



Global Conversations  
**2024 FALL ISSUE**



**THE EROSION OF  
DEMOCRACY AND  
ITS IMPLICATIONS**



# Table of Contents

- 01.** Letter from the Editors-in-Chief  
By Steffi Hebel & Ada Trybuchowska
- 02.** The Estate of Emergency: The Shifting Sands of Freedom of the Press  
By Anya Haldemann. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.
- 05.** When Power Trumps People: Venezuela's Crisis of Democracy and Displacements  
By Isabella Facchinelli. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.
- 09.** Erasing the Past, Present, and Future: What Azerbaijan's Conquest of Nagorno Karabakh Reveals About the Legacy of Territorial Disputes  
By Krithik Sivabalan. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.
- 13.** El Salvador's Democratic Crisis: The Rise of Authoritarianism Under Nayib Bukele and Its Impact on Latin America  
By Maria Fernanda de Almeida. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.
- 17.** Mexico's Judicial Reform in an Era of Worldwide Threats to Judicial Independence  
By Matthew Chasmar. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.
- 20.** Warfare in the Shadows: The Democratic Crisis of Privatized Violence  
By Sadie McIntosh. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.
- 24.** The Growing Threat of Misinformation and Disinformation to Canada's Democracy  
By Trang Nguyen. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.

## Our Team

### Editors-in-Chief

Ada Trybuchowska, Steffi Hebel

### Director of Long-Form Content

Aurora Schatz

### Director of Short-Form Content

Olivia Paul

### Director of Podcast

David Okojie

### Feature Issue Contributors

Maria Fernanda de Almeida, Trang Nguyen,  
Sadie McIntosh, Anya Haldemann,  
Krithik Sivabalan, Matthew Chasmar,  
Isabella Facchinelli, Ananya Kaumudi  
Mallubhotla, Andrew Tureski

### Associate Editors

Julia Chapman, Tasnia Reza

### News-Watch Contributors

Andrew Chan, Joshua Bernstein,  
Aya Samaha, Harmanbeer Sandhu,  
Yotam Gubbay, Chang Du

### Coordination Associate

Alexander Lee

### Podcast Producers

Crystal Butler, Ginelle Alvaro

### Social Media Associates

Yuliia Strokan, Quinn Melenbacher

Dear Readers,

We are pleased to present our feature issue, *The Erosion of Democracy and Its Implications*. Around the world, democratic institutions are under strain. Press freedom is under attack, misinformation is shaping public opinion, and authoritarian leaders are consolidating power. These challenges raise urgent questions about the future of governance and individual rights.

In this issue, our writers examine the decline of press freedom, the role of misinformation in Canadian politics, and Mexico's controversial judicial reforms. We explore how private military forces challenge state authority, the displacement crisis in Venezuela, and the impact of Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh. Finally, we look at El Salvador's shift toward authoritarianism and its implications for Latin America.

Democracy is not lost in a single moment but through gradual shifts that weaken its foundations. As these issues unfold, it is crucial for each of us to reflect on their consequences and understand our pivotal role in defending democratic values. Our collective action can make a difference.

Thank you for reading. We hope this collection informs, challenges, and sparks conversation.

**Editors-in-Chief,  
Steffi Hebel and Ada Trybuchowska**



**The Estate of Emergency:  
The Shifting Sands of Freedom of the Press**

*By Anya Haldemann. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.*

## The Estate of Emergency: The Shifting Sands of Freedom of the Press



Freedom of the press is the cornerstone of democracy, essential for transparency, accountability, and an informed populace. Yet, across the globe, an alarming and palpable trend has emerged: governments increasingly label journalists as “enemies of the people” or purveyors of “fake news.” This hostile rhetoric fosters distrust in the media and emboldens authoritarian behaviours, threatening to erode democratic foundations and disrupt open societies.

The origins of this rhetoric are rooted in authoritarian regimes, where the phrase “enemy of the people” has been used to discredit dissent and suppress opposition. For example, during the Stalinist era Soviet Union, this phrase was wielded to isolate critics and justify severe repressions. Its resurgence in contemporary politics highlights a concerning normalization of authoritarian tactics. Specifically, leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines have all invoked similar language to undermine the press. Undoubtedly, Trump’s framing of the media as “enemies of the people” exacerbates societal divisions, reinforces distrust, amplifies the deeply polarized American society we see today, and sets a precedent replicated in other countries. In Hungary, Orbán’s administration uses such rhetoric to consolidate control over independent journalism, turning public opinion against critical outlets. Kenny emphasizes that by framing themselves as champions of the people against a corrupt elite, populist leaders often include the press in their list of enemies, mechanizing this public distrust in journalism and reinforcing essential governmental populist narratives.

This villainizing language which arouses hostility, appeals to leaders in polarized societies because it simplifies complex narratives and consolidates political support. Discrediting unfavourable coverage deflects accountability while reinforcing loyalty among supporters who perceive the media as aligned with opposing political ideologies. This bears rise to a feedback loop in which trust in journalism diminishes, and rhetorical power becomes increasingly centralized by those who seek to avoid scrutiny. For example, Viktor Orbán’s systematic dismantling of independent media in Hungary exemplifies this strategy, where state-aligned outlets now dominate the media landscape, ensuring that dissenting voices are silenced. In Russia, Vladimir Putin’s government has tightened control over information, branding independent journalists as “foreign agents” and forcing them to cease operations or leave the country. In Myanmar, the military junta’s crackdown on journalists covering anti-coup protests illustrates how press suppression enables authoritarian regimes to maintain control without transparency.

## The Estate of Emergency: The Shifting Sands of Freedom of the Press



The consequences of this antagonistic rhetoric against journalism extend beyond mere words and theory, leading to tangible declines in press freedom and the safety of journalists worldwide. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in 2022 alone 55 journalists were killed and over 300 detained, with many incidents linked to environments where anti-press rhetoric prevails. In the Philippines, for instance, Duterte's branding of media outlets as "biased" emboldened attacks against journalists, contributing to a climate of impunity for such crimes. Similarly, in Mexico, which remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, such rhetoric fuels violence against reporters investigating corruption and organized crime. The decline of journalism poses a severe threat to democratic societies, as it disrupts the ability to investigate freely and the journalistic ability to hold power accountable through the court of public opinion.

The intimidating environment fosters a culture of self-censorship among journalists, who may avoid reporting on sensitive issues for fear of reprisals. In Turkey, for example, journalists have been jailed for covering political dissent, prompting many news organizations to shift their focus away from investigative reporting. Kenny further notes that such suppression not only curtails individual freedoms but also deprives societies of the diverse perspectives essential for meaningful democratic discourse. Thus, fearless journalism is put to rest and the role of the press as a watchdog is devolved, leaving a void in the public availability of critical information.

While the Washington Post has faced criticism this past fall for its lack of presidential endorsement – its slogan, Democracy dies in the Dark, is pervasively true. Unchecked power thrives in environments where the press is silenced, allowing aspiring authoritarian leaders to operate without necessary opposition or accountability, and posing significant risks to global democratic governance and stability. The global assault on press freedom is not merely an issue for journalists but a fundamental threat to the health of democracy and societal strength. When journalists are vilified as "enemies of the people," the role of the press as a guardian of truth and accountability is diminished. In this era of shifting sands, safeguarding press freedom is a moral imperative for anyone who values democracy and the rights and liberties it brings. Protecting press freedom requires collective vigilance and action, from financially supporting credible journalism to actively countering misinformation. Public awareness and advocacy are crucial in ensuring that journalism continues to serve as a check on power and a voice for the voiceless. In rejecting the narrative that journalism is an adversary and instead championing its essential role, societies can resist authoritarian tendencies and preserve fundamental democratic justice.

By Anya Haldemann. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.



**When Power Trumps People:  
Venezuela's Crisis of Democracy and Displacements**

*By Isabella Facchinelli. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*

## When Power Trumps People: Venezuela's Crisis of Democracy and Displacements



### Introduction

In two decades, Venezuela transitioned from one of the most prosperous democracies in Latin America to an authoritarian regime marked by political repression, economic collapse and widespread human suffering. Today, more than 8 million Venezuelans, roughly a quarter of the population, have fled, causing the largest displacement crisis in modern history. This exodus is not just a result of economic mismanagement or a drop in oil prices but the consequence of the systemic dismantling of democratic institutions. Venezuela's descent into authoritarianism under Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro illustrates how democratic erosion fuels mass displacement.

The Freedom House consistently marked Venezuela "free" as its Global Freedom Status from 1972 to 1992, meaning the government adequately protected civil liberties and political rights. However, since 2017, Freedom House has described Venezuela as "not free," which begs the question of where it went wrong for Venezuela.

### Democratic erosion and populism?

Democratic erosion often begins with populist leaders exploiting public grievances to consolidate power. Leaders with autocratic tendencies are coming to power through democratic elections and attacking norms and institutions from within, typically with support from some portion of the electorate. This is exemplified by Hugo Chavez, who rose to power in 1998. The conditions in Venezuela during the 1990s were characterized by economic stagnation, rising inequality and corruption, alienating a large portion of the population. Creating the perfect storm for Hugo Chavez to push forward his populist rhetoric. He capitalized on the discontent, framing himself as the saviour of "the people" against the corrupt elite. His ideas, paired with nationalistic pride and a Marxist-inspired "Bolivarian" vision, resonated with the impoverished majority.

Chavez's early policies concentrated on redistributing wealth through robust social programs funded by oil revenues. However, these programs came at a price: the systemic breakdown of checks and balances within the country. He rewrote the constitution to expand presidential powers, weakened the legislature and placed loyalists in the judiciary. His regime prioritized loyalty over competence. These actions effectively limited the power of Chavez's opposing parties. Institutional oversight was severely compromised, thus expanding Chavez's power even further. Despite the significant deterioration of the democratic system, it is important to note that Chavez's decisions received widespread support from the public, facilitating his consolidation of power. This can be seen as the continual recognition of the general public towards Chavez's regime, legitimizing his charismatic authority. Part of the reason his policies benefited the people was because oil prices were high, which meant that the social systems he put in place were thriving.

## When Power Trumps People: Venezuela's Crisis of Democracy and Displacements



After he died in 2013, Nicholas Maduro assumed power and inherited an economy on the brink of collapse and a democracy hanging on by a thread. Venezuela's dependence on oil revenue underpinned its economic stability during the Chavez regime. This meant that when the oil prices fell from 100\$ a barrel in 2014 to less than 30\$ a barrel in 2016, all the social services Chavez implemented that were dependent on the oil prices completely collapsed. The Venezuelan economy spiralled into chaos, with hyperinflation peaking at over 1 million percent in 2018, making the bolivar useless. Essential goods, including food and medicine, became unaffordable for most of the population and by 2021, nearly 95% of the population was living in poverty, with millions facing acute food insecurity. During this time, Maduro doubled down on anti-democratic policies, manipulating the election process by falsifying election outcomes and using violence to suppress dissent. Security forces carried out extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and torture, targeting not only political activists and opposition but also ordinary citizens who dared to protest. Independent media outlets were shut down, and internet access was restricted to control the narrative. Furthermore, he continuously filled positions within the government branches with his supporters.

**What does this mean for Venezuelans?**

All of this created a nightmare for the Venezuelan people. As all services depended on oil, hospitals that were once well equipped now lack basic supplies, and outbreaks of preventable diseases that were previously eradicated have surged. In addition, schools have also crumbled. Teachers are not being paid or are severely underpaid, and many children cannot even attend school as their families cannot afford to send them. Essential goods such as clean drinking water are scarce, and chronic power outages are the new norm.

In addition, as state institutions have weakened armed groups, government-aligned militias and criminal gangs operate with impunity, contributing to the country's violence. Kidnapping, extortion and drug trafficking have surged. The breakdown of law and order has compounded the humanitarian crisis, creating an environment where leaving is the only option.

The economic collapse and humanitarian crisis are not an accident but a symptom of a regime that prioritized its survival over the well-being of its people. As the government diverts resources to maintain its grip on power, ordinary citizens bear the brunt of the collapse.

Venezuela is no longer a safe place to live, and this is what led to around a quarter of the population to leave within the last decade. Similarly, the political repression and human rights abuses that forced millions to flee were direct efforts of the regime's efforts to maintain power at all costs. Democratic erosion in Venezuela created a perfect storm of political, economic and social crisis, leaving millions with no choice but to flee in search of safety.

## When Power Trumps People: Venezuela's Crisis of Democracy and Displacements



### Conclusion

*The scale of this crisis is staggering, even surpassing the numbers of those displaced in Syria and Myanmar. Despite its magnitude, the Venezuelan crisis is the most underfunded global crisis now. With minimal international support, the suffering of displaced Venezuelans is heightened. In 2024, the situation remains dire as Maduro claims victory in a widely disputed election marked by allegations of fraud and rejected by a significant portion of the international community, exacerbating the country's political isolation and humanitarian crisis. Yet, he clings to power, refusing the call for a democratic transition. As millions continue to flee, the international community must act decisively to address both immediate humanitarian needs and this tragedy's underlying political and economic causes.*

*By Isabella Facchinelli. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*



**Erasing the Past, Present, and Future:  
What Azerbaijan's Conquest of Nagorno Karabakh  
Reveals About the Legacy of Territorial Disputes**

*By Krithik Sivabalan. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*

## Erasing the Past, Present, and Future: What Azerbaijan's Conquest of Nagorno Karabakh Reveals About the Legacy of Territorial Disputes



A year has passed since Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the democratic future of Nagorno-Armenians appears bleak. The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave within the Republic of Azerbaijan with a historical ethnic-Armenian majority, has been at the center of one of the longest conflicts in Central Asia. Nagorno-Karabakh existed as an internationally unrecognized breakaway state that was de facto independent of Azerbaijan since its secession from Azerbaijan, despite Azerbaijan's claim that it is Azerbaijani territory. On September 19th, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive and conquered the region in 24 hours. The government of the Republic of Artsakh, otherwise known as Nagorno-Karabakh, conceded to Azerbaijani demands to dissolve, and ceased to exist in January of 2024.

The political future of Nagorno-Armenians, more than 100,000 of whom were expelled or forced to flee following the military operation, remains uncertain. Although the Republic of Artsakh was not a full democracy, it provided its citizens with rights not accorded by the autocratic regime of Azerbaijan to its citizens, not least ethnic Armenians. Nagorno-Armenians have now lost the power to govern themselves and exercise their basic democratic rights. As Azerbaijan continues to integrate Nagorno-Karabakh into its autocratic system, the world is reminded of the vulnerability of people living in disputed territories, and how their rights are threatened by the ambitions of nationalist and authoritarian forces.

### Historical Context

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh dates to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union controlled most of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including the territories that now form Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Soviet Union gradually lost control over its constituent republics in the late 1980s, as calls for independence within the republics grew. In this turmoil, as the political futures of the Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan were being shaped, ethnic tensions grew in Nagorno-Karabakh over its post-Soviet future. Under Soviet rule, Nagorno-Karabakh existed as an autonomous republic within the Soviet Republic of the Azerbaijan due to its Armenian majority, and tensions between the Armenian majority and Azeri minority grew over whether Nagorno-Karabakh would become Armenian or Azeri territory.

From 1988 to 1994, tens of thousands of Armenians and Azeris were killed and hundreds of thousands more displaced through riots, wars, and ethnic cleansing to determine Nagorno-Karabakh's future. In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh declared the independence of The Republic of Artsakh, leading to the start of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. With the help of the newly formed Republic of Armenia, the Artsakh forces eventually captured the territory within the Soviet-carved borders of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as surrounding Azerbaijani regions. Artsakh operated de facto independent of Azerbaijan until 2023, with limited international recognition and material/financial support from Armenia.

## Erasing the Past, Present, and Future: What Azerbaijan's Conquest of Nagorno Karabakh Reveals About the Legacy of Territorial Disputes



Grievances over these events continue to define relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and have resulted in countless armed conflicts and clashes between Azerbaijan and Artsakh forces supported by Armenia until 2023. In a military operation conducted in September 2020, Azerbaijan captured the territories surrounding the Soviet-era borders of Nagorno-Karabakh. By the end of 2023, Azerbaijan successfully captured the remaining territory of Nagorno-Karabakh; 'liberating' the region and extending Azerbaijani control over "every corner of Karabakh".

### The State of Democracy for Nagorno-Armenians

Azerbaijan has since destroyed the democratic will of the people who had once called Artsakh home. Before its conquest, Azerbaijan enforced a 10-month blockade around Artsakh. This severely reduced the availability of basic services and resources, and the capacity of the Artsakh government to provide for its people. It was Azerbaijan's first step in undermining the self-governing capacities and democratic rights of Nagorno-Armenians.

Following the military offensive in September of 2023, Azerbaijan began its efforts to implement the 'Great Return', a state program that calls for the "reconstruction and revitalization" of Nagorno-Karabakh to ensure "sustainable settlement". In this pursuit, more than 95% of the pre-war population has been expelled or forced to flee; displaced Nagorno-Armenians are denied the right to return and exercise the rights they once enjoyed. Armenian cultural heritage and remnants of the Artsakh government continue to be destroyed, as Azerbaijan reconstructs the region with an Azeri cultural vision. Countless churches and historic Armenian villages have been destroyed in this pursuit. By 2026, Azerbaijan hopes to settle 140,000 Azeris across Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nagorno-Armenians remain displaced across the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, with most seeking refuge in Armenia. They live as refugees and no longer exercise the democratic rights they once had. While the government of Armenia has pledged to allow Nagorno-Armenians to apply for citizenship, integrating the refugees into Armenia has proven difficult, due to Armenia's financial and infrastructural limitations. While many will be able to exercise their democratic rights in the future as Armenian citizens, they have lost the ability to govern themselves as a people with a distinct history. While Azerbaijan claims that Armenians will be able to live alongside Azeris, Nagorno-Karabakh remains highly militarized, with severely restricted entry of all peoples, including the press, into the region. According to the Freedom House report for 2023, Artsakh's freedom score fell from 37 to -3, which is one of the largest declines in freedom in a year.

The plight of Nagorno-Armenians embodies the plight of all peoples living in disputed territories, as they fall prey to the nationalist, expansionist ambitions of authoritarian states. Countries like Azerbaijan often seek to fulfill expansionist agendas that are situated within a cultural narrative. While the suffering of Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh should not be forgotten, it does not serve as a recourse for the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the region. Regardless of whether the regime of Ilham Aliyev is truly committed to the narrative or is simply invoking this narrative to curry favour with the Azeri masses, the commitment to the "Great Return" has brought about the largest democratic decline of 2023.

# Erasing the Past, Present, and Future: What Azerbaijan's Conquest of Nagorno Karabakh Reveals About the Legacy of Territorial Disputes



Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno Karabakh was one of several events in 2023 that highlighted the democratic vulnerability of people living in disputed territories. In the Occupied West Bank, the already limited democratic rights of Palestinians have been further diminished in the wake of the Israel-Hamas War. Israeli settlers continue to terrorize and harass Palestinian civilians with relative impunity, Israeli Defense Forces launch frequent raids and arbitrarily detain Palestinians in greater frequency, and the state of Israel continues to limit the mobility and basic rights of Palestinians. This increased repression is rooted in the belief that the West Bank belongs to Israel and that Palestinians stand in the way of bringing the region under Israeli control. The use of historical narratives to resolve territorial disputes has further diminished what little rights Palestinians in the West Bank have.

Venezuela's claim over Eastern Guyana was yet another event in 2023 that highlights this risk. On December 3rd, 2023, The Venezuelan Government held a referendum regarding whether Guayana Esquina, the eastern half of the Republic of Guyana that the Venezuelan government claims is Venezuelan territory based on Venezuela's rejection of a colonial-era transfer of land to Guyana, is Venezuelan territory. The referendum returned with an overwhelming majority in favour – the result of the referendum is widely believed to be falsified by the authoritarian government – to which the government proclaimed that the region must be annexed. Although nothing more has happened beyond Venezuela's legal recognition of the referendum results, it is a stark warning of how Venezuela's ambitions to resolve the territorial dispute threaten the democratic power of the Guyanese people.

Those who live in disputed territories face heightened risks of losing their democratic rights and capacity for self-governance to the ambitions of authoritarian states. The plight of Nagorno-Armenians informs the world of this risk and serves as a reminder that such disputes must be resolved diplomatically and not militarily. The latter only serves to perpetuate a cycle of dispossession and violence and does little to fan the flames of hate. The international community must be committed to providing global forums for diplomatic cooperation and engagement, and to ensure resolution through peace, not conquest and repression.

By Krithik Sivabalan. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.



**El Salvador's Democratic Crisis:  
The Rise of Authoritarianism Under Nayib Bukele  
and Its Impact on Latin America**

*By Maria Fernanda de Almeida. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*

# El Salvador's Democratic Crisis: The Rise of Authoritarianism Under Nayib Bukele and Its Impact on Latin America



El Salvador has experienced a dramatic shift toward authoritarianism in recent years under President Nayib Bukele. Once seen as a reformist leader offering a fresh alternative to traditional parties, Bukele has systematically redefined executive power, bypassing democratic institutions and curtailing civil liberties to enhance national security. This transformation raises profound concerns for El Salvador and the broader Latin American region, where populism and authoritarianism resurface. Examining Bukele's erosion of democratic checks and balances reveals unsettling implications for civil liberties, human rights, and the future of regional governance.

From the beginning of his presidency in 2019, Bukele's primary focus has been consolidating power. His early moves targeted the judiciary, a cornerstone of democratic governance that checks executive authority. In May 2021, leveraging its legislative majority, his New Ideas (NI) party orchestrated the dismissal of all five magistrates of the Constitutional Court and the Attorney General. This blatant power grab dismantled the judiciary's independence and drew condemnation from domestic and international observers. Bukele has effectively removed barriers that limit executive authority by undermining this crucial institutional safeguard. The separation of powers, a fundamental principle of democracy, has been significantly weakened, allowing unchecked governance. This erosion not only threatens El Salvador's democratic future but sets a dangerous precedent for other nations in the region facing similar challenges.

As Bukele solidified his control, civil liberties in El Salvador faced increasing threats. His administration has deployed mass surveillance, media censorship, and intimidation to silence dissent. Reports indicate that the government closely monitors journalists, activists, and opposition figures, creating an environment of fear where dissenting voices are stifled. Independent media outlets critical of the administration encounter harassment, economic pressure, and disinformation campaigns. Meanwhile, state-controlled platforms amplify pro-government narratives, further marginalizing critical voices. Public protests are frequently met with heavy-handed police responses, leading to arrests and, in some cases, violence.

The situation worsened in March 2022 when he declared a state of emergency in response to rising gang violence. While the move was framed as necessary to enhance security, it effectively suspended constitutional protections, including due process rights. Thousands of individuals were detained arbitrarily, many without evidence or fair trials. Human rights organizations documented numerous cases of abuse, including torture and ill-treatment of detainees. These actions disproportionately affected marginalized communities already struggling with poverty and violence. While Bukele points to a decline in crime rates as evidence of success, his methods' ethical and legal implications are deeply troubling. Suppressing civil liberties in the name of security erodes the rule of law and risks alienating the communities the government purports to protect.

## El Salvador's Democratic Crisis: The Rise of Authoritarianism Under Nayib Bukele and Its Impact on Latin America



The human cost of these authoritarian tactics is significant. Vulnerable groups, particularly in impoverished areas, bear the brunt of the government's heavy-handed approach. Prisons are overcrowded, and conditions have deteriorated, with reports of at least 18 detainees dying in state custody under questionable circumstances. These deaths, coupled with widespread allegations of torture and abuse, highlight a pervasive culture of impunity. The government's actions have violated individual rights and exacerbated social tensions, undermining efforts to build a more equitable and just society.

El Salvador's democratic erosion is not occurring in isolation but reflects a broader trend of rising authoritarian populism across Latin America. Similar patterns have emerged in countries like Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega and Brazil during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. These leaders share common strategies: undermining independent institutions, concentrating power, and portraying opposition forces as corrupt enemies of the people. Bukele's direct communication style and populist rhetoric have resonated beyond El Salvador's borders, and his high approval ratings, despite documented human rights abuses, present a worrying model for other leaders in the region. In societies grappling with crime, corruption, and economic instability, the appeal of "strongman" leaders promising quick solutions is particularly potent. This trend severely threatens democratic norms, encouraging other leaders to adopt similar tactics under the guise of delivering security and stability.

Bukele's approach has implications far beyond El Salvador. His ability to maintain widespread public support while dismantling democratic institutions could embolden other regional leaders to follow suit. The promise of swift solutions to complex problems like crime and corruption, coupled with populist rhetoric, often masks the long-term damage caused by eroding democratic governance. As countries across Latin America face escalating violence and political instability, the allure of authoritarian solutions grows stronger. However, history demonstrates that such strategies often lead to more profound instability, undermining the very foundations of democracy and exacerbating social divides.

Finally, El Salvador's experience under Bukele is a cautionary tale for Latin America. While his administration's hardline approach has delivered short-term security gains, the long-term consequences of undermining democratic institutions and civil liberties are severe. The country's trajectory underscores the fragility of democratic systems and the ease with which they can be dismantled under populist leadership. For other nations facing similar challenges, the lesson is clear: sustainable security and prosperity cannot come at the expense of democratic values. Upholding human rights, ensuring judicial independence, and fostering civic engagement are essential for lasting stability.

## El Salvador's Democratic Crisis: The Rise of Authoritarianism Under Nayib Bukele and Its Impact on Latin America



*Scholars argue that the international community must support democratic governance and human rights across the region. El Salvador's journey highlights the need for vigilance and collective action to resist authoritarianism and champion democratic principles. The future of democracies in Latin America depends on recognizing that proper security can only be achieved through respect for democratic norms and the protection of civil liberties. El Salvador's struggle serves as both a warning and a call to action, reminding us that preserving democratic freedoms requires constant vigilance, commitment, and solidarity.*

*By Maria Fernanda de Almeida. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*



## **Mexico's Judicial Reform in an Era of Worldwide Threats to Judicial Independence**

*By Matthew Chasmar. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.*

# Mexico's Judicial Reform in an Era of Worldwide Threats to Judicial Independence



In September 2024, Mexico enacted constitutional amendments bringing about sweeping and highly contentious changes to its judicial system. Under these reforms, Mexico's Supreme Court will be reorganized, while anonymous "faceless judges" will sit on organized crime-related cases. Yet the most significant change in these reforms is the future selection of Mexico's judges in elections, rather than by appointment.

Mexico's first round of judicial elections will take place in June 2025, followed by a second round of elections in 2027. Overall, more than 1600 federal judges will be selected through this electoral process. Additional elections must also be held to select local judges. Conducting these elections will be a major undertaking. Ensuring their integrity will be of the utmost importance but also poses a difficult challenge for Mexico's electoral authorities.

Only a very small minority of countries worldwide select judges through elections, and no other country conducts judicial elections on the scale that Mexico plans to. Interestingly, Mexico has some historical precedent for this reform. Under the country's 1857 constitution, Justices of the Supreme Court were determined by indirect popular elections. However, most countries select their judges by appointment or through an examination-based system. For example, in Canada, judges are appointed by federal, provincial and territorial governments.

The now-former President of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO, as he is often known) has justified these reforms as a means of strengthening democracy by making judges accountable to the people. As it currently stands, Mexico's judicial system suffers from serious problems including high corruption and impunity. However, critics also argue that the reforms will politicize the judiciary and undermine the democratic separation of powers. They charge that the reforms are an attempt to prevent the judiciary from standing in the way of the executive branch's priorities.

Indeed, the reforms have also proven highly controversial. Mexican judges and judicial workers went on strike over the reforms, disrupting current legal proceedings. Mexico's Supreme Court reviewed the amendments' constitutionality, prompting current President Claudia Sheinbaum to accuse the Court of overreach. Though the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the constitutionality of the amendments, 8 out of the Court's 11 justices have opted to resign rather than stand for election.

The reforms have also garnered international criticism. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed grave concern over the measure, noting its potential negative impacts on access to justice, judicial independence, and the rule of law. Meanwhile, Mexico paused its relations with the Canadian and U.S. embassies in that country, after both the Canadian and American Ambassadors expressed concerns over the reforms' potential impact on North American trade and investment.

## Mexico's Judicial Reform in an Era of Worldwide Threats to Judicial Independence



Further, these reforms in Mexico come at a time of attacks on judicial independence worldwide, which have advanced alongside the erosion of democracy. In a 2024 report to the Human Rights Council, Margaret Satterthwaite, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, outlines a typology of methods that "autocratizing governments" use to undermine or control justice systems.

The first category of methods seeks to capture or curb courts and legal institutions (such as bar associations), such as by expanding the role of other branches of government in judicial selection. The second grouping of methods subverts justice systems, transforming them into tools of control for the regime. This may take the form of politically motivated prosecutions or politically motivated disciplinary proceedings against judges and lawyers.

Finally, the third category encompasses interference with and attacks on actors within the justice system. These attacks may be rhetorical, such as government disparagement of judges, prosecutors and lawyers. Yet in the most serious cases, governments have also employed arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture, physical attacks and assassinations against justice actors. Importantly, as Satterthwaite herself notes, not every judicial reform is an attack on judicial independence. Indeed, there are many legitimate reasons why governments might seek to reform their judicial systems. However, any changes must be scrutinized for their effect on human rights, the rule of law, and the overall health of democracy.

As far as judicial elections are concerned, a conventional understanding of democracy as government by and for the people might suggest that more elections must necessarily further democratic aims. Yet despite being unelected, the judiciary nevertheless plays a vital role in democracy by upholding the rule of law. This role requires judicial independence, which allows judges to act impartially, fairly, and in the interests of justice even when it is unpopular to do so. Judicial elections risk eroding this independence, by making judges' selection and tenure subject to electoral politics.

Mexican democracy is fragile. The country scored a 60/100 rating from Freedom House in 2024 and has only been an electoral democracy since 2000. Though its ultimate effect remains to be seen, the introduction of judicial elections is a perilous development for Mexico's democracy at a time of attacks on judicial independence – and democracy itself – worldwide.

By Matthew Chasmar. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.



**Warfare in the Shadows:  
The Democratic Crisis of Privatized Violence**

*By Sadie McIntosh. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.*

## Warfare in the Shadows: The Democratic Crisis of Privatized Violence

The traditional notion of conflict – physical violence that occurs between two states – is becoming archaic. Methods such as economic sanctions and disinformation campaigns are how states exert control and power over one another in the 21st century. With the broadening of warfare tactics, the actors involved in conflicts have also diversified. The early 2000s saw the War on Terror, where governments struggled to grapple with the threat non-state actors posed to their national security. The 2003 Iraq War showed that non-state actors did not have to be entirely categorized as a threat; new actors in the grand theatre of war provided ample opportunity for the American government to expand their military capabilities. The use of Blackwater in this conflict marked the beginning of a key player in the new conflict landscape: private military and security companies (PMSCs).

Historically, the government has monopolized the authorization to enact violence. Max Weber argued that this was, in fact, a foundational characteristic of statehood. In recent years, this sole power has been jeopardized. PMSCs are being used by governments worldwide to support or carry out crucial missions typically facilitated by the military. Given the significance of military power in a state, the privatization of said industry poses significant questions for democracy. When the decision to enact violence now falls on CEOs instead of Congress, can warfare be democratically enacted?

PMSCs show no sign of declining in demand on a global scale, reflecting the prevalence of novel forms of war. As they are contractors of states, the limitations of their actions remain hazy. PMSCs lack the systems that ensure transparency and accountability that exist in state militaries. The Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA) provide valuable frameworks for regulating PMSCs but are not legally binding. This creates a vacuum where PMSCs are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny as militaries are, resulting in a lack of regulation and ability to carry out clandestine operations. Ultimately, PMSCs do not have the same accountability issues that militaries have, and there is less clarity on who they answer to. This is fundamentally undemocratic; accountability and transparency are two of the key principles of any healthy democratic society. The shift towards utilization of PMSCs in military operations is a symptom of global democratic decline.

### PMSCs and Authoritarianism

When asked to think of a PMSC, Wagner Group is the first that comes to mind. The Russian state-sponsored PMSC has made waves in headlines over the last decade for its involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and various conflicts throughout Africa. Operatives have been accused of war crimes, and Russia has consequentially been under fire as Wagner operates under the auspices of the Kremlin. Following the 2023 battle for Bakhmut, five thousand Wagner operatives marched towards Moscow to protest the alleged under-supplying of troops from Russia's army chief. As of today, Wagner is thought to be less of a consolidated force and more of a loose coalition of networks. The Wagner founder's death in August of last year resulted in a dissolution of the pre-existing leadership structure, making it difficult to assert what the path forward might look like.

## Warfare in the Shadows: The Democratic Crisis of Privatized Violence



Even following Yevgeny Prigozhin's death and the 'decline' of Wagner, the UK parliament is calling for the PMSC to be labelled a terrorist organization. Both the UK and the U.S. have a track record of labelling Russian PMSCs as far more abhorrent than their British and American counterparts. PMSCs have come to be associated with Russia through the focus of Wagner as the foremost contractor in the international community. Consequentially, PMSCs are becoming intrinsically connected with authoritarianism more broadly. The rhetoric in much of the discussion surrounding Wagner is that it is only allowed to carry out missions that result in war crimes because it works under the auspices of the Kremlin. The use of PMSCs in warfare can be seen as undemocratic through its association with Russia – authoritarian regimes lack systems for transparency and accountability, so it follows that the conduits for violence in these states would be private contractors.

### American PMSCs and Democratic Decline

While the future of Wagner remains uncertain, the demand for PMSCs does not. American PMSC Blackwater's involvement in Iraq and subsequent criticism during the early 2000s fostered belief amongst policymakers and academics alike that PMSCs came with too much baggage. Concerns about ethical violations and lack of control over private contractors brought the critique of PMSCs into the public sphere.

This prediction has proven to be inaccurate; the changing conflict landscape has only further necessitated the involvement of PMSCs in warfare. In the United States, government spending on private corporations in the defence industry has increased 69 per-cent from 2000 to 2017. The reliance of the American Department of Defence on PMSCs cannot be understated – a 2017 Congressional Report asserted that without private contractors, the U.S. could not arm and deploy an effective fighting force on its own.

When government spending is being directed toward hiring contractors, the power to enact violence becomes decentralized. It is no longer the responsibility of the state, but instead the private corporations the state employs. This is particularly true when militaries are as reliant on PMSCs as the U.S. is. This poses an existential threat to democracy – those in charge of the military might of a democratic country are not the state's generals, but instead third parties who prioritize a bottom line over life.

### Implications of the Trump Presidency

A second Donald Trump presidency has created discourse about fascism coming to the White House. Opponents and former allies alike have gone on record to state that Trump poses a threat to democracy in America. His role in the January 6th insurrection and ever-growing list of fascist remarks compiled with a stacked Senate and Supreme Court further bolster his potential for taking on an authoritarian role as president. While there is not a great deal of discussion occurring on the use of PMSCs, Trump has threatened to use the military to carry out mass deportations and suppress protests. This suggests that when democracy is in decline, not only are PMSCs more widely employed but the military itself can be used to carry out duties that are performed by law enforcement. The proposed invocation of the Insurrection Act on his first day in office poses serious concerns regarding democratic warfare. If troops can be employed on American soil, the line between public and private in enacting violence has become entirely blurred.

## Warfare in the Shadows: The Democratic Crisis of Privatized Violence



### Conclusion

*The international community must reckon with new challenges in warfare. This is particularly true when democracy itself is being threatened globally. America is the supposed stronghold of democracy. When it starts to wane domestically, repercussions occur globally, and this is particularly true of warfare. Heading into a new era of great power competition with China, it is critical that the relationship the U.S. government has with private military contractors be assessed. The decentralization of power to enact force – both at the international and domestic levels – should be left up to state actors to maintain democracy rather than leaving it in the hands of corporations.*

*By Sadie McIntosh. Edited by Julia Chapman, Aurora Schatz.*



## **The Growing Threat of Misinformation and Disinformation to Canada's Democracy**

*By Trang Nguyen. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*

# The Growing Threat of Misinformation and Disinformation to Canada's Democracy



*With the 2025 election on the horizon, cybersecurity threats present an escalating challenge to Canada's democratic processes. Misinformation and disinformation are particularly concerning in Canada's diverse, multicultural society, where they can deepen divisions, undermine trust in institutions, and heighten social tensions. These risks jeopardize the stability of Canadian democracy. In the past, Canadian elections have been targeted by state-sponsored cyber threat actors, hacktivists, and cybercriminals, underscoring the urgency of addressing these vulnerabilities.*

*Misinformation refers to incorrect information spread without the intent to cause harm, while disinformation is the deliberate spread of false information to deceive or manipulate. With the evolving digital landscape, it is becoming more challenging for Canadians to confirm the credibility of the information. A survey from Statistics Canada suggests that over two in five Canadians (43%) think that it is difficult to distinguish between true and false news or information. Both forms of misinformation and disinformation are exacerbated by the digital landscape, where social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow for the rapid dissemination of misleading or false content. These platforms often create "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles," where individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, intensifying political polarization and distrust.*

*According to a Communication Security Establishment (CSE) report, Canada is facing increasing cyber threat activity from foreign actors, particularly in the context of elections. The report highlights that these threats are compounded by the growing use of AI-generated content and sophisticated tools for deception. Canada's status as a member of key international organizations like NATO and the G7, its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, and its support for Ukraine make it an attractive target for cyber actors seeking to influence political outcomes. These actors may not need to directly alter election results but can succeed in undermining democratic institutions by sowing doubt and mistrust through the strategic spread of misinformation.*

*Canada's efforts to promote peace, security, and international human rights motivate actors looking to change election outcomes to influence policy or diplomatic ties. For Canada, a diverse population presents a vulnerable point. Voters are the frequent targets of cyber threats, and mis/disinformation can become a powerful tool to divide Canadian society through the manipulation of information related to each group. As a liberal democracy, Canada presents itself as an easy target for foreign disinformation campaigns. These actors do not have to change the outcome of an election to successfully interfere but can do so by sowing doubt and spreading misinformation to undermine Canada's democracy.*

## The Growing Threat of Misinformation and Disinformation to Canada's Democracy



### *Impact on Canada's Multicultural Democracy*

Canada's unique demographic makeup—comprising French-speaking, Indigenous, rural, and immigrant communities—makes it particularly vulnerable to these threats. Disinformation campaigns target specific groups, often exploiting cultural, racial, and political divides. For example, according to a study from McGill University, South Asian communities in Canada, particularly those who rely on non-English or French media outlets, are more susceptible to sharing fake news. This was largely observed during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Similarly, Indigenous communities, with historically lower trust in government, are more vulnerable to misinformation, which can undermine their confidence in democratic processes.

These targeted campaigns can create "us vs. them" narratives, dividing communities along cultural or ethnic lines and deepening political polarization. This makes it harder to engage in constructive dialogue and social compromise, further destabilizing social harmony.

Different social groups might hold different beliefs and biases, making them more susceptible to certain mis/disinformation. A multicultural society is therefore prone to being deeply divided and politically polarized with false information catered to their emotions and biases. This can amplify polarization and destabilize social harmony as it makes peaceful dialogue or compromises harder to reach. Fear can have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable communities which may already face social or economic marginalization. One example is that Canadian South Asian communities facing racist commentaries are likely to hold misperceptions about COVID-19. In addition to fostering fear and anxiety, mis/disinformation can fuel hate and violence that harms the social fabric of Canada which values peace, inclusivity, and tolerance.

### *The Importance of Resilience and Public Response*

The nature of mis/disinformation can range from actors with free resources and less power aiming only to hurt one individual or a group of people to formidable state and non-state actors looking to instill mistrust in society and institutions. Canada must develop strategies to build resilience against misinformation and disinformation. According to scholars, addressing the vulnerabilities posed by these threats requires a collective response from governments, journalists, researchers, and the public. They identify four key vulnerabilities: a fractured information system that undermines trust in news sources, increasing difficulties in detecting disinformation and coordinating countermeasures, perceptions of systematic manipulation of the information system, and a global network of distrust, where Canadians are increasingly skeptical of their democratic institutions.

## The Growing Threat of Misinformation and Disinformation to Canada's Democracy



*Policy recommendations to address these vulnerabilities and strengthen Canada's resilience in preparation for the next election*

- 1. Develop a Community of Practice: Canada ought to continue to build on its already existing National Cyber Security Strategy to address misinformation, focusing on diverse linguistic, cultural, and geographic communities. This would ensure that efforts are tailored to specific needs and vulnerabilities.*
- 2. Transparent Government Communication: Improve government communication strategies to promote transparency, trust, and clear messaging, particularly during times of crisis (e.g., elections or public health emergencies).*
- 3. Invest in Digital Literacy: Partnering with the private sector and civil society to enhance digital literacy across Canada is important as scholars point out that low digital literacy increases the harm from mis/disinformation. Better education for Canadians about the risks posed by mis/disinformation is essential to empower individuals to critically evaluate online content and reduce the spread of disinformation.*
- 4. Algorithmic Transparency: Promote policies and deepen investments to improve the algorithms of social media platforms, ensuring they prioritize reliable sources of information over sensationalized or misleading content.*
- 5. Collaboration Across Sectors: The threat to democracy is not limited to elections. A broader, long-term effort is needed to combat the steady erosion of institutional trust and social cohesion, which can stem from misinformation about basic facts. Therefore, there is a role for the private sector to play along with the public, particularly technology companies and social media platforms.*

*Cybersecurity threats to democracy are predicted to grow in the coming decades. Canada must take proactive steps to educate its citizens about the risks posed by misinformation and disinformation, particularly in a society as diverse and politically polarized as Canada. Striking a balance between ensuring security and upholding the values of equality, liberty, and private rights will remain a constant challenge. Canadian democracy is built on respect for the rule of law, the protection of minority and Indigenous rights, and the will of the people at all levels of government. Accurate information is vital to this process, as it shapes voters' decisions and ensures the integrity of elections. When misinformation undermines trust in government actions, policies, or elected officials, it erodes the foundation of democracy itself, making it essential to protect the public's confidence in its institutions for the health and longevity of Canada's democratic system.*

*By Trang Nguyen. Edited by Tasnia Reza, Aurora Schatz.*