acquisition, a leveraged buyout of democracy where regulatory walls are razed like obsolete storefronts, and public interest is auctioned to the highest bidder. The presidency is no longer a seat of authority but a CEO's chair, rotating between those who wield capital, not conviction. Like the market-state of late capitalism, the government no longer reigns; it facilitates, lubricating the gears of imperialistic expansion while masquerading as a republic. The laws resemble nothing so much as venture capital—now embodied by former ventura capitalists such as David Sacks shaping AI and crypto policy—no longer serve the many but speculate on the few, hedging bets on a future where citizenship is not a right but a subscription, and power no longer resides in the ballot, but in the algorithm.

The Trump-Musk broligarchy is not a coalition but a convergence—estate capitalism and techno-authoritarianism merging into a governance model that mirrors a hostile takeover. Trump liquidates the public sphere, reducing the state to a portfolio of assets; Musk constructs parallel infrastructures—satellites, AI, autonomous industries—that render traditional governance obsolete. Their alliance is not just transactional but symbiotic: one dismantles institutions, the other erects systems beyond their reach. What follows is not governance but algorithmic feudalism, where sovereignty shifts from law to code, and citizenship is no longer a right but a variable to be priced, toggled, and optimized at will. The convergence of Trump and Musk signals a new world order where U.S. dominance is enforced not by diplomacy or military might alone, but by monopolizing the technological arteries—space, AI, data—that other nations cannot unplug from.

Eva Dos Santos

Lebanon at a Crossroads

*Breaking Free or
Rebranding its
chains?*

“Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.

Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave,
eats a bread it does not harvest,
and drinks a wine that flows not from its own winepress.”

— Gibran Kahlil Gibran, *The Garden of the Prophet*

Lebanon is a nation of contradictions – a country full of beliefs yet lost in disillusionment. A land where ideologies reign, but justice is scarce. Its people have spent decades wearing cloth they did not weave, trapped in wars fought for foreign agendas, in economies dictated by distant hands. They have harvested none of what they consume, yet they are the ones left to starve.

For years, sovereignty has been a mirage, claimed, declared, celebrated, but never truly lived. “Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero,” wrote the renowned Lebanese American poet Khalil Gibran; indeed, Lebanon’s history is lined with warlords turned statesmen, men who once fought in the streets now seated in government halls. Power here does not die; it shifts, adapts, survives.

And now, the wind shifts again. The fall of Bashar al-Assad has undone decades of Syrian influence. Hezbollah, once untouchable, now falters, its grip weakening

as Iranian support dwindles. A new president, unbound by sectarian allegiance, takes the helm. A prime minister, a former ICJ judge, speaks of governance through law, not force. The old pillars of power tremble.

Yet, as Gibran warns, “Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpeting, and farewells him with hooting, only to welcome another with trumpeting again.”

Lebanon has seen change before. It has celebrated a new dawn, only to wake to the same darkness. So, what is this moment? Liberation or illusion? A nation breaking free, or simply rebranding its chains?

For decades, Hezbollah — a Lebanese Shia Islamist party and paramilitary group formed during the 1982 Civil War — has operated as a state within a state, wielding power beyond Lebanon’s central government. With its own army, intelligence network, and foreign policy, Hezbollah has dictated military actions, controlled regions where the Lebanese Army holds no authority, and dragged Lebanon into foreign conflicts. While other factions have risen and fallen, Hezbollah’s dominance has endured. But even the most entrenched forces are not immune to shifting tides.

Hezbollah’s unchecked autonomy has been most evident in its unilateral decision-making. In 2006, it initiated a war with Israel by kidnapping two Israeli soldiers, a move that plunged Lebanon into a devastating conflict. The Lebanese government had no

say in this decision, yet the entire nation bore the consequences of 34 days of destruction, over a thousand Lebanese killed, and an economy left in ruins. The war caused \$2.8 billion in direct damages, destroying 640 kilometres of roads and crippling vital infrastructure like Rafic Hariri International Airport, ports, and electrical facilities. Around 15,000 housing units were demolished, with property losses estimated at \$1.6 billion. Total economic losses reached \$5 billion, with Lebanon’s economy shrinking by 5% in 2006 instead of the projected 5-6% growth. This wasn’t an isolated incident; Hezbollah’s grip over Lebanon’s southern border has long enabled it to wage wars while sidelining state authority.

Even beyond Lebanon’s borders, Hezbollah’s influence has drawn the country into entanglements with little regard for sovereignty. Its intervention in Syria on behalf of Assad’s regime was yet another display of its unchecked authority. Since 2011, Hezbollah became Assad’s enforcer, leading ruthless offensives like the 2013 Qusayr offensive to crush opposition forces. Its fighters strengthened Assad’s military and enabled his atrocities, including the 2013 chemical attack that killed 1,400 civilians. This allegiance to Assad’s brutality left Lebanon with sectarian tensions, cross-border clashes, and a refugee crisis it couldn’t withstand. Hezbollah’s so-called “resistance” was always a lie — leaving Lebanon to starve, not only of bread and shelter but of



Source: Pinterest

justice and peace, as those who claim to defend her, devour her instead.

More recently, Hezbollah's involvement in the 2023-2024 war with Israel inflicted severe economic devastation. The World Bank estimated total losses at \$8.5 billion, with GDP contracting by 5.7% instead of growing by the projected 0.9%. Over 99,000 residential units were damaged, costing \$2.8 billion in repairs. Israeli strikes also destroyed 1,700 buildings, damaging 14,000 others, and causing \$500 million in infrastructure damages.

However, Hezbollah's grip on power is weakening. Internal and external pressures are forcing the group to confront the very forces that once sustained it. Iran, Hezbollah's main benefactor, is buckling under sanctions and economic turmoil, reducing financial support. Fighters now face delayed payments, and funding for community projects — a key tool for securing loyalty — is increasingly scarce. Assad's downfall has also disrupted Hezbollah's logistical and strategic depth. Syria, once a crucial smuggling corridor for weapons, money, and fighters, is no longer accessible, cutting Hezbollah off from a reliable supply line.

Beyond financial and logistical constraints, Hezbollah faces a crisis of legitimacy. Once hailed as Lebanon's "great defender against Israel," it now faces growing resentment from those it claims to protect. Many blame Hezbollah for deepening the economic

collapse and dragging Lebanon into unnecessary wars. Its resistance narrative — once its strongest weapon — is unravelling. Those who once saw Hezbollah as a shield against external threats now wonder if it has become Lebanon's greatest obstacle to recovery.

But the question remains: Does Hezbollah's decline signal Lebanon's sovereignty, or just the end of one monopoly, waiting to be replaced by another? In Lebanon, power vacuums are always filled. One faction's fall only paves the way for another, often backed by foreign sponsors. Before Hezbollah, Syria's occupation relied on loyalist militias and proxies. Before that, Palestinian groups held sway, supported by regional actors throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Earlier still, the Kataeb Party and Christian militias bolstered by Western powers, dominated the political landscape. As Hezbollah's power wanes, will Lebanon reclaim its authority, or will new players continue the cycle of external control and internal paralysis? Power in Lebanon rarely disappears; it simply finds a new home.

Lebanon's political system is built on a confessional power-sharing model, dividing leadership among major sects: the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Designed to ensure balance, it instead entrenched patronage, corruption, and dependency on

sectarian elites. This system rewarded loyalty over governance, leaving the state fragile and captive to factional control. The election of Joseph Aoun as president and Nawaf Salam as prime minister raises the question: is Lebanon truly transforming, or just repackaging old power structures with new faces?

Joseph Aoun's presidency is groundbreaking, not just because he is a former commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, but because of what he declared upon taking office. No leader in Lebanon's history has ever openly called for disarming all non-state factions, yet Aoun did exactly that. In his inaugural speech, he stated that Lebanon must have a monopoly on military power, vowing to remove weapons from all groups outside state authority. This statement is a direct challenge to Hezbollah, which has maintained a vast arsenal separate from the national military for decades. His commitment to implementing the ceasefire agreement with Israel in full further signals a willingness to curb Hezbollah's ability to act unilaterally.

Aoun's declaration is significant, but the realities on the ground make its implementation difficult. Hezbollah remains Lebanon's most dominant military force — for now — but its position has weakened since the 14-month war with Israel, which ended with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire in November 2024. The ceasefire forced Hezbollah to withdraw north of the Litani



Source: Pinterest

River, allowing the Lebanese Army to deploy in southern Lebanon — a symbolic but limited assertion of state authority. The group's leadership was further destabilized by Hassan Nasrallah's death in an Israeli airstrike and the reported flight of his successor, Naim Qassem, to Iran. While Iran's financial support remains substantial, Hezbollah's operational capabilities have been severely diminished by regional instability. Political leaders have long avoided confronting Hezbollah directly, out of pragmatism or fear of unrest. Aoun's stance may signal new political discourse, but can it translate into actual policy?

Nawaf Salam's appointment as prime minister signals a break from Lebanon's sectarian deal-making. A diplomat and former ICJ president, his leadership symbolises a desperate attempt to restore credibility. Salam promises judicial independence and anti-corruption, pledging to free Lebanon's courts from political interference. But Lebanon's judiciary has long shielded the powerful, not held them accountable. Many before him have made the same promises, only to be crushed by entrenched interests. Can Salam dismantle these networks, or will he be silenced like those before him?

The emergence of non-sectarian leadership is unprecedented, but does it dismantle the foundations of Lebanon's sectarian rule? If the same warlords remain in power behind the scenes, if Hezbollah's military dominance persists, and if institutional corruption remains untouched, then this is not a break from the past but a rebranding of Lebanon's long-standing political order. The real test is not in who holds power, but

in whether they can fundamentally alter the system itself.

A nation does not rebuild itself with words alone. Declarations of sovereignty mean nothing if the courts remain compromised, if the economy still bends to foreign masters, if the streets still belong to factions rather than a unified people. True change is not a proclamation, it is a battle against the very foundations of a broken system. So, has Lebanon truly turned the page, or is this yet another illusion, another mirage shifting in the desert heat?

If sovereignty is real, justice must be blind, not a weapon of the powerful. For decades, Lebanon's judiciary has served its political class, where verdicts are forged in the smoky backrooms of warlords. The 2020 Beirut Port Explosion investigation is a prime example: Judge Tarek Bitar's attempts to hold elites accountable were crippled by over 25 dismissal requests, paralyzing the process. In 2021, three judges resigned in protest over political interference, condemning a judiciary unable to act independently. Even the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, investigating Rafic Hariri's assassination, was plagued by manipulation and dubious testimonies. Judicial independence would end this grip — where corruption trials don't conveniently stall, and judges aren't threatened for daring to hold the untouchable accountable. But has any leader truly attempted to dismantle this system, or do they only offer empty promises of reform?

If sovereignty is real, then the state must stand above all factions. Yet Lebanon remains a country where power is fragmented, where armed groups carve out their own domains, where security is a matter

of allegiance rather than national authority. President Joseph Aoun has vowed to reclaim the state's monopoly on military power, but can he? No Lebanese leader before him has dared to utter those words, let alone enforce them. If Hezbollah, the strongest military force in the country, still operates outside the state's control, then what is sovereignty but a fragile illusion?

If sovereignty is real, the economy must be freed from dependency. For decades, Lebanon has survived on borrowed time and borrowed wealth, shackled by foreign aid, banking crises, and political greed. The economic collapse was not sudden; it was the inevitable result of a system built to serve the elite at the people's expense. A truly sovereign Lebanon wouldn't beg for IMF bailouts while the same oligarchs who engineered its collapse remain untouched. It would reclaim its resources, rebuild its industries, and stand without the crutch of foreign rescue. But is this shift beginning, or is Lebanon merely repeating the same cycle of reliance?

Lebanon has long been a nation that boasts among its ruins, mistaking survival for progress. But survival is not the same as sovereignty. If the courts remain tools of the powerful, if weapons still belong to those outside the state, if the economy remains at the mercy of external benefactors, then this is not a nation reborn. It is merely a nation learning how to decorate its chains with colours of empty liberation and ornaments of transient optimism.

As Khalil Gibran once wrote, "Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation".

Tala Karkanawi

The Invisible Overground Current

How Politics Redefines Long-Term Planning

Congratulations: you are ten again. You stare at the wall as you were told to wait, and hypnotize the clock, mentally urging it to move faster. It mocks you, and snaps you out of internal rumble with a gentle snap of reflected sunlight on your nose. Not yet, little one, it says, as the thin strands of its mustache lazily float behind the glass.

Back to the present. You pick up your phone to check the time, and see yourself - all grown up, in the shiny screen, where the numbers switch faster than the fruits in the slot machine. Your childhood wish has finally come true: time flies now, but suddenly you wish it would steady its restless flow for only a moment.

It often feels as though we are caught in some kind of an unbeatable overground current - just like the little (but brave) clown fish Nemo from a renowned Pixar movie. However, unlike us, he seemed to have a destination, a long-term goal - a luxury we find ourselves stripped of. We never know where the stream of our lives will take a turn - and it cannot be guaranteed it will not be the literal point Nemo.

While this perspective can come off as strictly pessimistic, it captures the leitmotif of hopelessness that runs through the conversations I happen to share with my peers that touch the subject of the future in any way. Not too long ago, I would receive quite a number of confident claims as answers to the quintessential “where do you see yourself in ten years?”. Though, today, I see more of diametrically opposed reactions, often followed with a nervous laughter and an innuendo about the unsteady trajectory of our world. People point out how they struggle to “catch up” with the restless pace of life, and how political chaos discourages any long-term planning: why, when the air is filled with the pervasive spirit of doom? Thus, I began to wonder: what is the relation between political change and planning, and how far can we really plan?

This connection could be best observed during the latest election in the United States. In such highly politicized, and paradoxically

politically misinformed, (according to one of my interviewees) societies, the two-party system creates a significant split. Hence, the panic that surged after Trump’s inauguration, with some people who could afford it packing up and leaving the “liberty land” for good. For those who were unable to do so, however, especially the representatives of marginalised communities, Trump’s coming in power meant increased the anxiety for the future, with notorious ICE raids and an echelon of newly introduced discriminatory policies.

Moreover, a shift in American politics did not fail to affect those outside the physical borders of the country. For example, the dismantlement of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—the primary aid agency of the U.S. with more than 60 years of history—not only placed the lives of millions who depend on humanitarian aid for survival in danger, but also left nearly 2,000 foreign aid workers without a job. An anonymous interviewee shared that after USAID’s closure, their family was given a notice of as little as two weeks to move from the place of their posting with no compensation or apology. The debates regarding practical and moral implications of this decision as well as its legality are still ongoing, and aim to bring light to the potential long-term consequences of diminishing humanitarian efforts.

So why are we so bothered by the events that take place an ocean away – and why should we be?

Firstly, the progressively increasing interconnectivity and access to social media allows relatively free flow of the news. Nowadays, it’s almost impossible to censor significant socio-political events, from activist initiatives to national calamities, and while it’s rather helpful to stay tuned, the loud headlines of a tragedy after a tragedy after may be rather discouraging, especially when witnessed every single day in seemingly unending fashion.

Secondly, we cannot ignore the effects political uncertainty has on financial

planning for both businesses and individuals. For enterprises, rapid shifts in the political arena can evoke acute necessity for adjusting to the new policies and regulations, as well as tariffs, if international trade is concerned. For individuals, political volatility can be a decisive factor in things as simple as affording healthcare and rent to investment strategies. While these effects can be mitigated by actively educating oneself on finance management, there is no guarantee. According to Fitzsimmons (2006), “one cannot plan for that which cannot be known”.

Finally, increased tensions between global superpowers put us at the very palpable risk of yet another world war (in the scarce number of regions where it is not already the case, of course), which hardly helps with positive thinking. A recent study on war anxiety showed that military action taking place in one country can directly affect the stress levels of the people from different states. Moreover, war-induced fear can take an intergenerational turn, becoming an intrafamilial issue, only fueled by distressing narratives in the media and television (Li & Zhang, 2024). In such a fear-stricken society, one may wonder: does it even make sense to make a plan when life feels like a history book where every turn of the page throws us into an even darker future?

Where I am from, all said above would be concluded with two universal questions: ‘who is to blame?’ and ‘what is to be done?’, referencing Herzen and Chernyshevsky consequently. While the first inquiry can be pondered and argued upon for all eternity, it is fairly evident that in times of increasing uncertainty it is crucial to not get swayed by panic. It is true that we can no longer afford the luxury of long-term planning, but let’s look at it differently: instead of one big, very evident solution we embark on a journey with millions of ways, rediscovering the notion of free will, as well as the burden of choice. It is a two-edged sword indeed, but we must learn to wield it. How? Slow down. Allow yourself to flourish in the present.

It is okay.

Liza Sulenko

5 Steps to becoming the Perfect Populist

Thinking about a career in politics? Are you willing to do whatever it takes, regardless of the ethical ramifications? Some right-wing leaders have found the recipe to success: populism!

The increasing influence of right-wing extremist powers is rapidly becoming a global trend, and populism seems to be one of its quintessential avenues. Defined as the idea that politics should be made for “ordinary” people and not the “elite”, populism has recently become a tool that many right-wing leaders effectively use. For the aspiring ruler, it is valuable to look to the major populist players of the world

stage: American powerhouse Donald Trump, rising German star Alice Weidel, and the world’s richest man and common endorser, Elon Musk.

The question is, just what do they have in common that makes them so successful? So what exactly do these populist leaders have in common?

Step 1: Create an “us vs them” dichotomy

Populism plays on emotions. The skilled populist utilises emotionally charged language to garner support ideologically, financially, and at the ballot box. In order to do this, they strategically create a figurative “inside” and “outside”, affirming and validating certain communities while designating others as “outsiders”. They present clear criteria as to who shares your identity, driving home the message that each member of the group is on the same exclusive team.

One particularly controversial step Weidel took throughout her campaign was the terminology of her immigration policy: specifically, her plans for “remigration”. Remigration refers to the mass deportation of immigrants; under Weidel’s policies, it would include a wide range of deportations of even legal residents and “non-assimilated” citizens. Their plans were criticized for being

a racist procedure with no legal basis. However, they have also gathered support within Germany. The AfD talks about “non-assimilated” immigrants and citizens as a threat to German culture, framing them as an enemy to Germany’s social system and resources in order to unite their supporters around a shared adversary.

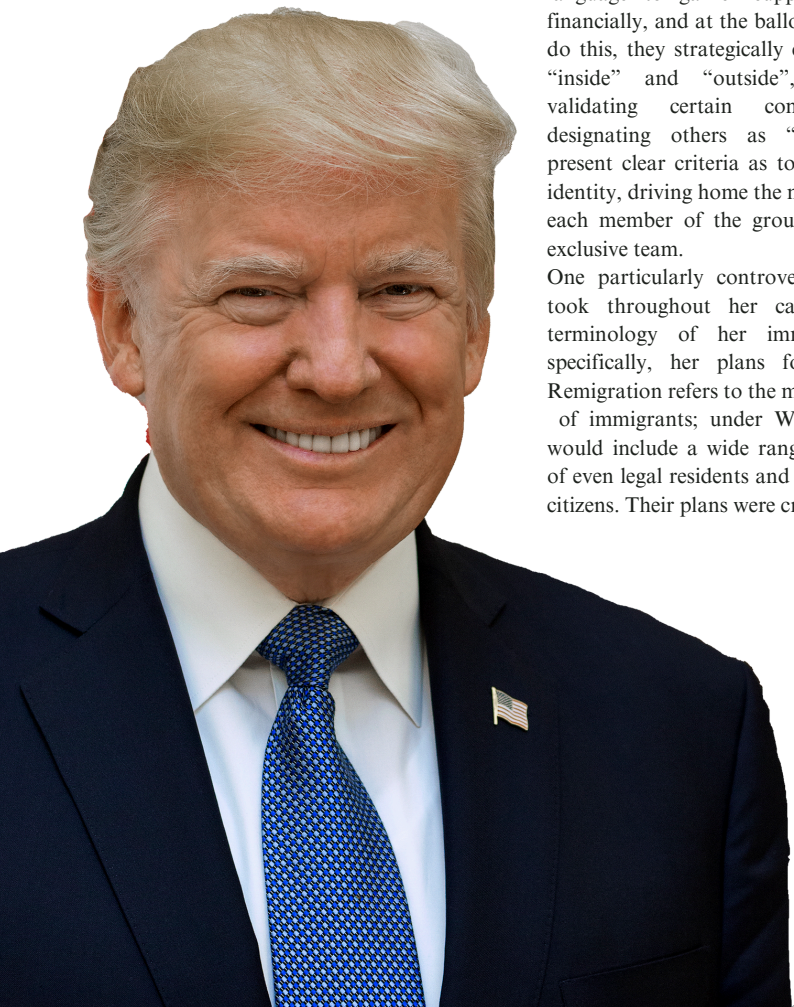
Trump shares Weidel’s weaponization of minorities as a tool to advance divisive rhetoric. His bold “America First” policy defines both his domestic and international policy, allowing him to present anyone against his plans as “un-American”. However, “America First” is not just a tagline; Trump demonstrated his

Step 2: Manufacture a crisis, find a scapegoat

Next, in order to initiate the call to action, it can be useful to emphatically stress that you, particularly, are facing an unjust crisis — even when there isn’t any semblance of one. The populist will seek out a simple solution and a singular culprit, regardless of the difficult interplay of various complex factors that created the disadvantageous situation. Then, they will designate their opponent as the one who created the problem, while they are the only one capable of fixing it.

Trump shares Weidel’s rhetoric on immigration, promising mass deportations and other crackdowns on immigration. In his inauguration speech, he promised, “All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places from which they came.” He has executive orders planned to send troops to the southern border, eliminate foreign gangs and criminal networks, and declare a national emergency at the southern border. According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), over 1,000 people were removed or repatriated on just the fourth day of the Trump administration, with officials promising that numbers would increase steadily. By villainizing immigrants, he has found someone he can blame for the problems Americans face each day.

Likewise, in Weidel’s interview with Musk, she blamed Merkel for not closing the borders to illegal immigrants, turning off nuclear energy plants, and turning a blind eye when the education system adopted



“wokeness” – which, to her, created a cultural downturn. Weidel effectively presented a comprehensive laundry list of Germany’s problems, describing Germany’s economic and cultural decline, and then pinned the blame solely on Merkel.

Step 3: Choose your words carefully

Trump is not a president praised for his eloquent, intellectual speeches; instead, he is more known for his conversational, informal proclamations, which are saliently presented to garner and maintain media attention. He uses shorter sentences, fewer nouns compared to verbs, and non-complex sentence structure in order to present himself as accessible and relatable. He also deliberately appeals to voters’ emotions, telling listeners at his inauguration about an assassination attempt several months prior, “But I felt then and believe even more so now that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again.” Trump shares Weidel’s utilisation of language as a tool to play on his audience’s emotions and present himself as one of the people.

On the other hand, Weidel utilises more elaborate language than Trump does. However, like Trump, she knows her audience and understands how to meticulously select more complex rhetorical choices for her target demographic.

Step 4: Create movements, not moments

Creating a movement is one of the final steps to be a successful populist. This is exemplified by Trump’s most memorable slogan: the simple yet effective “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), a rallying cry that symbolizes Trump’s entire political movement. At the heart of this political movement is Trump himself, a dynamic figure who has come to dominate American politics with a speed that has astonished both inside and outside the United States.

Within Europe, no group has had the thrust to create a parallel to MAGA. The AfD, a newer, rising party has not gotten there yet, but is surely on the right path. Weidel is already striving to make her party stand out through her use of rhetoric to show its

superiority. In an interview with Elon Musk on X, Weidel described all rivals as the “uni-party” and Angela Merkel, the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), as their former “Green Chancellor”. By grouping together her political rivals, she has created a counter-movement, presenting a united front and leaving no room for nuance in her opponents’ policies, beliefs, and ideas.

Step 5: Win Key Endorsements

“You are the media now,” Musk told users on X, taking over a throne of information he claims mainstream news outlets have held for far too long.

This was not an empty comment. X, known as Twitter prior to his acquisition, is becoming the newest news outlet, where Musk provides key endorsements for politicians whose policies he personally supports. Having steadily accumulated political power in the US, notably by bankrolling Trump’s 2024 election campaign with “over a quarter of a billion dollars” and subsequently serving in his cabinet in the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Elon Musk has proven himself as a significant political actor. However, Musk hasn’t always been quite so close to Trump; in fact, in November 2016, Musk criticized Trump in an interview with CNBC as “not the right guy”. This truly is a testament to Trump’s expertise as a populist: over the years, as Musk became further involved in politics, he was inexplicably drawn to Trump. Now, Musk is a political powerhouse in his own right; in his capacity on Trump’s campaign and now with DOGE, he is able to wield a significant amount of money and resources. None of this would have been possible without the magnetism of Donald Trump.

However, Musk has not limited his growing political influence just to the United States; instead, he has used his significant media presence and financial resources to openly endorse politicians around the world and shape global trends. One notable example is Musk’s involvement in German right-wing politics. When Germany held its parliamentary elections in February 2025, both domestic and international observers watched the results with concern. The far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), whose youth wing is classified as extremist

and monitored by the German secret service, saw their vote share double from around 10.4% in the 2021 election to 20.8% in 2025. It is no secret that Musk’s endorsement of the AfD played a significant role in their success. His interview with Alice Weidel, as well as streaming the AfD’s party conference on X, provided free advertisement and exposure worth millions to the party. Why would someone give away such a valuable service for free? At his core, Musk is a businessman who understands the influence that political situations in a country can have on economic policies that benefit him. He is using his wealth to make a valuable purchase: a populist political influence and power.

Practice Makes Perfect

You now have received the perfect formula by way of these steps: set up an “us vs them” mentality, find someone to blame, utilise deliberate word choice, create a mass movement, and finally, garner key endorsements. Overall, populism is about being the loudest in the room, bringing your points to the people, and achieving support whether you deserve it or not, and the fact that it works is indisputable as we watch the frighteningly swift rise of far-right movements around the world. Any doubts? Just ask Donald Trump or Alice Weidel: they’re the true masters. Don’t hesitate, start your journey to populism and become the most memorable leader in history!

Natalie Moran and Carla Roth



media

**change and
the media**

Kamala is brat and Politics is a Mess

How Virality, Memes, and Clout-Chasing Have Changed Politics.

Do you think votes just fall out of a coconut tree? No, they are earned by politicians through campaigning, building trust with the public and fulfilling the promises they made to them. In the past, these campaigns centred around policy, party manifestos and holding politicians accountable to enable real change. These elements were central to building trust between politicians and the public, creating an environment where the real, substantive changes promised to them could be realised. Today, with social media deeply embedded into society, the landscape of political campaigning has shifted dramatically. Platforms have become a battleground where politicians compete not only for votes but also for followers, likes, views, and shares.

In an interview in 2010, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Meta, said, “If you look five years out, every industry is going to be rethought in a social way.” Fifteen years later, social media has led to whole new industries being created by giving platforms to influencers and creating the ‘likes economy’ – where a person or product’s worth is directly proportional to the amount of traction it gains on social media. This has had wide-reaching effects across all fields, changing how we approach hospitality and even education.

The political sphere was not immune to this epidemic and soon caught up to the fact that to be successful, politicians must get people to double-tap on their pictures. This manifested in politicians scrambling for any chance to go viral on their socials. These attempts have often felt inorganic and have

fallen flat on their face, exposing themselves as a mere publicity stunt. In 2021, Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez wore a statement dress to the Met Gala adorned with big red letters across its back spelling out ‘Tax the Rich’. Initially, this protest at a public forum from a leader felt refreshing and did, in fact, make the rounds on social media. Ironically, it was soon discovered that the designer for the dress herself had been accused of tax debts and owed taxes in multiple states across the US. Further undermining the protest attempt, interns described her work environment as hostile to the extent that they were afraid to ask for their salaries. This, coupled with the fact that AOC herself would have paid \$35,000 – a life-changing amount of money for people – to attend the Met Gala, showed the true nature of the gesture. It was an attempt to succeed in the attention economy while lacking depth and sincerity, making her look purely hypocritical and out of touch.

Social media has turned politicians from public servants into influencers constantly struggling to catch our attention in just the right way so they can have our votes. This begs the question: How do they keep pulling us in?

The lines between internet celebrities and politicians are becoming increasingly blurred, making it normal to see politicians all over social media pages taking part in the latest social media trends. This tactic of increased viral social media campaigning was prevalent in the 2024 US elections. Vice President Kamala Harris announced her presidency on

the 21st of July, 2 weeks after the release of Charli XCX’s album ‘brat’. The very next day, Charli posted on Twitter, stating that “Kamala IS brat”. 2024 was the year of Brat Summer, but what does being ‘brat’ mean?

Charlie XCX herself described a brat as “You’re just like that girl who is a little messy and likes to party and maybe says some dumb things sometimes.” In an effort to integrate the campaign into the pop culture of the week, Kamala Harris’s main campaign page (@kamalahq) was filled to the brim with posts saying Kamala is so brat! However, this kind of behaviour was very odd coming from a presidential candidate, given that being seen as a messy party girl does not seem to align well with a critical presidential campaign. The use of this tactic allowed her campaign to go viral the minute it started. Over the next few days, #kamalaharris and #kamalaisbrat were trending across social media, mainly on TikTok, and multiple edits of Harris to tracks from Brat were garnering millions of views. This kind of ‘fangirl’ behavior is usually reserved for internet celebrities and turned Kamala Harris into a pop culture icon overnight. Her campaign continued to capitalise on this engagement as @kamalahq continued to follow the craziest social media trends, and Harris appeared on an episode of ‘Call Her Daddy’ – Alex Cooper’s sex and relationships podcast. This approach to digital campaigning not only brought in numbers but also highlighted a broader shift in how political engagement operates in the social media age.

Harris’s campaign was dedicated to their

social media presence and their ability to go viral. The entire Kamala HQ team consisted of only Generation Z content creators to ensure that all content was topical and geared towards younger voters. This paid off in the engagement that @KamalaHQ TikTok saw in the campaign's first 20 days, which was more than double what @BidenHQ's posts received in roughly five months. The account had half as many followers as Trump on TikTok, but by September, the campaign had up to 100 million more views. The impact was clear as Trump accused her team of paying for fake followers. This exchange proves that social media has become essential for winning elections, and no election campaign is complete without absurd memes, troll fighting on Twitter and unusual podcast appearances. Although Kamala's campaign efforts may not have guaranteed her a place in the Oval Office, her success compared to when she entered the race mid way with Biden trailing significantly behind cements the importance of social media.

In this race to go viral and connect with the masses, the idea of disrespecting and slandering your opponents is not exclusive to Kendrick and Drake's rap battle. Today, politicians and political parties are openly making mockeries of their opponents on social media to gain votes and make the other side look not only incompetent but also plain foolish.

India, the world's largest democracy with arguably the most diverse vote bank, has not fallen behind in weaponising social media to garner votes. The Bharitya Janta Party's

(BJP) instagram page (@bjp4india) is rampant with reels calling opposition like the Aam Aadmi Party (translating to the common man's party) the 'Fraud' Aadmi Party showcasing the party leader Arvind Kejriwal as an "alcoholic weak man" in the same frame that Modi is depicted in an almost "god-like" manner. The leader of the opposition party, Rahul Gandhi, has faced the same jabs on this account. He has been 'memed' multiple times, called an anti-national who is against the Indian state and even shown as a character too weak to survive in the viral Netflix show Squid Games. However, the BJP is not alone in using these tactics, as on the official Congress page (@incindia), this battle continues, and one can find many reels made at Modi's expense. In an Instagram reel on their page, the Indian National Congress (INC) states that the B in BJP stands for Balatkari (Rapist) instead of Bhartiya (Indian). Multiple statements have been made towards Modi poking fun at him for being unfit for his roles and calling him a leader known across the world for his hate speeches. As both the BJP and INC weaponise platforms to ridicule and discredit each other, it raises questions about the evolving nature of political discourse—one where entertainment and propaganda often blur the lines between information and manipulation.

The reckless use of power and influence by the political elite has created echo chambers visible in the comments section, where the contents of these posts are regarded as absolute truth among party loyalists. Ultimately, this allows parties to create a vote

bank not based on strong economic and social policies but by fear-mongering and polarising the nation using hatred and disrespect.

While the neon green hope that Kamala is Brat brought to liberal Americans has faded, her campaign has confirmed that social media has become extremely central to election campaigns to the extent that even political candidates will fight about follower counts. Indian politics has shown us that politicians will now chase virality on social media by setting in motion banter that only entertains the masses and allows them to build a vote bank without having to focus on their policies. These developments in the digital sphere have created echo chambers that are only starting to be understood and have left society, specifically the younger generation, polarised to alarming extents and have given politicians the power to contort the truth in any way that it benefits them.

Unfortunately, nobody is able to successfully utilise their platforms for the one thing the world needs the most: progress.



The Fragility of Democracy in an Era of Change

Exploring Media Influence and Power in a Global Context

In an era characterised by rapid political change, preserving the principles that define democracy is more crucial than ever. With authoritarian regimes further tightening their grip on power, established democracies face unprecedented challenges, and populism is normalising democratic backsliding. Simultaneously, politically fragmented Western populations have witnessed an alarming rise in political extremism. A key driver of this instability is social media's immense and still growing power over public perception - shaping narratives, reinforcing biases, and therefore accelerating democracy's decline.

Given free access to the internet and an existing extensive media landscape, democratic principles should, in theory, be more secure than ever. The widespread availability of information allows individuals to research topics instantly, access a wide range of perspectives and engage in informed debate.

One might expect this unprecedented access to foster a more informed public. Why does democracy continue to weaken, paradoxically?

It is well known that social media algorithms cater to users' preferences, feeding them content that reinforces their existing beliefs while filtering out dissenting perspectives. This creates echo chambers, causing stark ideological divisions. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns of well-organised, powerful small groups are deepening polarisation. The overwhelming flow of information and a general lack of critical analysis on an individual level have progressed the rapid spread of misinformation, deepening distrust in democratic institutions. Prodigious social media platforms, ruled by very few powerful individuals, more often discourage engagement with differing views and, therefore, foster division among citizens, weakening democratic stability. To highlight

the power and, therefore, the danger of social media, this article will explore three country studies.

Germany's February 2025 Elections

Germany's election results highlight the increased influence of social media in shaping political preferences, particularly among younger voters. Dr. Jasmin Reidl, Professor of Political Science at the Universität der Bundeswehr Munich, noted that this election demonstrated the immense role social media plays in political engagement. She pointed out that the Left Party, *Die Linke*, led by Heidi Reichenick, had made surprisingly quick and significant strides at the ballot. She attributed their success to their growing presence on TikTok, where Reichenick's January 2025 speech had gone viral, with over 2.2 million views. *Die Linke* now has the most likes of any German party on TikTok with 12.9 million likes in total, followed by the far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, with 9.8 million likes.

A report from *The Times* showed the election outcome for German citizens under 25. *Die Linke* secured the highest vote share with 25%, while the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* followed with 21%, demonstrating a distinct political divide among young voters. This youngest cluster of new voters grew up immersed in social media and remains its most active and malleable user base, demonstrating social media's influence on political attitudes, elections and intensifying ideological polarisation.

U.S. - Are you being influenced by social media? Or are you already controlled?

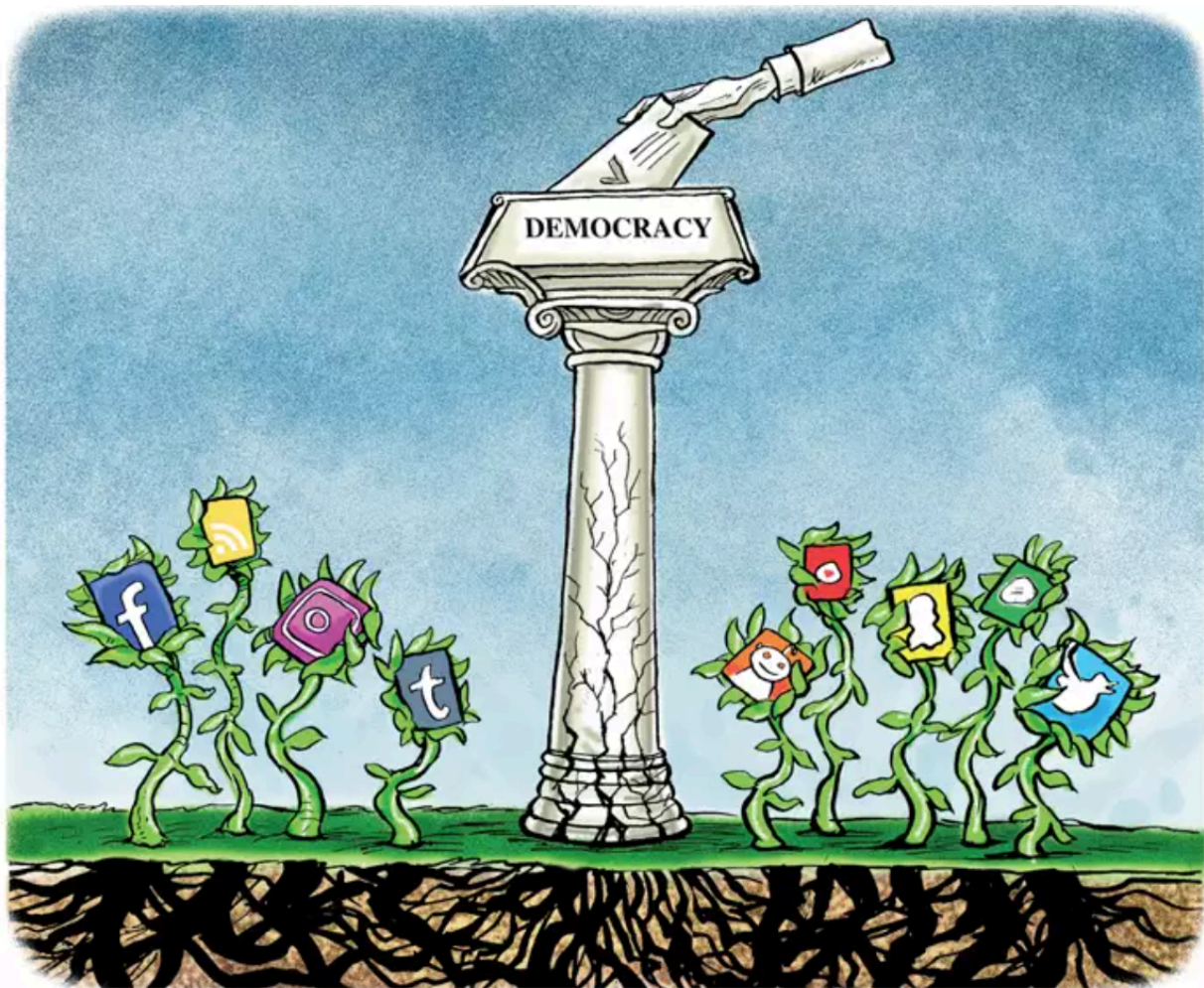
U.S. social media companies exert significant influence over citizens' political decisions. Disinformation campaigns have swayed public opinion, shaping political actions on a large scale. Donald Trump's false election fraud claims in 2020 illustrated his immense influence over citizens, which remains largely

unchecked. Two aspects of this incident stood out. Firstly, Trump's questioning of his 2020 election defeat suggested a U.S. president's fundamental distrust of the democratic institutions of his own country, and more alarmingly, his tweets set a mob of 2,000 to 2,500 followers in motion to storm the Capitol on the 6th of January 2021. Countless tweets made by Donald Trump during his presidency have also fueled the cult of personality he has created, dramatically impacting the existing democratic structure in the U.S. In addition to frequent self-praising, Trump's tweets adopt an informal tone; users are manipulated into feeling as if they were talking to their friend. Donald Trump's often controversial and brazen tweets, combined with the dangers that social media poses, suggest a clear threat to democratic stability through the division of society.

In his final speech as president, Joe Biden addressed the decline of U.S. democracy, warning of an oligarchy of the ultra-wealthy, threatening the freedom of citizens and the democracy of the U.S.. Indeed, Facebook has 3 billion users, while Whatsapp and Instagram each have 2 billion, all belonging to Meta, with Mark Zuckerberg as the main shareholder. X (formerly Twitter) has 700 million users and is majorly owned by Elon Musk. However, the most meaningful strings between social media and the U.S. government seem to be pulled by Peter Thiel, the ultra-right tech billionaire, deemed the "kingmaker".

Georgian Dream's Systematic Dismantling of Democracy

The Republic of Georgia, a small country in the South Caucasus, has long struggled for independence from powerful, covetous neighbours. Now, more than ever, its citizens are strongly resisting Russia's grip, fighting for democracy. Two forces are tugging at Georgia's fragile democracy: the pro-Russian



Source: Bruin Political Review, 2023

Georgian Dream party and Russia, which is extending its influence into the Caucasus region. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, has used media propaganda techniques for over a decade to sway public opinion in favour of the local oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's political agenda. Over the last two years, the government has taken a more direct and observable approach to suppressing democracy through media control.

Russia's increasing influence in the South Caucasus and Georgia's strategic position on the Black Sea underscore its importance for regional security and keeping Putin's growing, imperialist sphere of influence out of Europe. Natia Seskuria, Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and Visiting Fellow at Harvard University, explained that Russia's highly efficient approach to its disinformation and propaganda campaigns heavily relies on their intricate knowledge of the audience, making their strategy individually targeted and tailored towards the vulnerabilities of certain countries and groups.

Through the use of social media and algorithms, Russian propaganda and disinformation ensure time and cost efficiency to achieve their goals in Georgia. Pro-Russian media outlets typically portray Russia as Georgia's natural economic and security partner. EU and NATO integration

are portrayed as threats to Georgia's sovereignty and traditional values, while bewilderingly labelling the EU, U.S. and the West as the "global war party". During an exclusive interview, Natia Seskuria suggested that the technique in Georgia is "very useful to manipulate societal perspectives and change perceptions to serve Russia's agenda".

Since the War between Russia and Ukraine started in 2022, Natia Seskuria asserts that Georgia's democratic backsliding from internal factors has significantly accelerated, as the Georgian Dream Party pursues its anti-democratic and anti-Western agenda while also strongly aligning with Russia. In April 2024, Georgian Dream passed a controversial "foreign agent law.". Activists have condemned this legislation as a "Russian Law," drawing parallels between the early days of Putin's way to dictatorship in Russia and Ivanishvili's actions in Georgia. The disputed November 2024 elections triggered daily mass protests. Following the election, the government suspended Georgia's EU membership process, despite surveys showing that over 80% of Georgians are supportive of EU integration, certainly not a democratic move. The government has cracked down on independent journalism, a classic move against democracy and towards authoritarianism. Opposition reporters have been jailed, including Mzia Amaglobeli,

director of Netgazeti and Batumelebi, who was detained in January and remains a political prisoner. By silencing opposition voices and strengthening propaganda campaigns, Georgian Dream seeks to consolidate power and secure long-term control. Given the "stolen elections", a biased judicial system and a violent crackdown on protests and freedom of the press, Natia Seskuria argued that the Georgian government's policies are demonstrating a swift diversion from democratic values and Georgia's declared aspirations for European integration.

Nineteen Eighty-Four? The Dangers of Social Media

Social media renders users more vulnerable than ever. Users are bombarded by digital dis- and mis-information, flooding their screens and brains so that very small, well-organised groups can shape and manipulate the political beliefs of the masses. While digital platforms offer opportunities for engagement, their algorithmic structures frequently amplify political fragmentation and polarisation, meaningfully impacting elections. Ultimately, both media fragmentation and concentrated ownership of omnipresent social media cause significant political change and present the most imminent and serious threats to democracy.

Mia Kazbegi

From Meme to Militant

The Danger of Online Echo Chambers

Social media is a plague. It controls our lives and our thoughts by creating and curating an algorithm that aligns with our ideas, constantly feeding us new information at incredible speeds. As unbiased as we may think we are, the content we see online inevitably shapes our opinions on many matters, especially politics. The main reason this occurs is due to a phenomenon known as “echo chambers”. Echo chambers essentially function by selectively exposing users to information that aligns with their existing political beliefs. This occurs because we naturally seek out information that confirms our beliefs while purposefully avoiding contradicting ideas, a psychological process called confirmation bias. Since social media algorithms prioritize engagement, present us with ideologically consistent content, which creates a self-reinforcement cycle. So why is this an issue? Because a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives undermines democracy, as prolonged immersion in these “chambers” often leads to radicalization, where misinformation, conspiracy theories, and distrust in mainstream institutions are rampant.

Political discussions are meant to be driven by debate between people, not programmed algorithms. And this deterioration of critical thinking skills is on an exponential rise according to Psychology Today. The YouTube radicalization pipeline, that featured videos along the lines of “cringe feminist compilations”, “social justice warriors getting owned”, and other examples of covert misogyny, racism and homophobia, was incredibly effective in luring vulnerable, young, individuals into these chambers, where jokes quickly became blatant extremism. To test the echo chamber theory, A journalist from Moment Magazine conducted an experiment by downloading Tik Tok, and it took him only 3 hours of app usage to be exposed to far-right conspiracy

theories, antisemitism, and more, which all began from seemingly innocent, ironic videos, showing how dangerously easy it is to be lured into a harmful algorithm.

On top of that, our constantly shortening attention span has increased the influence of echo chambers, as targeted algorithms can rapidly feed us mass amounts of information, not only maximising what we take in but also making it harder to look away and/or put in the effort to conduct further research. In recent years, longform videos have somewhat lost popularity, and platforms like Tiktok, Instagram, and Twitter, that feature short form content, began gaining significant traction. These platforms perfectly exemplify echo chambers, as even simply scrolling on the home page, liking or commenting occasionally, may lead a user down a path of bigotry which was initially represented as humor. Considering that the average teenager spends 7 hours and 22 minutes on their phone per day, where 97% of these report using social media daily, it’s clear that echo chambers pose a very real and concrete problem to society, especially to younger, impressionable people who increasingly rely on social media as their primary source of information. Echo chambers shape political identities at an early stage, often before individuals have had the opportunity to develop media literacy skills necessary to critically assess information, and who are still in the process of forming their political and social worldviews.

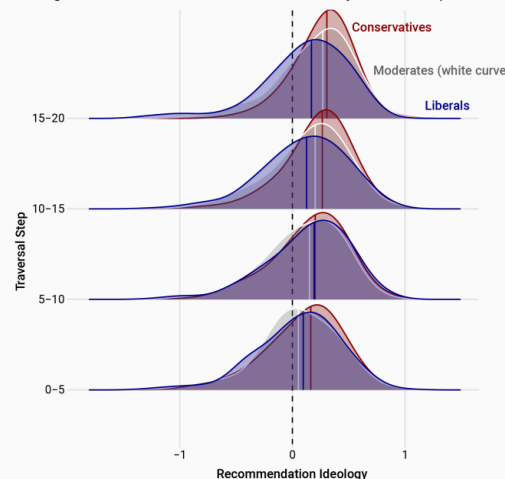
And, worryingly, there is a direct correlation between echo chambers and the success of the far-right in international politics. The far right’s social platform is based on attacks to the “cultural left”, that is, discussions regarding LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, climate change, etc. While economic insecurity is the main driving factor of far-right success, it is heavily fueled by a general

social distrust of the left that brews within social media. In Europe, countries like Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and the Czech Republic, have all elected far-right governments, mirroring the societal attitude of the respective countries. Similarly, the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States can be attributed to the rise of far-right content in mainstream media and its consumption by young and old voters alike. Without intervention, social media will continue to shape young minds in ways that may deepen divisions and hinder collective problem-solving in society, which directly challenges and undermines democracy and its principles.

So how do we escape this vicious cycle? Here are three steps to take into consideration:

- Limit your usage of social media
Leave social media for the memes and for texting your friends, don’t rely on it for reliable information regarding current events and politics; remember that social media isn’t real life.
- 2. Diversify your information sources
Make sure to engage with multiple perspectives by consuming news from different countries and opinions in order to get a fuller picture of whatever you’re curious about.
- 3. Prioritize human, face to face discussion
Always remember that real change stems from discourse and debate between real people, not behind a screen.
We can’t simply learn to coexist with social media. We must challenge the content curated for us by an AI-powered algorithm and understand that this will only keep polarizing us. Politics are meant to be debated, debunked, discussed, not consumed in 15-second intervals.

FIGURE 1
YouTube’s algorithm pushes users into (mild) echo chambers
Ideological distribution of recommended videos, by traversal step and user ideology



Source: NYU Center for Social Media and Politics (data); Megan A. Brown (figure).
Notes: Positive ideology score on the x-axis is more conservative and a negative ideology score is more liberal.

B Economic Studies
at BROOKINGS

Source: Brookings, 2022

Anna Julia Cantoni

Ahead in the Cloud?

Transatlantic Power Struggles in Cloud Computing

The global digital economy thrives on cloud computing, a sector dominated by U.S. giants like Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure. Yet, as the European Union seeks to bolster its digital sovereignty through initiatives such as the EU Cloud Certification Scheme (EUCS), significant economic and legal barriers remain.

This article delves into the asymmetrical transatlantic dynamics that shape the cloud computing market. In the U.S., a combination of legal frameworks, such as the Patriot Act, Buy American Act, and antitrust policies, has fortified domestic players while creating formidable barriers to entry for foreign competitors. Agencies like the Committee on Foreign Investments in the United States (CFIUS) scrutinize foreign investments with little transparency, discouraging international firms from establishing a foothold in sensitive sectors like cloud computing.

Conversely, the EU's fragmented approach to regulating foreign direct investment lacks the cohesion necessary to protect European firms effectively. While the 2019 EU regulation on investment screening represents progress, it remains insufficiently harmonized across member states, leaving companies like France's OVH at a disadvantage in competing on the global stage. This article aims to explore these regulatory disparities, analyze their implications for market competition, and assess whether the EU can achieve true digital sovereignty in the shadow of American dominance.

The U.S. dominates the global cloud computing market through legal frameworks that protect domestic firms while restricting foreign competition. In contrast, the EU's fragmented investment regulations hinder its ability to shield European companies like OVH from market asymmetries. This article examines these regulatory disparities and their impact on the EU's pursuit of digital sovereignty. The significance of cloud sovereignty extends beyond mere economic competition: it is a matter of strategic autonomy, cybersecurity, and control over critical digital infrastructure. The cloud computing sector underpins everything from government operations to private enterprise data storage, making regulatory disparities between the U.S. and the EU particularly consequential.

A key challenge facing European cloud

providers like OVH is the restrictive legal environment in the United States. U.S. legislation, including the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act and oversight bodies such as the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), imposes stringent controls on foreign investments. These regulations often on an equal footing with domestic giants like Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure. For instance, CFIUS can block or impose severe conditions on transactions involving foreign entities if they are deemed to pose a risk to national security. In the cloud computing sector, this means that European providers face unpredictable regulatory scrutiny when attempting to establish operations in the U.S. Unlike the EU's relatively fragmented approach to foreign direct investment screening, the U.S. legal framework is clear, centralized, and explicitly protectionist.

Kaspersky, the Russian antivirus software, has been banned in the United States, along with three other companies linked to it. Any association with this company had already been prohibited in 2017, but this restriction applied only to U.S. federal agencies. The Bureau of Industry and Security had previously advised against its use publicly. This announcement led to increased consumer distrust toward the Russian company in the U.S. However, the recent total ban on the software offered by the company, driven by the U.S. Department of Commerce, has been framed as a response to a national security threat. The government agencies behind this decision (the BIS, the Department of Commerce, and the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States) claim that Russian authorities could potentially use this software to collect intelligence on American users. Although officially made for security reasons, this decision by the U.S. government explicitly resembles a form of protectionism. In recent years, Kaspersky had begun to pose serious competition to American rivals such as McAfee and Symantec in the U.S. market. This example illustrates not only increasingly strict market entry barriers for foreign companies but also the United States' determination to maintain its leadership in the digital sector within its own territory.

While the United States has actively built a legal and regulatory framework to protect its

cloud industry, the European Union has been slower to respond. The EU Cloud Certification Scheme represents a step toward establishing a sovereign digital infrastructure, but challenges remain. Unlike the U.S., where federal regulations create a unified approach, the EU's regulatory landscape is divided among member states, making it difficult for European firms to compete collectively against American cloud giants. For example, OVH, a major French cloud provider, faces structural disadvantages when competing with U.S. firms, as European regulations on data localization, privacy, and foreign investment screening vary significantly across countries. The EU's investment screening regulation introduced an important mechanism for evaluating foreign direct investments, but its implementation remains inconsistent across member states, leaving European firms vulnerable to competitive disadvantages.

The future of cloud computing will depend on which economies can best balance security, innovation, and competitive market access. While the United States has created a formidable legal framework to protect its digital dominance, the European Union still faces the challenge of translating its regulatory ambitions into effective economic strategies. Faced with this asymmetry, several scenarios are conceivable. The European Union could attempt to negotiate agreements to ease these restrictions, although geopolitical tensions and the United States' determination to strengthen its control over the digital sector make such prospects uncertain. Another option would be to reinforce reciprocity measures and adopt a more protectionist policy to support European companies in their own market and curb the dominance of American tech giants. Finally, European businesses could seek to adapt by developing alternative strategies, such as forming partnerships with local players or strictly complying with U.S. requirements though this entails significant costs and does not guarantee fair market access. In this context, Europe must urgently rethink its digital strategy, not only to protect its companies but also to ensure its technological autonomy in the face of an increasingly restrictive competitive landscape. The future of the global digital economy will largely depend on the ability of different powers to strike a balance between sovereignty, innovation, and international cooperation.

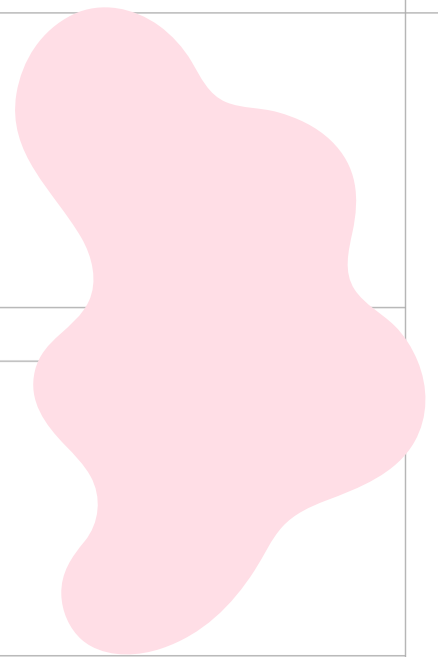
Alice Levard

per ception ion

changing
perceptions

'Kyoto'

Fuelling awareness of climate change and diplomacy



Humour in politics? - Surely not. Yet Co-directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin use a light, ironic touch in bringing to life the lengthy and what might be considered by some, rather tedious debates surrounding climate change in their play 'Kyoto'. The play follows a series of long conferences, where the long-term and potentially irreversible threat of climate change first became clear. Through its series of witty jokes and clever staging, we, as the audience, are invigorated by the dynamics of these first conferences and are forced to reflect upon their meaning in our day-to-day life in the modern era.

In this political thriller, writers Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson follow the events leading up to and at Kyoto's COP3 conference on the 11th of December 1997. This duo who met at Oxford University are known for 'The Jungle' - referring to the migrant camp in Calais - where they set up a temporary theatre, and 'The Walk' - where a giant puppet named Amal walks the route of many migrants from Syria to the UK. This time, they follow oil lobbyist and lawyer Dom Pearlman, played by Stephen Kunken (The Handmaid's Tale), as he attempts to stall international climate change cooperation under the orders of 'the Seven Sisters', the biggest oil companies of the world.

Here, we are immersed in the heart of the action, seated around a circular conference table-turned-stage, anxiously watching history unfold itself. Upon entering the theatre, we are given lanyards to wear, as if we are press or representatives at the conference. Some members of the audience are even invited to sit at the table and are given a chance to engage in debates themselves, allowing us all to gain a genuine, more detailed understanding of the dilemmas at hand.

We all watch Pearlman anxiously move from

conference to conference, scheming via the representatives to oppose attempts to limit carbon emissions. The scenes move rapidly through 10 years of international climate change negotiations, which Pearlman tails eagerly, trying to have his views heard and imposed. Akhila Krishnan's video projections supersize the chunks of text being written and rewritten, displaying the little progress made by the representatives. This is almost comical, with the delegates caught up in the details of syntax, whether to use "could" or "would", and the grammatical use of the comma in papers issued post meeting. However, it showcases just how powerful words can be. Here, Kiribati (played by Andrea Gatchalian) protests that if the sea levels continue to rise as they are, it "would" threaten her country's survival.

The writers Murphy and Robertson boldly opt to have an influential lobbyist for the fossil fuel industry to narrate the events of the play, rather than a scientist, a campaigner, or a UN diplomat. Pearlman's charisma and charm lure us in. At times, he made me forget he was the antagonist in the story, unveiling hypocrisies and contradictions, outing our reliance on carbon emissions. In one scene, as the leaders arrive at a conference, he mocks them; reminding the audience each member has taken a plane to attend and lists the carbon footprint produced. At the close of Act one, cigarette in hand, he taunts: "Interval drinks will be provided by BP," before tossing it in a bin, which quickly sets fire – a strong metaphor for what will happen to our planet if we continue to enjoy commodities to the extent at which we do.

Placing an anti-hero at the centre of the stage helps highlight the ongoing debates within climate change, with his positioning enabling the narration of both sides. This is not only achieved via Pearlman, but through powerful discussions amongst UN leaders. Tanzania steps up, on behalf of smaller and developing countries, protesting the larger impacts climate change is having upon them, and what cutting carbon emissions will do for their, already fragile, economies. We see countries valuing their self-interest and benefits above communal, long-term safety, reluctant to make the first moves in case no one follows.

In the second half of the play, we reach the COP3 conference: the nations of the world are in dispute and 11 hours have passed since the UN's landmark climate conference should have ended. At the time it should have ended there is a powerful scene where all the translators have gone home, and diplomats are left to argue in their own languages. Through the theatre we hear echoes of Mandarin, German, and Gilbertese, as leaders ferociously attempt to make their points heard. This demonstrates the scale of the issue at hand, emphasising the global turmoil, and how everyone (regardless of



Manuel Harlan."Kyoto Production Photos," January 2025

their background or status) is implicated. Almost by miracle some agreement is met, yet in the audience, after witnessing such distress, I was left with little sense of victory and rather pervading echoes of guilt at the lack of progress since the deadlock which entrapped COP3.

The play was first performed in 2024, a year of deadly floods and hurricanes across the world. Watching it now, the play questions and challenges us, leaving an uncomfortable feeling. With the recent LA fires fresh in our memories, the play can only be seen as an even more urgent call for action against the ever-growing crisis of climate change which threatens to envelop us. Seeing such powerful diplomats unite to reach an agreement reluctantly and rather unexpectedly should inspire us as an audience and offer hope for our planet. The play's focus is on reducing carbon emissions, and as Pearlman wittily

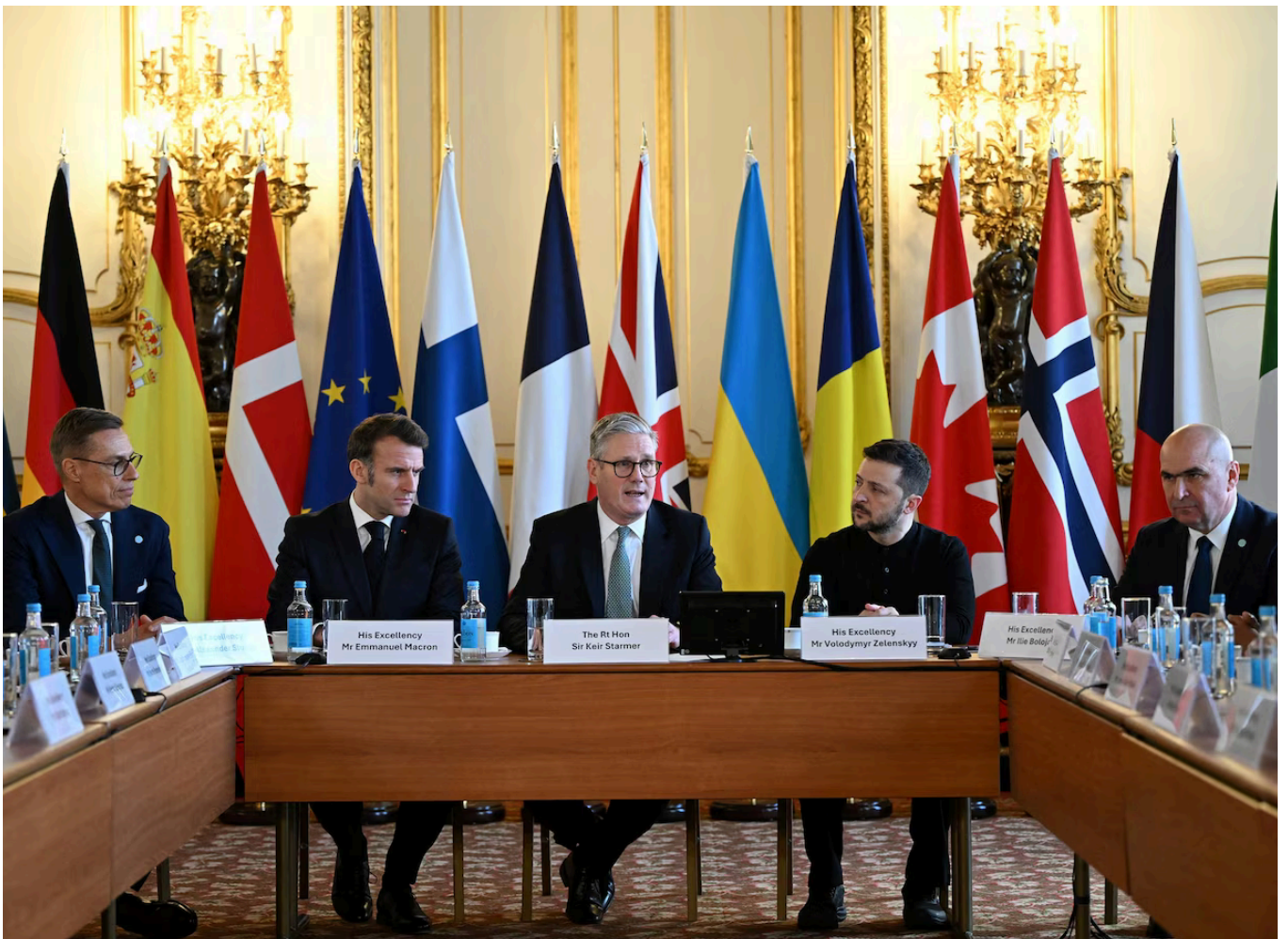
remarks, we are all implicated - with many of our daily activities contributing to high carbon footprints. This ranges from our food waste, transportation emissions, clothing, and so much more. Just like a small change in grammar in the papers published on the matter can offer a different meaning, implementing small changes in our day-to-day lives can be crucial to saving our planet.

Start by watching *Kyoto*, playing @sohplace until the 3rd May.

Mathilde Covello

EU defense

“For things to remain the same, everything must change”



ABC News article, Justin Tallis/ pool via Reuters

As Donald Trump starts his second term, the future of European defense looks more uncertain than ever. Since the end of WWII, European countries have delegated their security to NATO and the Americans. Yet with Trump’s virulent anti-NATO comments and his threat to leave NATO if states do not pay their fair share in the alliance’s defense budget, European states’ security is at risk.

Indeed, EU countries have, for too long, not only delegated their security to the US but

have also underfunded NATO, with major powers such as France and Germany failing to meet the two percent GDP mark in the past decades following the end of the Cold War. With the full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU and European countries were taken aback: war had returned to Europe. This has led to a revival in the debate on defense in Europe, with European states quickly agreeing to increase their defense spending in light of the threat posed by Russia.

However, the EU lacks the strength of a military actor like the US simply because it does not spend as much on defense as it should and due to other specific factors; for instance, the EU has no supranational army and its military matters are in the hands of member-states. This means that instead of having a coordinated action plan with a clear leader, any large-scale military action would require intergovernmental cooperation to properly function. Secondly, EU member-states have capability gaps, with some still

not even allocating two percent of their GDP to defense (as required by NATO) after the Russian invasion in 2022. This means that EU and NATO member-states are not only unprepared if a war erupts and they have to take part, but will also lack coordination. This trend has been slightly reversed since the start of the Ukraine war but not enough to meet the NATO requirements.

Despite some serious pushbacks, the EU had managed to elevate its defense game even prior to 2022. PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) was introduced in 2017 and the European Peace Facility (EPF), originally designed to help with missions in Africa, was transformed to support the war effort in Ukraine. Despite certain issues, EU states have aimed at enhancing their defense since before the recent Russian Aggression. This is important to take into account as the EU and other European nations are improving their capability to face military threats such as that from Russia.

The real question now on everyone's lips is: Can the EU become a real security actor without the United States and/or NATO?

The question seems hard to answer positively considering the influence of the US over NATO and its preeminence in the European Security Framework.

One can legitimately ask whether a European army could fill the void if the US were to leave. In theory, this could work as the military forces of all EU nations combined (plus Britain and other European nations) does amount to a respectable size even though the US' armada would not be matched. However, this project seems unlikely for two main reasons: Firstly, the EU has been kept away from military matters since its creation. It started as an economic community and talks on defense were avoided mostly because NATO was the prime security guarantor. It is unlikely for the EU to start promoting the establishment of a European army out of the blue while NATO is still around.

Secondly, assuming it does happen, the feasibility of a European army leaves a lot to be desired. In what language should the troops speak? English should probably be the main language but try getting Portuguese, French and Hungarian generals to discuss highly important matters amid a state of war in a language that is not even their own. This is assuming they still manage to communicate effectively in a language they have never used on a daily basis. Language difficulties aside, the more obvious obstacle to a European army is who will be the commander in chief of all troops? Macron? Good luck convincing every European leader to give up their military sovereignty to a man who's leaving office in two years (maybe sooner). EU Commissioner Von der Leyen? Her military experience is likely limited to playing Risk

once in a while so it is not ideal. Create a new body to run a European army? Then who? An elected body or a permanent one? From which country? There are simply too many questions to give a satisfying answer in the short-term.

While NATO did work because the Commander in Chief was an American military, hence, from the country giving the best guarantee of security to all European states, it seems harder to decide on a good and sustainable option if there is an EU Army. Hence, the future of EU defense remains in the hands of individual countries' ability for cooperation.

Recent developments indicate that the tides are shifting and that the EU may take more drastic initiatives. Following the announcement of a meeting in Saudi Arabia between the USA and Russia for peace negotiations, Europeans leaders met in Paris for an urgent meeting. This was also in response to recent comments made by US Vice-President Vance in which the EU was heavily criticized as drifting away from values shared by the US. This meeting can be analyzed as European nations striving to remain relevant in peace negotiations for Ukraine and by extension in their own security framework. This seems even clearer after European leaders came out to support Zelensky after tensions rose when Trump and Zelensky met in the Oval Office.

Furthermore, following the EU summit, European defense stocks were on the rise and hit a new record high. This means that the stocks of defense industry companies like Rheinmetall in Germany and Thales in France have been on the rise. This is a good augur for European defense initiatives as it follows a recent comment from Von der Leyen stating that extraordinary measures will be introduced to boost defense spending in the EU. Hence, despite serious issues, there seems to be a convergence of actions between the EU, EU member-states and national companies to quickly catch up in the defense sector. This will be necessary as Russia is currently spending a higher GDP share than most European countries on defense.

In this context, one would be inclined to only look at the issues and to fear for the security of the European continent. However, while the Ukraine war is a tragedy like any mass-scale conflict erupting in the world would be, it is also a unique opportunity for European states to prove that defense still matters to them and that the EU can still play a role in world politics. While the situation is difficult and massive efforts will have to be produced to improve EU defense, it is often in times of urgency that the most drastic and efficient changes can occur (any procrastinating student can concur). The EU has already acted to support Ukraine by using the EPF, sending funds and trying to speak with one voice. This is a start and shows that the EU

can and is willing to do more in terms of protecting the continent from external threats.

It will be hard for the EU to become a real security actor without massive efforts. However, it is in hard times that the true nature of things is revealed. If the EU can become a security actor, it will be able to rise to be one when threats are there.

Olivier Conac

Ahmed Al-Sharaa: from “terrorist” to president

The politics of perception

The story of Al-Sharaa

Ahmed Al-Sharaa – Syria’s interim president who toppled Assad, and formerly wanted jihadist leader known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani – has undergone a profound transformation, reflecting a remarkable journey of ideological recentralisation.

As Al-Julani he began his militant career in Iraq in the early 2000s, joining al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) during the 2003 US invasion. Arrested by US forces in Iraq in 2006, he was detained for five years. After his release, he was tasked with establishing al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria, Al-Nusra Front, coordinating with ISIS’ predecessor ISI.

In 2012, during the Syrian Civil war, Al-Julani founded Jabhat al-Nusra, establishing it as a Syrian rebel faction, which gained support by providing social services and focusing attacks on Assad’s regime. Disputes with ISIS led Al-Julani to reject its expansion in Syria, resulting in conflict between the groups, during which he coordinated with other Syrian rebel groups to expel ISIS.

Over time, Al-Julani appeared to distance himself from al-Qaeda’s global jihad ambitions, prioritising the consolidation of his group within Syria. In 2016, he publicly broke ties with al-Qaeda, rebranding his group as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, later merging with other factions to create Hayat

Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), establishing the Syrian Salvation Government for which Al-Julani was the de facto ruler in Idlib.

HTS, listed as a terrorist organisation by the UN, US, the EU, and Turkey, claimed its goal was to liberate Syria from Assad’s rule and establish a government based on its interpretation of the Islamic law. Al-Julani, however, has since attempted to reshape the image of HTS and legitimise it as a governing authority and counterterrorism partner.

In December 2024, taking advantage of regional instability, HTS and allied rebels captured Aleppo and Damascus, overthrowing the Assad government. This



<https://eutoday.net/the-rise-of-abu-muhammad-al-jolani/>

event marked a significant change in Al-Julani's position, now publicly recognised as Ahmed Al-Sharaa, who was declared Syria's interim president in January 2025. He announced a new constitution would take up to three years and elections would follow a national census, and ordered the dissolution of armed factions, including HTS.

Now leading Syria, Al-Sharaa has distanced himself from jihadist principles, allowing Damascus to remain relatively liberal and promoting a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state; a vision that directly contradicts traditional jihadist ideology.

His transition from revolutionary leader to head of state is marked not just by softened rhetoric but also by a change in appearance, trading military attire for a suit and tie, which symbolises a shift in identity. Once viewed as a brutal militant, Al-Sharaa has gained popular support and political legitimacy. His image has shifted from being that of a terrorist to a freedom fighter, and finally to a statesman.

Beyond the headlines, the story no one tells

How can a formerly imprisoned al-Qaeda fighter become president, and why has this transformation been so rapidly normalised?

The side of the story which is given little attention to is the broader geopolitical calculations behind the shift in perception of Al-Sharaa. While Western governments once condemned him, some, like the United States, have begun to engage with HTS as a potential counterweight to Iranian and Assad-aligned influence.

Syria's context is crucial to understanding Al-Sharaa's rise. The country has long been a geopolitical battleground involving the US, Turkey, Russia, Iran and Gulf states; each backing different factions based on their strategic interests. While Western states opposed the Assad government, they maintained relations with factions that aligned with their geopolitical interests, particularly with regards to limiting Iranian and Russian influence in the wider region.

Hence, while Western governments pushed for Assad's diplomatic isolation and denied him legitimacy, they have sought diplomatic ties with Al-Sharaa, despite once labelling him a terrorist. Although contradictory, from their perspective, aligning with a newly established pro-Western government in Syria better serves their interests after years of opposing Assad's anti-Western regime. By disrupting the arms supply route between Iran and Hezbollah, traditionally facilitated through Syria with Assad's support, Al-Sharaa's government has weakened Hezbollah's military capacity and reduced Iran's regional influence – an outcome aligned with US and Israeli strategic goals.

This pattern is not unprecedented, nonetheless. Historically, leaders once labelled terrorists have often become legitimate partners when it served the West's geopolitical interests. Al-Sharaa's case is one amongst many others. Nelson Mandela was once on the US terrorist watch list due to his association with the African National Congress (ANC) and its armed struggle against South Africa's apartheid regime. As the ANC received support from the Soviet Union, this led the US to view it as part of the broader communist threat during the Cold War. Nelson Mandela remained on the US terrorism watch list until 2008 despite becoming a global figure of peace and the President of South Africa. Just as Mandela's rebranding reflected a shift in Western priorities, from Cold War containment to supporting democratic transition in South Africa, the same logic applied to the West's evolving approach towards Al-Sharaa, aligning with Western broader strategic interests. A key distinction, though, is that while Al-Sharaa's rise to power broadly serves Western interests, the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa and Mandela's presidency did not. The changing perception of Mandela was driven more by necessity resulting from his success, rather than by geopolitical calculations.

This shift in perception is also reflected in the mainstream media's narrative surrounding Al-Sharaa. Once recognised as a terrorist leader of al-Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, he is now portrayed as a pragmatic leader. As he rebranded himself, distancing from extremist roots, media coverage evolved. Most strikingly, major news outlets began offering him platforms – notably with CNN granting him an exclusive interview and the BBC analysing his transformation into a 'rebel statesman'. This demonstrates how mainstream media reflects great power narratives, contributing to the selective and strategic labelling of terrorism. The media plays a key role in shaping public perception, which helps explain how Al-Sharaa's transition was so quickly normalised after Assad's fall. By selectively highlighting certain aspects of his story, the media directs public focus by limiting access to information that would provide them with a more critical perspective. This strategy has been effective in crafting political labels that can be used to de facto discredit a group or individual.

Importantly, Al-Sharaa has leveraged these media platforms to shape his own narrative. Aiming to reach Western audiences and lift sanctions against Syria, he presents himself as a man of peace. In the UK podcast *Leading*, Al-Sharaa explained that he joined al-Qaeda to learn from war by witnessing it first-hand and return to liberate Syria. Acknowledging his past mistakes, he emphasised that even as a fighter, he always avoided civilian harm, and targeted only the regime, insisting that what matters is not repeating them. This self-

representation is a deliberate effort to distance himself from the brutal image once attached to him. It reinforces his image of a politician and signals a clear departure from a revolutionary ideology; stressing that building a country requires a move away from a revolutionary mindset once power has been seized.

Terrorism – a concept shaped by perception and power

If Al-Sharaa's story reveals anything, it is that yesterday's so-called 'terrorist' can become today's partner if the circumstances demand it. In my view, by positioning himself as a potential partner, the shift in perception of Al-Sharaa's identity shows how geopolitical priorities, rather than consistent legal or ethical principles, determine who is labelled a terrorist. This exposes how the label of 'terrorist' is attributed or shifted depending on whether actors threaten or aid Western political influence, thus serving as a political tool. Change, therefore, is central to the politics of terrorism. Al-Sharaa's transformation represents this fluidity of identity; shaped by geopolitical interests, media narratives and power dynamics, influencing perceptions of legitimacy. It is a label weaponised by states to demonise actors who threaten their interests, and later discarded when those same actors become useful partners.

Al-Sharaa's story is yet another example that exposes the hypocrisy within international politics. The ability to redefine identities ensures that power controls the narrative – revealed by the absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism, which allows selective and inconsistent applications of the term. In that sense, shaped by political agendas rather than universal criteria, this subjectivity allows the most powerful to reshape the label to justify interventions, suppress opposition or shift alliances.

This ambiguity has wider implications, highlighting the inherent subjectivity of international law and its vulnerability to manipulation by powerful actors. The instrumental use of the 'terrorism' label undermines the legitimacy of international law. As the rules shift based on politics rather than principle, international law struggles to uphold its authority across the international system. The global counterterrorism framework is unstable, lacking clear legal foundations and reflecting balances of power instead. This has led to the 'terrorism' label losing credibility, particularly in the Global South, where populations perceive international law as a tool of Western dominance, seeing through double standards. Without a consistent and objective framework to define terrorism, the label will remain a weapon of power rather than a standard of justice.

Rana Zeidan

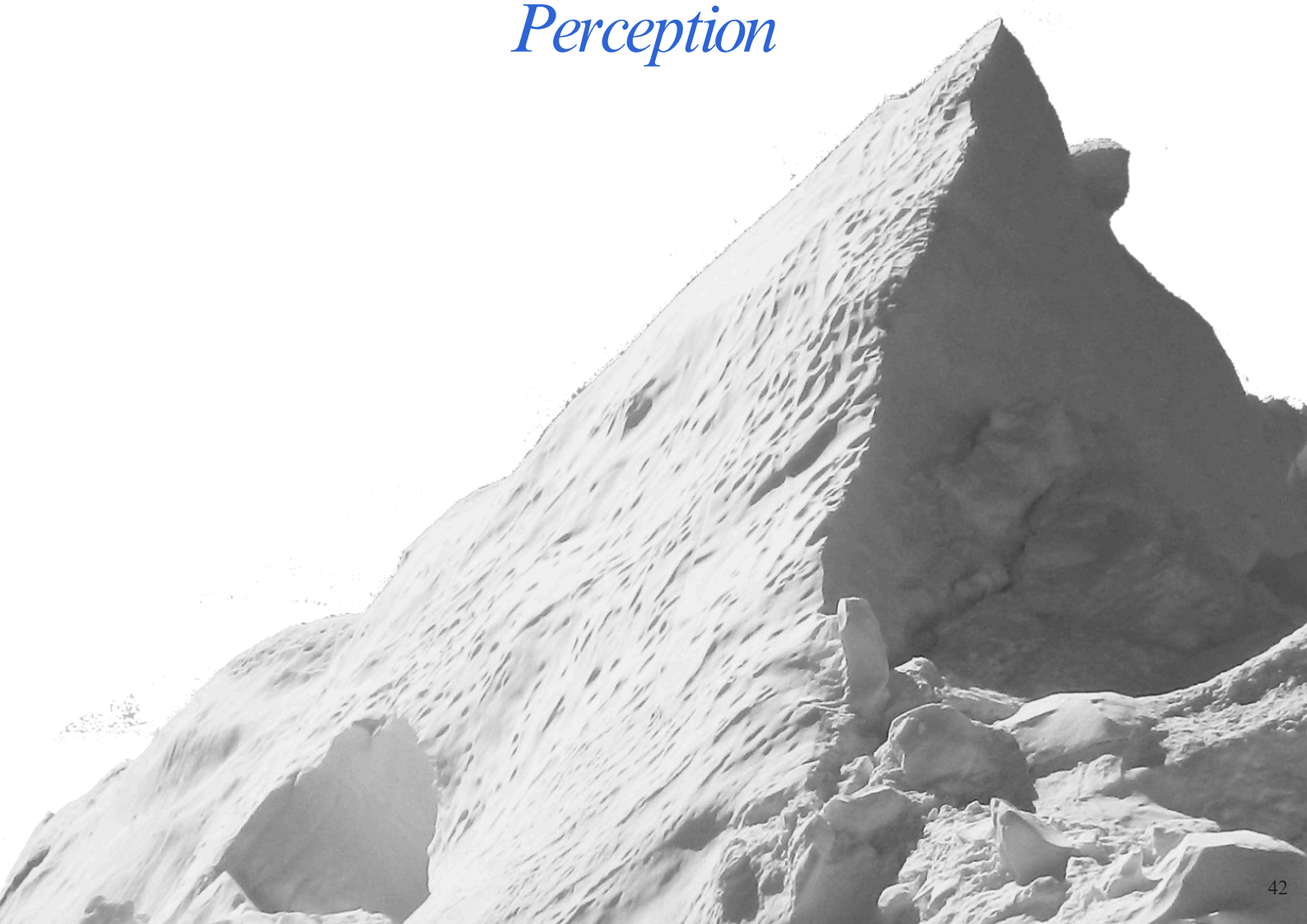
Climate Tipping Points

Irreversible Thresholds and Public Perception

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines a tipping point to be “a critical threshold beyond which a system reorganises, often abruptly and/or irreversibly”. If crossed, this will lead to large, accelerating, and irreversible impacts in the climate system. In turn, severe impacts will affect human society with cascading impacts such as sea level rise, extreme weather events, destruction of ecosystems, and the potential for further warming. The 1.5°C warming limit is a key climate target. Working to adhere to this target will reduce the impacts on human systems and terrestrial, freshwater, and coastal ecosystems. Every increment of global warming above 1.5°C increases the risk of crossing key irreversible tipping points, such as Greenland and Arctic ice loss, Amazon deforestation, and the slowing of ocean currents. These critical thresholds in the Earth’s natural systems often go underappreciated by the public. Climate education intended to understand tipping points and the science behind them is crucial to prevent catastrophic environmental change.

Misconceptions about the Climate Crisis

Public perception holds the key to impactful action on climate change. People’s understanding – or misunderstanding – of climate change shapes everything from their consumer choices to their voting decisions.



Despite the overwhelming evidence from the scientific community, public perception still remains mixed. The average estimate among the UK public is that 65% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused climate change is happening – much lower than the reality of 99.9%. Conservative views often tend towards scepticism about the severity of human caused climate change, and populist far right politicians and voters often dismiss it all together. The public's reluctance to acknowledge climate change is most certainly delaying the action needed to address the crisis.

The role of the media is critical in shaping the public's understanding on climate change. Reporting has significantly increased due to the growing frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, wildfires, and heatwaves. Whilst much of this reporting is factual, there is also a great amount of 'fake news', downplaying the crisis. For example, leading newspapers such as the Daily Mail often publish articles minimising the urgency of the climate crisis. In 2023, they published an editorial titled 'Climate hysteria', which accused the IPCC of using 'hysterical language'. While there are growing efforts to raise awareness on climate change, there is still a disconnect between the urgency of the crisis and how it is portrayed every day. To counter misinformation, governments must promote climate literacy and regulate misleading coverage.

The Amazon Rainforest - Carbon Sink to Carbon Source?

The Amazon Biome is unrivalled in complexity, scale, and opportunity, covering an area of 2,300,000 square miles. It plays a crucial role in regulating the earth's climate by absorbing carbon dioxide - it currently stores the equivalent of almost two years of global carbon emissions. However, its role as a major carbon sink is under threat, raising concerns about its future role in the carbon cycle. Deforestation is a major concern - performed for agriculture, logging, and infrastructure development - pushing the Amazon to become a carbon source rather than a carbon sink. If deforestation continues at the current rate, the Amazon's ability to absorb carbon will decline, accelerating global warming. This shift would have devastating consequences, including biodiversity loss, changes in rainfall patterns, and increased vulnerability of local

communities to extreme weather events. This would intensify the climate crisis, allowing for not only an environmental disaster but also a human one.

The Slowing of Ocean Currents

Oceans currents regulate the global climate via redistributing heat around the planet. They act like a global conveyor belt, transporting warm waters from the equator towards the poles and cold waters from the poles back to the tropics. One main ocean current is the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC). This circulatory system brings warmth to various parts of the globe, helping to sustain ocean life. However, if the planet continues to warm, the AMOC will weaken due to the increased temperatures and freshwater from melting ice. Weakening of the AMOC will trigger significant weather events, temperature shifts, rising sea levels, and even disruption to marine ecosystems. European countries could experience harsher winters, while West African and South American regions could suffer from prolonged droughts. The economic and humanitarian consequences would be severe, affecting water resources, human settlements and global food security.

Melting of the Arctic and the Albedo Effect

Summer Arctic sea ice is currently shrinking by 12.2% per decade due to warmer temperatures. A process known as the 'albedo effect' accelerates warming - as ice melts, darker surfaces such as ocean waters are exposed, allowing more heat to be absorbed, thereby driving increased warming. With this feedback loop, ice coverage of the Arctic will significantly diminish or completely vanish. Scientists predict the Arctic could experience its first ice-free summer before 2030 if current greenhouse gas emissions continue unchecked. This will cause sea level rise, extreme weather events, and increased heat waves worldwide, damaging wildlife and communities. Ice melting and ocean warming disrupt the food supply, harming the abundance of fish species that marine mammals depend on.

Climate Policies: Progress and Setbacks

While international agreements such as the 2015 Paris Agreement aim to limit global warming, progress has been inconsistent. The UK government has pledged to reach net zero emissions by 2050, yet recent policy reversals undermine this commitment. For instance, Rishi Sunak's decision to delay the ban on selling new petrol and diesel cars

from 2030 to 2035 weakens efforts to transition to clean energy. Such policy rollbacks increase reliance on fossil fuels and delay necessary emissions reductions.

However, there have been positive steps. The EU's European Green Deal aims to become climate neutral by 2050, and the US Inflation Reduction Act allocates billions to clean energy investments. IGOs and national governments must strengthen climate policies, enforce emissions regulations, and invest in green infrastructure to ensure long-term sustainability.

What can we do?

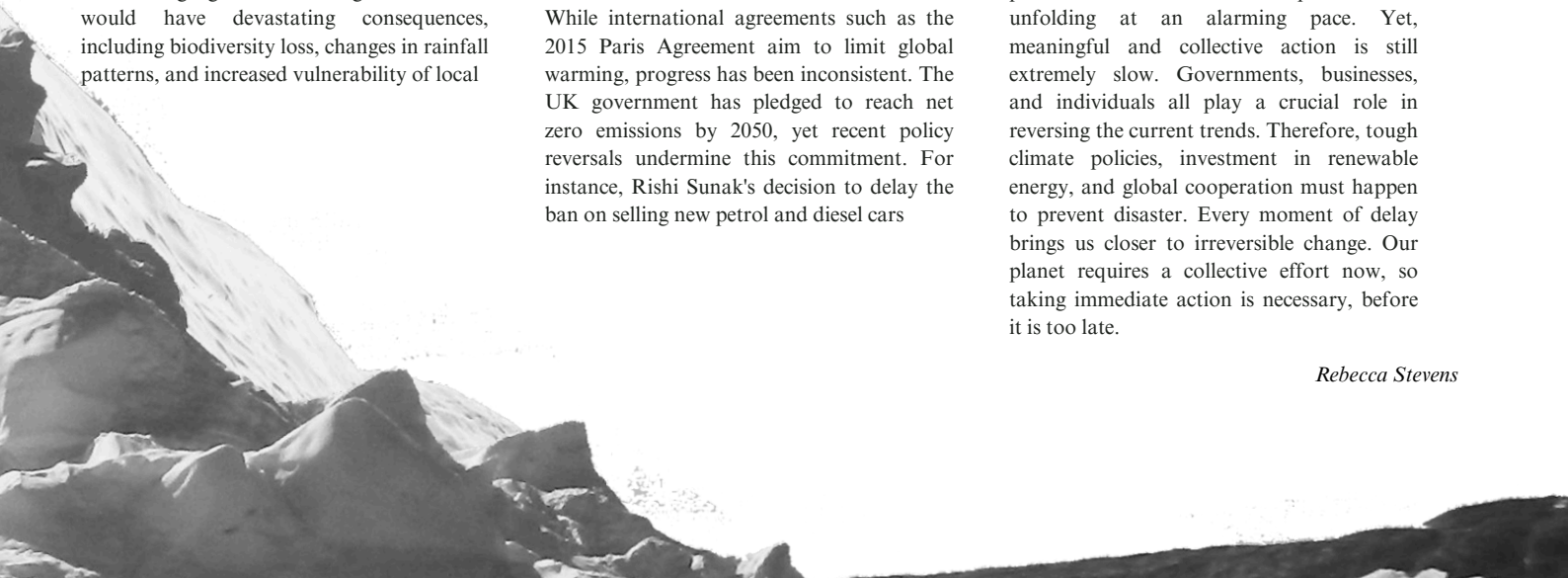
While policy change and global effort is essential, individuals still play a crucial role in driving climate action. Personal choices such as reducing meat consumption, recycling, and using public transport lower carbon footprints. Holding politicians accountable by voting for climate-conscious leaders and supporting green policies is equally important. Peaceful protests and grassroots movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, Friends of the Earth, and The Climate Coalition have all pressured governments to implement stronger climate measures. Public engagement with MPs through petitions and direct lobbying can influence policy decisions.

Furthermore, financial choices matter. Supporting businesses committed to sustainability and divesting from fossil fueled companies sends a clear message to industries that their consumers demand for green alternatives. Increased awareness and action at all levels of society can push governments and transnational corporations towards necessary climate commitments.

A call for Urgent Action

Climate tipping points aren't a distant threat - they are happening right now, and they are some of the most pressing risks to our society and the health of our planet. The deforestation of the Amazon, the slowing of the ocean currents, and the melting of Arctic ice are just a few critical thresholds that, if crossed, will cause irreversible damage. The science is clear, the warnings have been published and the consequences are unfolding at an alarming pace. Yet, meaningful and collective action is still extremely slow. Governments, businesses, and individuals all play a crucial role in reversing the current trends. Therefore, tough climate policies, investment in renewable energy, and global cooperation must happen to prevent disaster. Every moment of delay brings us closer to irreversible change. Our planet requires a collective effort now, so taking immediate action is necessary, before it is too late.

Rebecca Stevens



More Than a Number

The Lives Left Behind in USAID's Closure

Recent pauses, stoppage, and draconian cuts in foreign assistance by the Trump administration have been highlighted in the current news cycle. The information presented and quantified by a mere statistic has its own undeniable human story behind each figure, a life disrupted, abandoned. Too often, the reader can forget the stark reality of those affected by such acts, reducing real people to mere data. This article is a first-hand account of one of those numbers.

For the past fourteen years, my father served as a humanitarian advisor for the US government agency, the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), the largest provider of foreign assistance globally (Desilver 2025). Driven by the passion to protect the lives of vulnerable populations across the world from conflict, natural disasters, and socio-economic struggle, my father sacrificed private sector benefits, notwithstanding the terms that set him on a mission to assist regions where even basic necessities were scarce.

This global outreach of assistance was the vision of former US President John F. Kennedy in 1961 when establishing USAID; a source of not only essential aid, but a foundation of diplomatic cooperation (Performance.gov 2015). And yet on January 20th 2025, with the impulsive stroke of a pen and without congressional approval, these altruistic pursuits were abruptly dismantled. The effects of this executive order for a 90 day foreign aid freeze would be felt immediately.

The signs of complete dismantling arrived in just a few days. First, USAID's website went dark, replaced only by a blank screen and the hollow message: "This website can't be reached.". Then, came revoked email access

for USAID staff. A cold, impersonal notice confirmed what many had feared, yet not thought possible—thousands, including my father, were put on administrative leave then dismissed.

The cost extended beyond the job loss; it was the severing of lifelines and safety for those who have depended on USAID's assistance for the past 63 years—obstructing the core values that the agency was built to uphold. Yet, this is not simply the story of an institution closing down, it tells a much larger story on the direction of humanitarianism and governance in the West.

Prior to his work for USAID, as a fresh university graduate my father took part in the Peace Corps, a U.S. government agency of volunteers immersed in low- and middle-income countries. Through the course of two years, he lived in a small mud hut, in the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho, aiding local communities in self-help initiatives and collaborating with government ministries to provide essential services—from clean tap water to education facility support. He expressed pride in serving his country through these grassroots initiatives, development built from the ground up—priorities identified by the people.

On the other side of the world, many Western Europeans and Americans are victims of fear-mongering that incites conspiracist notions of USAID's relief efforts, like such, being an unnecessary drain of the U.S. budget. As a dangerous distraction, immigrants are blamed for the state's social and economic struggles, with federal institutions serving a so-called "deep state" to pursue hidden agendas, manipulating public opinion and averting

democratic accountability (Olmsted & Willmets 2024). Hateful rhetoric from Trump and Elon Musk has promoted this misguided hostility toward USAID, touted by right-wing media outlets.

Consider this—"USAID's entire annual budget (\$40B) is less than 1.5% of Elon Musk's net worth (\$400B)" (Zelizer 2025). Meanwhile, more than 15,000 American jobs and more than 140,000 jobs globally supported by USAID are confirmed lost (USAIDStopWork 2025), even as defense spending continues to rise (Wong 2025). This is a deliberate move driven by Donald Trump and Elon Musk's elitist agenda, prioritizing the interests of the affluent and powerful over the working-class people and global humanitarian commitments.

I grew up inspired by my father's field work overseas. Our move to Budapest, Hungary seven years ago was an opportunity only provided through his job, shaping my global outlook today that began from his small town roots as a NorthEast Ohio native. Families like mine, dependent on USAID contracts now face an uncertain future—from our housing to education, and at the very basic, financial security. It is clear the precedence of our government lies in the values of profit over the people, hollowing out the decades of USAID's commitments. This exposes the hypocrisy of the US' adherence to democracy, claiming to be built by the people and for the people, while it slashes life-saving programs and allocates our monthly income to the \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts for the wealthy and ballooning military spending (HBC 2025). Among these spiteful losses, the largest and irredeemable is the current and future deaths worldwide. During the interview with my father, he cites a significant life-saving response in the

February 2022 invasion of Russia into Ukraine:

“Near the Ukrainian border, USAID worked day in and day out with the US military, the United Nations, and relief organizations to aid mothers and children arriving to Poland, and deliver emergency supplies to Ukraine amid missile strikes”

Assistances like such are sustained by and large via USAID funding, which currently has been under threat and termination of nearly 10,000 awards—many already approved for humanitarian aid. Secretary of State Marco Rubio signed off on the cuts, instantaneously slashing 90% of USAID’s funding (Miolene 2025). As of 2023, around \$44 billion was managed by USAID for foreign assistance, distributed in programs and operations across 160 countries and regions (Da Silva & Williams 2025). With the abrupt freeze, USAID’s key initiatives—including biosecurity, famine relief, and HIV treatment—have been forced to scale back or shut down. A modest 0.7% of the US GDP budget has been dedicated to USAID humanitarian efforts, yet its programmes serve to help millions. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR—operating in more than 50 countries—is credited with saving more than 25 million lives since launching in 2003 (Da Silva & Williams 2025).

In light of this, my father describes a striking shift toward censorship within the agency, with superiors discouraging discussion and employees resorting to encrypted apps such as Signal and WhatsApp to communicate freely. Those in similar positions have also attempted to publicly expose the crisis, only to be met with threats of immediate termination. Under an emerging repressive power structure, diverting public attention from these cuts is just the initial test for broader institutional dismantling.

The full extent of USAID’s impact currently remains unreleased in fears of a White House retaliation under Trump. One critical report warns aid cuts jeopardize the Israel-Hamas ceasefire in Gaza, putting more than \$300 million in humanitarian assistance at risk (Rein & Hudson 2025). Another highlights severe security risks, widespread looting, disease outbreaks, and millions of dollars in additional costs resulting from foreign aid withdrawal. In South Sudan, auditors warn of severe famine risks and a neglect of gender-based violence. Across the Sahel, the absence of USAID funding anticipates exacerbated terrorism, illegal migration, and increased Russian influence (Rein & Hudson 2025).

Organizations including the World Food Programme (WFP) will also be stripped of vital USAID funding. Egypt’s nutrition assistance has aimed to cover food needs for up to 230,000 refugees per month, with cash top-ups provided to about 46,731 pregnant and breastfeeding women registered with the national social protection programme (ReliefWeb 2025). From a local standpoint, USAID has also worked to fund grassroot networks in areas like Sudan, where nearly 80% of emergency food kitchens have shut down while over 2 million people are suffering from the civil war (Nairobi 2025). These developing long-term stability programmes will only stagnate with the agency’s shutdown.

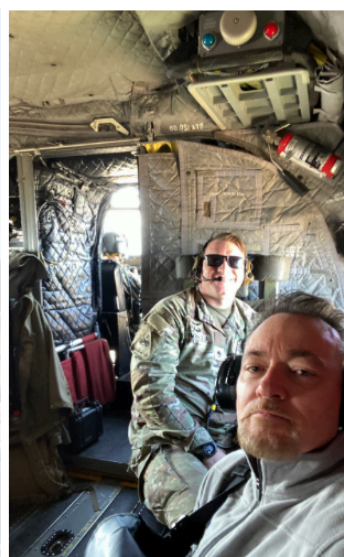
Stemming from this approach, my father highlights the loss of US soft power through critical alliances to nations worldwide. Withdrawing humanitarian efforts leaves a vacuum from America’s international leadership, of which world powers including China and Russia can fill (Kurlantzick 2025). Many Southeast Asian states already felt inconsistency with US foreign policies and democratic commitments—with USAID being among one of the remaining foundations to US international leadership.

China has strengthened economic and diplomatic ties in this region and taken over significant projects in countries such as Cambodia, Nepal, and Colombia (Kurlantzick 2025). This has enabled expansion of foreign aid and grants, and infrastructure development funding previously adopted through USAID.

Undermining U.S. support is also reshaping the West’s humanitarian priorities. In the United Kingdom, the government has been condemned for its major cut to foreign aid budget, reducing overseas development assistance from 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income—approximately £6 billion—to fund increased defense spending (Lay 2025). Germany, France, Belgium, and potentially Canada are similarly following suit, reflecting the cruel abandonment of the most vulnerable populations from the West (Lay 2025).

The dismantling of USAID is more than a policy decision, it is an attack on the very norms of democracy on which the US claims to be an ideal representative of. The cost is not measured in dollars, but in lives. As I write this, my family has been given just two weeks' notice to leave the place we have called home for nearly eight years, with my father fired at will. My younger brother, in his final year of school, now faces the abrupt consequences—forced to navigate his last few months in Hungary without the stability of a home or the cohesive presence of family. Globally, countless lives will endure unbounded crises, while critical resources are revoked not by necessity, but by impulse. Among this reality, silence is complicity. It is increasingly important to remain informed, raise awareness and continue the conversation. Remember that “we, the people” have the power to demand change, and hold leaders accountable—remind them that me, you, us, are more than a number in a playbook.

Sabrina Mergenthaler



February 2023 Turkiye Earthquake USAID Response. Delivering emergency supplies to the earthquake affected communities accessible by air only.