D+C

Development and Cooperation

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11|2025

Does money rule the world?

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Pamela Smith

Representatives of African states sharply criticise the UN, p. 5.

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Malawi's agricultural sector is suffering from the consequences of climate change, p. 14.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Thoko Chikondi

"Both India and China are seeking new markets in Latin America and the Middle East to buffer against US trade shocks." Aditi Roy Ghatak, p. 16

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Illustration: Dadi Prayoga / Unsplash

Cover: Illustration by Dadi Prayoga (see p. 4).

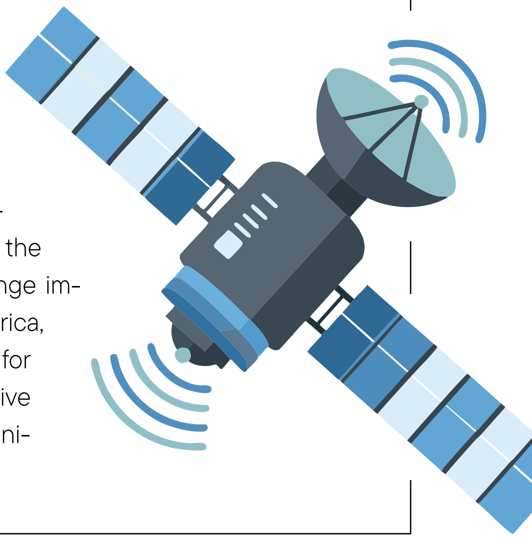
The chances for development increase when a country's political and economic elites make decisions that benefit the population. However, it is not uncommon for them to live in parallel worlds, be corrupt or part of organised crime. Worldwide, a great deal of wealth continues to be concentrated in the hands of a very few individuals who are determined to exert political influence – often to the detriment of the less privileged.

600 million people

in **sub-Saharan Africa** lived without **access to electricity** in 2023. According to the latest figures available from the *International Energy Agency (IEA)*, this means that only 40 % of the population in sub-Saharan Africa was connected to the main grid at that time. In addition, 4 million households had access via local grids.

At the same time, these figures mark a turnaround: for the first time in three years, the **number of people with access to electricity rose again,** although the figures for 2019 still could not be reached. The positive development can be attributed not only to the increasing spread of **solar home systems,** but also to the **expansion of electricity grids.**

The good news



This happened in May, but with everything that is going on you may have missed that the African Union has inaugurated the African Space Agency (AfSA). Africa's first continental space agency, headquartered in New Cairo, is not just about African countries going to space, but a significant step towards battling the climate crisis: launching satellites and establishing weather stations across the continent allows centralised monitoring and effective responses to climate-change impacts – in all member states, not just in high-resource countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Nigeria, which have been investing in national space agencies for years. The integration of these programmes is expected to have numerous positive effects, ranging from optimising the agricultural sector and satellite-based communications to driving economic growth through improved access to technologies.

ARTIST

Dadi Prayoga

Instagram: @prayocraft

Photo: Dadi Prayoga

Dadi Prayoga is an illustrator based in Indonesia. Here he introduces himself and his art:

"I'm an illustrator from the charming city of Tasikmalaya. I love crafting simple yet expressive illustrations, where every shape and colour helps tell a story or share a feeling. I find inspiration in everyday moments and the little wonders of life. For me, there's a special kind of magic in simplicity – when we say less, the heart can listen more closely.

Through my art, I hope to connect with people from all walks of life and maybe even brighten someone's day with a bit of warmth and positivity. My dream is to keep growing as an illustrator, creating images that gently stay in people's hearts. For me, illustration isn't just about drawing – it's a way to share my view of the world, one gentle story at a time."

Two of Dadi Prayoga's illustrations are featured on our cover page and at the beginning of the focus section, respectively.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Pamela Smith

Burkina Faso's prime minister, Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, lashed out at the UN in his speech to the General Assembly.

MULTILATERALISM

A bold stance

At a deeply divided UN General Assembly, African leaders stood out with assertive demands for a greater voice in global decision-making. But behind the bold rhetoric lie old dilemmas: Can Africa unite around reform, and will it risk friction with traditional partners to secure its place in a changing world order?

BY MIRIAM OGUTU

This year, the United Nations turned 80. At the General Assembly (UNGA) in New York in September, world leaders focused on pressing issues such as ongoing conflicts, climate change, sustainable development and human rights. The anniversary year's motto, "Better Together," could not have been more timely – nor could it have contrasted more sharply with reality.

The UNGA exposed just how disunited the world really is. The gathering was marked by veiled jabs, grievances, pleas and open disagreement – all against the backdrop of today's cascading crises: the situation in Gaza, the wars in Sudan and Ukraine, accelerating climate collapse – and, as the US President used his speaking time to note, malfunctioning teleprompters and escalators.

The stance taken by African heads of state and government was in keeping with the heated atmosphere. They stood their ground, carrying a whole bunch of complaints to demand fair representation and inclusive global governance, especially in the UN Security Council, the organisation's main decision-making body. While these concerns were far from new, their voices had become louder and more impatient.

> "Ruto openly questioned whether the UN remains relevant to the demands of our time."

FAILING LIKE THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS?

Topping the list of grievances was the United Nations itself. African leaders criticised its exclusionary structure, which continues to sideline the continent. Kenya's President William Ruto, in his address, drew a historical parallel to the League of Nations, pointing to its failure to prevent the Second World War. This, he stressed, must serve as both lesson and warning – underlining the urgent need to reimagine and reform international institutions so they become more inclusive, responsive and fit for today's global challenges. He called for the UN Security Council to be restructured to include at least two permanent African members.

Ruto openly questioned whether the UN, in its current form, remains relevant to the demands of our time – and whether it can still serve humanity amid today's global realities. It was a provocation that resonated widely, echoed by many other speakers from across the African continent.

> "Ghana's president argued that the UN Charter has become outdated in terms of representation."

Ghana's president, John Dramani Mahama, argued that the UN Charter has become outdated in terms of representation. He pointed out that post-World War II powers continue to enjoy disproportionate influence – a reality that stands in stark contrast to Article 1 of the Charter, which affirms the sovereign equality of all member states.

More modest than his counterpart from East Africa, Mahama maintained that Africa must be granted at least one permanent seat on the UN Security Council. He further argued that veto power should not remain the exclusive privilege of a few states, nor be absolute. In the interest of fairness and accountability, he proposed establishing a mechanism within the UN to review or challenge the use of vetoes.

Namibia's president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, strongly emphasised the need to uphold the Ezulwini Consensus, proof that Africa has been calling for stronger representation for the past 20 years. The consensus, adopted in 2005, reflects the African Union's unified position on the need on UN reform, one in which Africa enjoys equitable representation.

South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, reiterated his country's long-standing concern over the UN Security Council's ineffectiveness and the erosion of its credibility in upholding international law. Burkina Faso's prime minister, Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouedraogo, delivered an even sharper critique, accusing the Council of being misused to pursue political agendas and settle scores rather than to promote peace and justice. He insisted that Africa must be granted a permanent seat to restore balance and legitimacy in global governance.

Another important point of criticism raised by African leaders centred on the inequalities embedded in international financial systems, particularly in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Kenya's president, William Ruto, for example, underscored how current structures often perpetuate economic imbalances, noting that "the current global financial architecture punishes poor countries while rewarding the rich."

“Will Africa have the courage to disrupt the status quo, to rethink its role within the UN system, or even chart an independent course that reflects its growing global confidence?
To be frank, I doubt it.”

WHAT FOLLOWS THE WORDS?

Looking back on all these bold statements, I have questions. While the views of their leaders reflect the frustrations and hopes of many Africans, one has to wonder whether the world is truly prepared to turn their bold words on UN reform into action, or whether their calls for justice will once again sink into the usual cacophony of empty rhetoric. Will this newfound confidence among African leaders finally translate into meaningful action?

But even if the call for reform were to be heeded – would African states themselves be able to agree on who should occupy the permanent seats on the Security Council? Nigeria’s vice president, Kashim Shettima, left little room for doubt, insisting that his country must claim one of them. Presumably, the rest of the continent can sort out who gets the other. Or should we take turns? Let’s be honest: consensus on that is a long shot. So who decides – and based on what criteria?

And if the world continues to ignore these demands – what then? Will Africa have the courage to disrupt the status quo, to rethink its role within the UN system, or even chart an independent course that reflects its growing global confidence? To be frank, I doubt it.

Perhaps the more pressing question now is whether Africa’s growing self-confidence on the world stage will begin to strain relations with its traditional Western partners, especially in the wake of the ongoing and devastating aid and cooperation cuts, epitomised by the recent turmoil surrounding the USAID withdrawal.

However, this year’s UNGA signalled a shift. There is a sense of awakening: Africa is done waiting for permission to lead – at least on paper. Its leaders spoke with unusual conviction, demanding a fair share in global decision-making, not symbolic gestures.

But bold words must be followed by bold deeds. Will Africa’s self-confidence translate into a common will for reform, or will the fear of losing donor funding and foreign aid cause them to back down again?

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BRAZIL

A landmark for democracy

In a historic conviction, Brazil's courts have found former president Jair Bolsonaro guilty of attempting a coup, among other serious charges. This sends out a powerful signal of institutional strength in times when non-democratic actors are increasingly winning elections worldwide.

BY MARIANA LLANOS

In 2023, demonstrators protested in São Paulo against a proposed amnesty bill that could have benefited former president Jair Bolsonaro.

On 11 September 2025, Brazil's Supreme Federal Court handed down a historic verdict. It convicted former president Jair Bolsonaro and seven of his close allies – including former generals – of plotting to overturn the country's democratic order. We all remember the far-right ex-president (2019–2022) for his policies – or lack thereof – that endangered the biodiversity of the Amazon and denied the threat of the pandemic.

But that wasn't all. Bolsonaro also became notorious for undermining democratic institutions, casting doubt on Brazil's long-trusted electronic voting system and rejecting the results of the 2022 election after losing the run-off vote to the current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Just a week after Lula's inauguration, on 8 January 2023, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed Brazil's Congress, the Supreme Court and the government's palace in Brasília. They ransacked these landmark buildings and called for a military coup to oust Lula and reinstate Bolsonaro. The violent scenes were only the most visible chapter of a broader plot that was uncovered through police and prosecutorial investigations. The findings formed the basis of the trial in which a five-member panel of the Supreme Federal Court charged Bolsonaro with leading a criminal organisation, attempting to violently abolish democratic rule, plotting a coup, damaging public property and even conspiring to assassinate key democratic figures such as President Lula and Justice Alexandre de Moraes. Justice Luiz Fux was the only dissenting voice at the trial. He delivered an extraordinary 10-hour speech, arguing that the entire case should be annulled on procedural and substantive grounds. However, the court's panel convicted Bolsonaro by a four-to-one vote.

"Since the democratic transitions of the late 20th century, dozens of former presidents in the region have faced criminal investigations or trials."

A CONVICTION FOR ATTACKING THE DEMOCRATIC ORDER

For Bolsonaro and his supporters, this was a political trial. Bolsonaristas particularly dislike Justice de Moraes, who headed the Superior Electoral Court during the 2022 elections and strongly pushed back against Bolsonaro's claims of electoral fraud. The judge also took a firm stance after the events of 8 January 2023. In 2024, he even ordered the temporary suspension of the network X's operations in Brazil amid investigations of far-right disinformation campaigns. Nevertheless, the Bolsonaro trial was not a one-person action. Brazil has long been known for its strong judicial and prosecutorial institutions as well as for the independence of its courts. And there can in fact be no talk of political persecution, particularly when the attempts to undermine democracy that have been witnessed were so brazen and overwhelming.

In this unprecedented judicial ruling, the ex-president has been sentenced to 27 years and 3 months in prison for his central leadership role in the alleged plot. The other perpetrators – apart from one who cooperated in the plea bargain – also received long prison terms, mostly of 19 years or more. This makes the trial historic in Brazil, as it involved more than just the ex-president. It also marks the first time that high-ranking military officers have been held accountable in civilian courts for plotting to overthrow the democratic order.

"Bolsonaro's trial stands out region-wide for addressing an attempt to subvert democratic institutions."

HOLDING POWERFUL LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE

Is the Bolsonaro trial unique in Latin America? Since the democratic transitions of the late 20th century, dozens of former presidents in the region have faced criminal investigations or trials, charges ranging from corruption and illicit enrichment to human-rights violations and electoral crimes. This year alone, there have been two other cases besides the Bolsonaro trial. In July, Colombia's former president Álvaro Uribe was sentenced to 12 years in prison for witness tampering and procedural fraud. He was found guilty of offering money and benefits – through his lawyers – to imprisoned paramilitaries in exchange for false testimony intended to discredit accusations linking him to paramilitary groups. Although he is currently free pending appeal, his case constitutes the first criminal conviction of a former Colombian president.

Argentina, for its part, had famously convicted the de facto presidents of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) for crimes against humanity in 1985, marking a milestone in Argentina's history, as well as the democratically elected president Carlos Menem (1989–1999) on criminal charges. This year, former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) was convicted for aggravated fraudulent administration of public funds during her time in office. She is currently serving a six-year sentence under house arrest.

Holding powerful leaders accountable is difficult in polarised contexts. All three leaders convicted this year have claimed that their convictions were politically motivated, questioning the legitimacy of the judicial process: Uribe emphasised procedural unfairness and judicial bias, Bolsonaro echoed his ally Donald Trump's complaint of a "witch hunt," while Fernández framed her case as "lawfare," presenting herself as the target of elite conspiracies. All three have mobilised supporters in the streets.

While the three cases test the reach of the rule of law, Bolsonaro's trial stands out region-wide for addressing an attempt to subvert democratic institutions. This sets an important precedent for defending constitutional democracy at a time when non-democratic actors are increasingly reaching office via the ballot box.

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Photo: Claudia Hoehne

GOVERNANCE

Lessons on democracy from South Africa and Ethiopia

Democratic institutions across Africa face growing challenges, with South Africa and Ethiopia providing two notable examples. South Africa, long considered a democratic success story, is now grappling with deepening political polarisation and a crisis of public trust. Ethiopia, initially hopeful for positive change in the wake of sweeping reforms under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, has been sliding back towards authoritarianism for the past few years.

BY HAFTE GEBRESELASSIE GEBRIHET

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Themba Hadebe

Cyril Ramaphosa, president of South Africa, and Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian prime minister.

South Africa's transition from apartheid in 1994 led to the establishment of one of Africa's most stable constitutional democracies, based on freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary and regular elections. Three decades later, however, democracy is under considerable pressure. The 2024 elections marked a turning point, as the African National Congress (ANC) suffered its worst election defeat and failed to win a parliamentary majority for the first time since 1994. This change reflects the population's growing frustration with corruption scandals, economic stagnation and governance failures.

The rise of populist movements, particularly the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and former President Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK), has exacerbated political divisions. These parties exploit economic inequalities and historical grievances, making consensus-oriented governance increasingly difficult. Fuelled by corruption and mismanagement, the loss of public trust in institutions further threatens democratic stability. Despite these challenges, South Africa still has institutional safeguards in place, such as an independent judiciary and an active civil society, which can help overcome the democratic crisis if political leaders prioritise reform and accountability.

Ethiopia's democratic course has also become significantly less stable. The rise of Abiy Ahmed to prime minister in 2018 and his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize, especially for his policy of reconciliation with neighbouring Eritrea a year later, initially signalled a break with the country's authoritarian past and promised political liberalisation. However, this optimism quickly faded as his government reverted to repression, censorship and centralised control.

The 2021 elections, which were marred by voter suppression and widespread conflict, underscored Ethiopia's regression in terms of democracy. Parts of the population were excluded from the electoral process and key opposition leaders were arrested, meaning that the elections were neither free nor fair.

> "Democracy is not a sure-fire success."

Furthermore, Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system, which was originally intended to decentralise power, has in fact exacerbated ethnic divisions and instability and sparked violent conflicts. Ethiopia introduced ethnic federalism and restructured the country's regions along ethnic lines after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power and overthrew the military junta in 1991.

INSIGHTS FOR AFRICA'S DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

The experiences of South Africa and Ethiopia provide important insights for democratic governance across Africa.

Firstly, institutions alone are not enough. Political will and civic engagement are essential for sustaining democracy. South Africa's independent judiciary and free press remain intact, but increasing polarisation will weaken them too unless proactive reforms are forthcoming. In Ethiopia, weak institutions have enabled authoritarian consolidation that leaves little room for democratic debate.

Secondly, elections do not guarantee democracy. The electoral process in Ethiopia makes it clear that elections without transparency and political competition are more symbolic than substantive. Even in South Africa, declining voter confidence signals that procedural democracy is not enough – politicians must be accountable and responsive to the concerns of the public.

Thirdly, political polarisation and ethnic divisions are existential threats to democracy. Populist rhetoric in South Africa risks undermining democratic norms, while Ethiopia's ethnically based federalism has exacerbated conflicts rather than promoting integration. In both cases, inclusive governance and efforts to overcome social divisions are crucial.

Africa's democratic future depends on the resilience of its institutions and the commitment of its leaders and citizens to upholding democratic principles. South Africa still has the institutional framework to overcome the current crisis, provided it implements reforms to restore public confidence and curb corruption. Ethiopia, on the other hand, needs fundamental political restructuring to prevent further erosion of democracy and instability.

Democracy is not a sure-fire success; it requires vigilance, reforms and the active participation of citizens. The expe-

"Populist rhetoric in South Africa risks undermining democratic norms, while Ethiopia's ethnically based federalism has exacerbated conflicts."

riences of South Africa and Ethiopia show that democratic progress is possible, but fragile. If Africa's democracies are to survive, they must not only defend their institutions, but also create a political environment in which inclusion, accountability and the rule of law take centre stage.

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MASTHEAD | IMPRINT

D+C DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION

Vol. 53, 2025
D+C is the identical twin of the German edition E+Z.
Website: dandc.eu
ISSN 2366-7257

The production of this Digital Monthly was finalised on 30 October 2025.

D+C Development and Cooperation is funded by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and commissioned by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL. D+C does not serve as a governmental mouthpiece. Our mission is to provide a credible forum of debate, involving governments, civil society, the private sector and academia at an international level. D+C is the identical twin of E+Z Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit, the German edition.

We invite people who work in different sectors and live all around the world to contribute to D+C/E+Z. The editors request that no unsolicited manuscripts be sent, but proposals for contributions are welcome. After editing manuscripts according to journalistic standards, we ask the authors to approve the final texts before publishing their items. As we edit interviews for clarity and brevity, we also ask our interviewees for approval of the final manuscripts to ensure we do not distort their message. That is standard practice in German journalism.

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Fazit Communication GmbH
Executive directors: Jonas Grashey, Hannes Ludwig

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Disclaimer according to § 5,2 Hessian Law on the Freedom and Rights of the Press: The shareholder of the company is FAZ Fazit Stiftung.

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A farm in southern Malawi that was destroyed by cyclone Freddy in 2023.

FOOD SECURITY

Malawi's increasingly difficult battle against hunger

The hunger crisis in Malawi continues to worsen. According to the latest estimates, around 5.7 million people – roughly 28 % of the population – are acutely affected by food insecurity. The causes, which have accumulated over many years, lie in a combination of extreme weather events, economic pressure and weak agricultural structures.

BY BRENARD MWANZA AND MATTHIAS SCHARPF

Malawi was particularly hard hit by the effects of the El Niño phenomenon. Many of the country's regions experienced long periods of drought, followed by floods and hailstorms. The consequences are dramatic: in 2024, the maize harvest – Malawi's staple food – was around 17 % lower than the five-year average. Other crops, such as beans, were also unable to thrive under the adverse conditions.

Last year, the government declared a state of emergency in 23 of Malawi's 28 districts. The then President Lazarus Chakwera estimated the need for international aid at over

$ 200 million. The situation continues to deteriorate, especially in southern regions such as Phalombe, Zomba and Mangochi. However, centrally located districts such as Lilongwe and Mchinji are also reporting an increasing number of emergencies.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, over 79,000 hectares of farmland have been destroyed by drought, flooding or hail in recent months alone. Nearly 142,000 households have been affected. Last year, the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) warned that up to 5.7 million people could require assistance during the current hunger crisis. This forecast has now been largely confirmed.

> "The crisis in Malawi is not only a consequence of extreme weather conditions, but also a reflection of profound global social inequalities."

FARMERS FACING RUIN

Despair is palpable in many of the affected villages. "The maize looked good at first," reports village chief M'bwinja from Chimutu near Lilongwe. "But then the drought came. Everything was destroyed. We could hardly afford fertiliser, let alone new seeds." Tereza Langton, a smallholder from Blantyre, is also facing ruin. "If I can't harvest anything this year, I won't even be able to pay my children's school fees. We are dependent on help."

International organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF are already providing vital aid. However, the funds are insufficient to reach all those affected. Local actors such as CADECOM, the development office of the Catholic Church in Malawi, warn that the situation will continue to worsen without support. They are calling for targeted investments, for example in drought-resistant seeds and improved irrigation systems – as well as in educational opportunities and nutritional aid for children.

The Catholic Church is also actively involved in delivering emergency aid in Malawi. Auxiliary Bishop Vincent Frederick Mwakhwawa is deeply concerned about the impact of the hunger crisis, especially on families in rural areas. "Many people were already struggling before," he says. "Now they are in danger of losing everything." He calls for solidarity and support, emphasising how vital it is to provide affected households with seeds and fertiliser so they can continue to use their fields during the winter growing season.

The hunger crisis in Malawi is not an isolated case. It is representative of the increasing vulnerability of many countries to the consequences of climate change, especially in the Global South. When droughts destroy crops, food prices rise – and for many families, their entire livelihoods collapse. The situation also shows how important it is to think beyond emergency aid. Long-term support is needed for climate-friendly agriculture, better prevention structures and social security systems.

Furthermore, the crisis in Malawi is not only a consequence of extreme weather conditions, but also a reflection of profound global social inequalities. It reminds us that global solidarity is needed where people reach their limits through no fault of their own.

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Narendra Modi, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tianjin in September.

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Alexander Kazakov

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Why India and China are realigning their relations

Despite considerable differences, the world's two most populous countries have recently grown closer, a shift fuelled not least by the US's punitive tariff policy. Here's how experts from India and China analyse this geopolitical development.

BY ADITI ROY GHATAK

The Durga Puja celebrations in India are an annual festival to worship the Hindu mother goddess Durga and celebrate the triumph of good over evil. The festivities in the state of West Bengal are the biggest of their kind and a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. During the celebrations in September this year, some clay idols of Durga depicted her slaying a demon who bore a striking resemblance to US President Donald Trump. By incorporating such political symbolism into a socio-religious festival, locals were expressing their anger over the most recent trade tariffs of the Trump administration.

Trump's trade policy has had a severe economic impact. His administration has imposed tariffs as high as 50% on Indian exports such as apparel, jewellery, chemicals and footwear, which make up more than half of the country's $ 87 billion in annual exports to the US. Preliminary estimates suggest that tariffs may cut India's US-bound exports by more than half in the medium term, which would put up to 0.9 % of India's GDP at risk and threaten millions of jobs, particularly in labour-intensive sectors like textiles, gems and fisheries.

China has felt the impact of Trump's tariffs, too, which peaked as high as 145 % on some Chinese exports. China responded with counter-tariffs and export controls on rare earths. However, a meeting between Trump and China's President Xi Jinping in South Korea at the end of October sent signals of de-escalation.

"These disruptive tariffs threaten India's export-oriented sectors, have strained ties with Washington and prompted a decoupling in US-China trade, forcing India and China to pursue new alliances in a shifting global order," said Sitaram Sharma, president of the Tagore Institute of Peace Studies (Tips). He pointed out that the US tariffs against India are widely seen as retaliation for New Delhi's imports of Russian oil. The US and other nations, including the UK and members of the EU, have imposed sanctions on Russia because of Putin's ongoing attack on Ukraine.

Sharma spoke at an academic conference in Kolkata in mid-September where several scholars from India and China discussed how global developments are shaping the two countries' relationship. The event, "Shifting Geopolitics: A New Framework for India-China Relations", was organised by Tips and the Consulate of the People's Republic of China in Kolkata.

LOOKING FOR OTHER OPTIONS

The scholars discussed how the latest US tariffs have encouraged India to pursue closer ties with China, Russia and other countries. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China after a seven-year hiatus and met with China's President Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin in August and September. Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the summit, too. These developments indicate a strategic reset of the ties between India, China and Russia.

Both India and China are seeking new markets in Latin America and the Middle East to buffer against US trade shocks. China is also seeking to diversify towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and African countries, in addition to increasing domestic consumption.

"The two most populous countries and the two largest developing economies are at a critical stage of national development and rejuvenation", said Qin Yong, China's acting consul general in Kolkata. He was referring to both China and India pursuing their respective development goals as spelt out in China's Second Centenary Goal (2049) and India's Viksit Bharat (Developed India) 2047. Qin emphasised that trade between the two countries reached $ 88 billion in the first seven months of this year, a year-on-year increase of 10.5 %. "Only by strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation can China and India achieve a win-win outcome and hand-in-hand development," he said.

"Both India and China are seeking new markets in Latin America and the Middle East to buffer against US trade shocks."

Yet this possibility is fraught with problems. At the conference in Kolkata, several scholars underscored the legacy of mistrust between Beijing and New Delhi while emphasising the need to convert the environment of conflict to one of cooperation. Ishani Naskar of Jadavpur University in Kolkata stressed that the shared geography and colonial legacy of India and China are shaping current challenges. "We cannot run away from each other," she said. In her opinion, the two countries should focus on working through hardships and strengthening trade.

DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP

Relations between India and China have suffered severely in recent years. There have been repeated skirmishes on the shared border in the Himalayas, for example. More than 20 soldiers from both countries lost their lives during a border conflict in Galwan Valley in 2020. "Bilateral relations fell to the bottom", recalled Zhang Jiadong from Fudan University, China. "India cancelled multiple Chinese enterprise investments and restricted technology exports, while China strengthened border infrastructure construction," he said.

Unsurprisingly, the Modi government promoted a "self-reliance" policy, while China deepened its ties with ASEAN. According to Zhang, the events amplified the supply chain disruptions during the global pandemic. Fortunately, the conflict did not evolve into full confrontation, Zhang said, adding that both countries demonstrated great restraint.

The two nations succeeded in easing tensions. In October 2024, a border patrol agreement accelerated the de-escalation process and was followed by a bilateral meeting in Russia and Modi's attendance at the SCO summit. High-level meetings restarted. Zhang analysed that even though recovery has not been smooth, the leadership of both countries is clearly committed to stabilising relations. "In a changing world, China and India cannot afford the cost of prolonged confrontation," he said. For Zhang, the 2024 border agreement marks "a breakthrough".

> "As India is recalibrating its relationships with regional blocs and countries, it is likely to deepen ties with Russia, too."

Huang Yunsong from Sichuan University, China, emphasised the importance of institutionalised trust-building, such as through the real-time "trust hotline" established between the armies of both countries in 2021. He described it as a "24/7 mechanism for real-time coordination, supplemented by joint exercises in non-sensitive areas to foster military-to-military ties."

The need for trust was echoed by Tridib Chakraborti from Adamas University, India, who emphasised institutional mechanisms for conflict management: "The strategy ahead must be grounded in realism and oriented towards regional and global stability."

Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor of Adamas University, India, referred to the enormous prospects for cooperation between China and Eastern India in particular.

NEITHER ALLIES NOR ENEMIES

Yet these opportunities do not mean that India and China will become allies. Zhang Jiadong held that becoming allies would not conform to China and India's respective strategic autonomy. However, he stressed that the two countries "should not become enemies, as that would amplify global risks." He maintained that India's trade deficit with China of $ 99 billion represented "interdependence". "If unmanaged, the deficit could fuel protectionism; if harnessed, it could propel combined GDP growth beyond seven percent annually, lifting millions out of poverty," Zhang said.

As India is recalibrating its relationships with regional blocs and countries, it is likely to deepen ties with Russia, too. The two countries have a tradition of geopolitical cooperation, and Russia has supported India in difficult situations. Economic ties include the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects Mumbai to St Petersburg via Iran, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea. The corridor is enhancing regional economic integration between India, Russia, Iran and Central Asia.

WHAT'S NEXT?

On the sidelines of the conference in Kolkata, scholars discussed possible consequences of these geopolitical and economic shifts. These include:

1. A reinforced Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which would serve as a more inclusive and cohesive platform for collective diplomatic strategy in Eurasia and be more strongly influenced by the changing India-China-Russia dynamics.

2. An expansion of the BRICS+ group, which currently comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and other countries, including deepened economic cooperation between member states.

3. A reinvention of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, (SAARC) comprised of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka or a new regional grouping, which would impact South Asia's geopolitical alignment and connectivity.

4. Coordinated efforts to create alternatives to Western-dominated international institutions through global multipolar alliances as countries aim to gain more economic sovereignty and resilience by engaging in diversified multilateral partnerships.

Countries around the world are seeking greater control over critical resources and strategic sectors to protect themselves against external political shifts. India's future relationships with other countries and regional blocs will be shaped by its determination to preserve its strategic autonomy. While India's national security concerns are prompted by both China and the USA befriending arch-rival Pakistan, it is in India's economic interest to engage in nuanced, pragmatic cooperation beyond ideological or historical alignments.

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AGRICULTURE

Cactuses as a lifeline for livestock farmers

In Africa's dry regions, conventional livestock feed is difficult to grow. An alternative is cactus, which can help livestock farmers make their businesses more resilient to the effects of climate change.

BY NYASHA J. KAVHIZA

Photo: picture alliance/Westend61/Ega Birk

The prickly pear cactus can serve as a source of food and water for livestock.

Livestock production is vital in Africa's arid and semi-arid regions, from Morocco and Egypt in the north to Namibia and Botswana in the south. The continent's drylands are home to over 525 million people who depend on rainfed agriculture and livestock husbandry. Since crop farming is often not viable due to poor soil and erratic rainfall, people prioritise livestock farming instead. However, prolonged droughts, which are being exacerbated by El Niño and the effects of climate change, have made water even more scarce and caused significant loss of livestock.

A promising solution to this challenge is the use of the prickly pear cactus (Opuntia ficus indica) as a forage crop and source of moisture. This cactus plant is adapted to arid and semi-arid environments and thrives in places where most crops fail. It uses water efficiently and has a waxy cuticle (skin) that reduces water loss through transpiration. The production potential of the prickly pear is estimated to be 60 times higher than the productivity of pastures.

"For livestock farmers in Africa's drylands, adopting cactus as a forage crop could significantly reduce water dependency and enhance the resilience of their agricultural enterprises – especially in times of climate crisis."

Livestock like prickly pear cactuses, which are also about 85 % water. When included in animals' diet, it can significantly reduce their need for drinking water. In Brazil, where cactus plants are widely used as forage, dairy cows that are fed a diet containing more than 60 % cactus often require no additional water.

However, due to its low fibre content, cactus should be combined with dry feed to ensure balanced nutrition. For farmers in arid regions – whether they raise small livestock such as poultry, goats and sheep or larger animals like cattle – using cactus as fodder will significantly reduce the water requirements of their animals and improve the viability of their enterprises.

SHARING EQUIPMENT

The way cactuses are processed for feed varies depending on resources. Farmers often shred the cactus cladodes (pads) with machetes, but forage choppers, which mill the cladodes into small pieces, are more efficient. Low-income farmers can share such equipment communally. Given the high solar radiation in these regions, solar-powered choppers with battery storage can ensure a stable energy supply.

Cactus propagates vegetatively, so farmers can grow them from single cladodes or pads, similar to growing trees from cuttings. There are spineless, livestock-friendly varieties to choose from. With proper care, the plants can produce forage for over 20 years, and each planted pad can produce eight to 10 new ones within a year. Integrating livestock manure into cactus cultivation can further close the nutrient loop and improve soil fertility.

For livestock farmers in Africa's drylands, adopting cactus as a forage crop could significantly reduce water dependency and enhance the resilience of their agricultural enterprises – especially in times of climate crisis.

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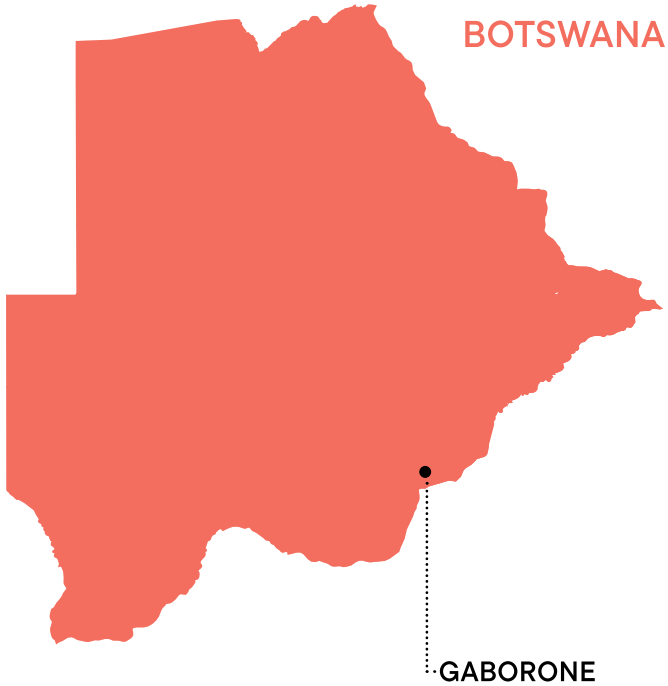

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

How Africa's youth is shaping climate solutions

Young Africans are tackling the climate crisis with creativity and determination. Across the continent, they are developing practical solutions that respond directly to local needs while demanding a stronger role in shaping policy.

BY LUNGELO NDHLOVU

In Botswana, 24-year-old Freddie Rakwadi works from his grandmother's garden in the country's capital Gaborone. The young man developed Fermavita, a liquid fertiliser made from fermented organic compost. His start-up BioCrude Innovations has tested the product on tomato plants, proving it effective under harsh weather conditions. Fermavita also serves as a soil enhancer.

Rakwadi aims to provide a cheaper alternative to imported fertilisers, which many smallholders can no longer afford. "A small field can be fed with just 250 millilitres diluted in 75 litres of water," Rakwadi explains. "It's accessible, and it works – that's what matters most to the communities we serve." By offering a local solution, he addresses overlapping challenges such as food insecurity, land degradation and climate change.

Rakwadi's story illustrates a shift that is taking place all over Africa: young people increasingly try their best to tackle climate change using whatever is locally available. At the Youth Entrepreneurship for the Future of Food and Agriculture (YEFFA) forum that took place in August in Gaborone, Botswana, Rakwadi stressed the need for collaboration between youth, governments and civil society. "Supporting innovation and entrepreneurship is how we build stronger economies and address systemic issues like policy, finance and market access," he said.

YEFFA is a youth-focused initiative that aims to empower young entrepreneurs across Africa to create jobs and support innovations in the agri-food sector. It forms part of a five-year programme which is implemented by the pan-African organisation AGRA and funded with $ 350 million across multiple African countries. The programme seeks to create 1.5 million work opportunities for young people in agri-food systems by strengthening innovation and mobilising support for the public and private sector.

Jeremiah Rogito, expert for soil health and climate at AGRA, says bringing together voices of the youth ahead of international forums such as the UN climate summit (COP30) in Brazil in November is crucial. "We are just five years away from the SDG deadline. Youth need to speak with one voice going into COP30 because this is our moment to be heard", he says.

YEFFA was hosted by Sustain267, a civil-society organisation led by climate justice advocate Pato Kelesitse, which also organises Botswana's Local Conference of Youth on Climate Change (LCOY). This year, discussions at LCOY Botswana focused on developing a youth position on how a just transition can look like. The position is to be presented at COP30 in Brazil in November.

The initiatives demonstrate how disadvantaged youth can interconnect and drive practical climate solutions. But they also reveal the structural barriers – limited funding, weak policy support and lack of visibility – that keep many ideas from scaling. Whether local experiments like Rakwadi's start-up can grow into continent-wide change will depend on whether governments and institutions back Africa's young innovators not only with recognition, but with sustained investment.

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Illustration: Dadi Prayoga / Unsplash

ELITES AND THEIR POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Does money rule the world?

Illustration by Dadi Prayoga (see p. 4).

The power of billions

Wealth is rapidly becoming more concentrated around the world, the richest 10 % of the population holding roughly three quarters of all wealth. How the phenomenon of the super-rich is undermining democracy – and why curbing their political influence is the only option.

BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

The pirates are back, and they have the rich and powerful in their sights: The skull and crossbones from the anime series "One Piece", in which pirates wage war against injustice and abuse of power, is currently experiencing a revival. From Nepal and Bangladesh to Madagascar, Morocco or Peru, the famous pirate flag is being flown at protests involving the young generation in particular. It has seen governments fall and been spotted even at demonstrations against Donald Trump's policies in the US.

However such movements may differ, what they all have in common is their anger at corrupt elites and growing inequality. And it's hardly surprising that this frustration is now spiralling out of control given that the global concentration of wealth has reached gigantic proportions. Since 2015, the wealth of billionaires has more than doubled – whereas poverty is hardly decreasing any more.

THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE SUPER-RICH

People with huge amounts of money also have greater scope to exert political influence – which is exactly what they are increasingly doing, as Oxfam noted early this year. This may often be for the public good, for instance through foundations, donations or investments. However, all too often it's mainly about securing and adding to their own wealth or pursuing their own political objectives.

In countries of the Global South, several places are dominated by elites whose influence is rooted in the injustices perpetrated during the colonial era. They hold land or natural resources, control political offices, influence the judiciary or the media. Elsewhere it is drug barons or large corporations that have politicians in their pockets. Those who can afford private security, as these elites can, have little interest in ensuring a basic level of social welfare. The result is a lack of progress for the majority of the population – and growing anger at those who thwart such progress.

It has long been impossible to ignore this fusion of wealth and power in the US, either. The super-rich plunged millions into Donald Trump's election campaign and he governs in their interests, protecting fossil industries and trying to block the regulation of digital companies. Tech billionaires in particular have enormous power, as their platforms determine which issues achieve global visibility – and thus influence how people think and act. This unholy alliance of nationalist policymakers and tech elites poses a threat to the entire rules-based world order.

Although Europe remains one of the regions with the lowest levels of inequality, the rift between rich and poor is widening and the number of super-rich is on the rise here too. Here too, they seek to exert influence through lobbying or media power, or they opt to escape to tax havens. Within Europe, Germany is one of the countries with the highest concentration of wealth.

A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

It's bad for society, the climate and development when wealth gives rise to excessive political influence. Super-rich individuals with an awareness of their own responsibility are now actually calling for higher taxes on themselves. In 2024, the G20 discussed a global tax on billionaires; France is currently debating it for assets above € 100 million.

One thing is clear: excessive inequality destroys democracy. It is one of the most pressing problems of our time. If corruption reaps success and money can buy influence, this undermines trust in the political system. Policies that pander to the rich while the remainder of the population experiences growing poverty and uncertainty create fertile soil for populist forces – and quite often for authoritarianism.

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INEQUALITY IN NUMBERS

Rich and poor –

the extreme distribution of income and wealth worldwide

Almost 4 billion people worldwide live in poverty, while there are 1200 more billionaires than there were 10 years ago. Facts and figures on global inequality.

BY D+C/E+Z

20.3 %

of global income goes to the richest one percent of the world's population. The poorer half receives less than nine percent. (1)

Globally, men own **$ 105 trillion** more wealth than women. (5)

More than a quarter

of national income goes to one percent of the population in some countries, including Peru, Angola and Bahrain. (1)

$ 6675

was the average per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa in 2024. The global figure was $ 21,852. In North America, it was $ 65,829. (3)

More than **36 %**

of global personal wealth belongs to the richest one percent of people. The poorer half of the world's population is left with two percent. In the Russia and Central Asia region, the richest one percent owns more than 45 % of the personal wealth. (2)

More than **54 %**

of the personal wealth is held by the richest one percent of the population in South Africa, one of the countries with the greatest wealth inequality. (2)

More than **1200**

new billionaires emerged worldwide between 2015 and 2025. (4)

More than **3.7 billion**

people live below the poverty line of $ 8.30 per day. (6)

At least $ 33.9 trillion

is the amount the richest one percent have gained in wealth in real terms since 2015 (adjusted for inflation). This would be enough to end annual global poverty 22 times over, based on the poverty line of $ 8.30 per day. (4)

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Sources:
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Photo: picture alliance/AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

A 2018 election poster from Cameroon. This year, 92-year-old President Biya, the world's oldest head of state, is running for office for the eighth time.

GOVERNANCE

Fossilised, power-hungry men are keeping Africa in a stranglehold

In many African countries, the same heads of state ruled – or have continued to rule – for decades after independence from colonial powers. Cameroon holds the record with a president who has been in office for half a century. These national elite figures were often central to the fight for independence – and filled the power vacuum that emerged after the colonisers withdrew with the same autocratic structures they had just dismantled. The stubborn persistence of these elites in government, often facilitated by corruption, is stifling true democratic progress on the continent to this day.

BY BABA G. JALLOW

At the beginning of July, Paul Biya, the 92-year-old president of Cameroon, announced his intention to run for an eighth term in the elections held in October. Biya has been president for 43 years – since 1982. He served an additional seven years as prime minister (1975–1982), which means that he has been in power for a total of 50 years. He is in poor health and, at a recent US-Africa summit, did not know where he was when he was led onto the stage to make a statement.

The reality is that at 92, Biya is no longer capable of governing a country, even if he and his supporters claim otherwise. He asserts that his decision to run for re-election is motivated by the Cameroonian people's demands for him to continue his leadership and by his determination to tackle his country's pressing problems.

At the end of July, another African head of state, the 83-year-old President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, announced that he would run for a fourth term in the elections also held in October. Ouattara, who had amended the country's constitution already in 2016 to remove term limits, has been president since 2010. Like Biya in Cameroon, he was previously his country's prime minister (1990–1993). And like Biya, Ouattara claims that his decision to run for re-election is a response to the demands of the people.

> "During the struggle for independence, European colonisers often told African nationalists that their people were incapable of governing themselves."

Biya and Ouattara are part of a long line of presidents who have been in power since the 1960s, the decade of Africa's independence from colonial rule. Other examples of incumbent African presidents who have been ruling for years and have no plans to step down include Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, who has been in power since 1979, Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo, in power since 1979 (with a brief interruption between 1992 and 1997); Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, in power since 1986; Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea, in power since 1993; Paul Kagame of Rwanda, in power de facto since 1994; and Ismaïl Omar Guelleh of Djibouti, in power since 1999. The six longest-serving African presidents still at the helm have collectively ruled for 211 years.

They follow in the footsteps of other long-serving former presidents, including Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (42 years), Omar Bongo of Gabon (41 years), Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo (38 years), José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola (38 years), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (37 years) and Dawda Jawara of Gambia (30 years). Many other African presidents were in power for between 10 and 20 years before they died, were violently overthrown or voted out of office.

RACIST EUROPEAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

The tendency of African heads of state to cling to power has deep roots. During the struggle for independence, European colonisers often told African nationalists that their people were incapable of governing themselves. Some colonisers argued that Western forms of government, which had been newly introduced to African colonial territories and still lacked some basic institutional structures, were unsuitable for independent African nations.

African nationalists, most of whom soon became leaders of newly independent African countries, condemned such attitudes as racist European exceptionalism that had no basis in reality and aimed to deny African peoples their right to self-determination, as enshrined in the Atlantic Charter (1941) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Invoking the provisions of these two international guarantees, nationalist leaders insisted on self-determination for their countries and ultimately achieved it.

However, once in power, some former nationalist leaders, now presidents of the newly independent countries, proved the European colonisers right as they transformed their states according to a kind of African exceptionalism. They now claimed that Western forms of democratic governance and ideas of human rights were alien to Africa.

Instead of opening up the political space to allow dissent and promote free debate about the best path for the newly independent countries, the new leaders suppressed, imprisoned, killed and exiled their opponents, gagged the free press that had actually helped them rise to power, and ignored the needs of the masses who had voted for them. They proclaimed hollow, pseudo-ideological notions of "Africanity" and "authenticity" to justify their newfound contempt for the concepts of equality, the rule of law and political accountability. In other words, they denounced the very concepts they had fought for during colonial rule as subversive tools of neo-colonial imperialism that had no place in an independent Africa.

Notions of the divine right of kings and the sacred duty of subjects to obey their rulers predated and survived the historically brief period of colonial rule. The new African leaders would have had to change these pre-colonial notions of governance to adapt them to the new nation-state systems introduced with independence, in which power lay with the people. Such a transition would have enabled the emergence of a politically enlightened citizenry capable of holding their leaders accountable. Unfortunately, in many cases, civic cultures were never transformed, which explains why notoriously corrupt and repressive African leaders are able to continue winning elections and hold on to power, with only a small percentage of their populations publicly protesting against them.

Backed by the blind support of many people, some of the most prominent former champions of African rights and freedoms soon declared themselves presidents for life and introduced one-party states. They simply suppressed dissenting opinions and clung to power for as long as they lived. This was the case with Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Ahmed Sékou Touré in Guinea, Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo and Omar Bongo in Gabon. Today, one-party states and life presidencies are rarely openly declared. They have been normalised through regular sham elections in which people are supposed to vote for leaders who are allegedly chosen by God and supported by a corrupt transactional politics of patronage and oppression.

PROXY BATTLEFIELDS IN THE COLD WAR

Africa's post-colonial leadership crisis was exacerbated by the fact that the continent gained independence at the height of the Cold War. Caught in the midst of this global ideological conflict, Africa's newly independent countries became metaphorical proxy battlefields in the bitter contest between communism and capitalism. Although a group of these countries joined forces with several Asian countries to form the Non-Aligned Movement after the 1955 Bandung Conference, true neutrality was simply impossible in the face of the aggressive policies of global ideological dominance pursued by the Eastern and Western power blocs.

The situation threatened Africa's future. Autocratic and corrupt leaders received blanket support or were otherwise propped up as long as they professed allegiance to one ideology or another. At the same time, subversive activities such as military coups, secessions and political assassinations were sometimes encouraged or even financed by Moscow or Washington and their respective allies. The result was a flood of coups, civil wars and political murders that continued to plague the continent long after the end of the Cold War.

At the same time, the new heads of state were busy securing their power and dependent on the unconditional support of their allies in NATO and the Soviet Union. They also had their eye on the financial incentives offered by the Bretton Woods institutions – the IMF and the World Bank. Without giving much thought to the long-term consequences of unnecessary and unlimited borrowing, the new African countries soon found themselves in a debt trap from which they are unlikely to escape any time soon.

> "Some of the most prominent former champions of African rights and freedoms soon declared themselves presidents for life and introduced one-party states."

Many of today's African heads of state, who feed off corruption and depend on the boots and weapons of their military, continue to wage war against dissenters in their own countries, neglecting what needs to be done to promote sustainable development. They still see no need to transform their countries' pre-colonial civil culture into an active and participatory civil culture that corresponds to the nation-state systems introduced after independence. Instead, they maintain the structures but ignore the essence of the nation state – an anomaly that allows them to abuse and cling to power while oppressing their people with impunity.

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OPINION

Nepal can change for the better

Widespread corruption and the enormous gap between the lifestyles of the elites and the rest of the population in Nepal helped spark the nationwide Generation Z protests. After the brutal violence, the country must find itself again.

BY RUKAMANEE MAHARJAN

In September, Nepal witnessed unprecedented protests and demonstrations by members of the Gen Z movement that claimed at least 76 lives and caused many more casualties as per the internal record of the Ministry of Home Affairs (October). Members of the Generation Z (Gen Z) were born between about 1997 and 2012 and are generally digitally savvy. The damage has been estimated at a staggering 3 trillion Nepali Rupees ($ 21 billion), about half of the country's GDP. Public infrastructure has been severely damaged, as have privately owned buildings. The tourism industry has been particularly affected, and the negative effects on the labour market are noticeable.

The protests have also reshaped Nepal's political landscape. The Federal Parliament has been dissolved, and an interim government led by Sushila Karki, former chief justice of the Supreme Court, has taken office. Elections for a new parliament are scheduled for 5 March 2026.

Many hope that the Gen Z movement will end the cycle of political instability that has persisted since 2015. Since then,

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Prakash Timalsina

The parliament building in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, was set on fire during the protests in September.

power has repeatedly alternated among three leaders: Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist-Leninist), Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist Centre) and Sher Bahadur Deuba (Nepali Congress). The expectation is that the events could bring about a democracy that serves the people better and a generational shift in political leadership.

While the protests seem to have put an end to the corrupt political culture, there are lingering concerns that change has come about too suddenly. Nepal had been scheduled to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Country (LDC) category in November 2026. Given the current upheaval, this now seems unlikely. It is too early to assess the effects on labour migration and foreign employment, which are vital to Nepal's economy.

Meanwhile, some Gen Z groups are demanding a new interim constitution and a directly elected executive ahead of the upcoming elections in March 2026. This move would require a fundamental change in the system of governance – something the current interim government is not mandated to pursue. Further protests and further uncertainty are therefore likely.

DESTRUCTION AND OPPORTUNITIES

For now, Nepal's Gen Z movement is definitely a double-edged sword: it has brought both destruction and opportunities for development. Driven by digital activism and a desire for social change, it was triggered in early September by a government decision to ban social media platforms. This coincided with widespread online outrage over the extravagant lifestyles of politically connected elites and their children. Hashtags like #nepokids and #nepobaby (derived from the word nepotism) were trending on online platforms such as TikTok and Reddit, sparking frustration over corruption, inequality and poor governance.

> "Rebuilding the country will take more than repairing infrastructure and buildings. It requires restoring collective trust, memory and a shared sense of identity of being a proud and peaceful Nepali."

On 8 September 2025, young people – mostly students – organised anti-corruption protests in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, and in other major cities via platforms like Reddit and Discord. The protests were decentralised and did not have clear leadership.

The demonstrations started peacefully but escalated quickly. The riot police used tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets to disperse protesters but could not control the protests. In Kathmandu, protesters attempted to enter the Federal Parliament building, which led to the violent and disproportionate use of live ammunition against protesters by the Special Task Force assigned to provide security for the building. Within a few hours, 17 young people died and more than 300 people were injured. Many watched the tragedy unfolding live on TikTok and other social media platforms. Across the country, at least 19 protesters were killed that day according to hospital records.

The next day, thousands of people took to the streets despite a government-imposed curfew. They condemned police brutality and government indifference. The situation escalated dramatically. Throughout the country, the protesters vandalised and set fire to government and public buildings such as the Federal Parliament building and the Supreme Court. Private residences of top politicians and shopping malls were also targeted. The Prime Minister resigned, and the army was deployed to restore order. While many feared a military coup, the army refrained from seizing power – a reassuring signal.

COLLAPSE OF TRUST

As the country slowly returns to normal, many people are struggling to comprehend what happened during those intense 48 hours in early September. It was more than political unrest, vandalism and violence, and more than a collapse of government: it was also the collapse of collective history and a shared sense of identity as Nepalese citizens.

Rebuilding the country will thus take more than repairing infrastructure and buildings. It requires restoring collective trust, memory and a shared sense of identity of being a proud and peaceful Nepali. The situation on the ground is very fragile, but for now, there is hope that positive change is possible for Nepal. To achieve this, however, the government and the Nepali people must ensure that the social divide does not widen any further.

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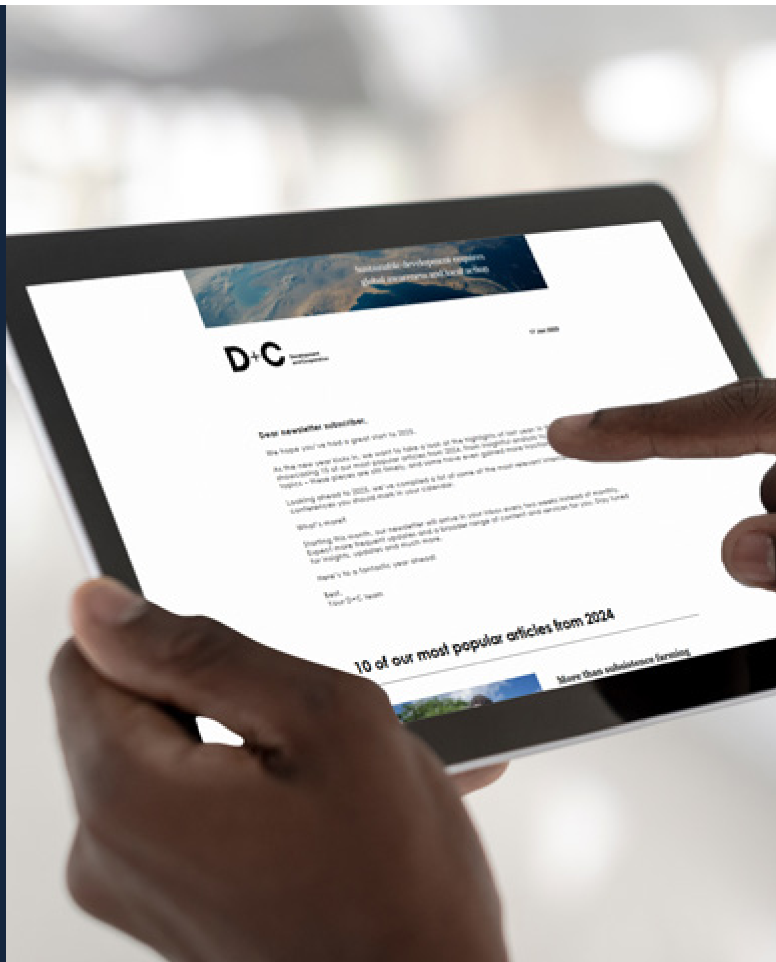

SOCIAL SECTOR

Pakistan's social divide

Pakistan's ruling elite are highly privileged: they send their children to private schools and go to private hospitals. Since they are disconnected from the problems faced by large sections of the population, they don't invest in social security for the masses, but in services for the wealthy.

BY ABDUR REHMAN CHEEMA

Photo: picture alliance/Middle East Images/Raja Imran

A mural on a wall at Punjab University in Lahore depicts the burden placed on the poor to sustain the lifestyle of the elite.

> “Political leaders, bureaucrats, superior court judges, business tycoons and military officials have insulated themselves from the crumbling public sector by relying on parallel systems.”

When the Kashmir conflict between Pakistan and India flared up once again last spring, the world looked with concern at the border region between the two nuclear-armed states. Both sides deployed modern fighter jets and drones before agreeing to a ceasefire brokered by the US. From the perspective of many Pakistanis, the outcome was good reason to celebrate its military's ability to defend the country's borders.

While the Pakistani military is keen to appear strong externally and internally, the country's social sector indicators remain alarmingly weak. About 26 million children, more than one in three, are out of school, according to the civil-society organisation Save the Children. The World Bank's Human Capital Index (HCI) measures how well countries prepare their children for future productivity through education and health. Pakistan's HCI score of 0.41 falls below the South Asia average of 0.48 and mirrors the scores in sub-Saharan Africa (0.40 regional average). Still, Pakistan spends less than one percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education, far below the four to six percent benchmark endorsed by the UN Education 2030 Framework for Action.

Pakistan's public health spending is far from sufficient, too. It remains below one percent of the country's GDP. People have to pay a large proportion of the costs out of their own pockets – an indicator of an unfair and unsustainable healthcare system financing model. At the same time, only 39 % of the population have access to clean water, and only 68 % to basic sanitation, according to the humanitarian organisation Human Concern International. The list goes on, and Pakistan's exposure to climate shocks is exacerbating the situation.

The glaring disparity between Pakistan's military strength and its failing human development indicators raises a critical question: Why does a nation capable of such advanced defence systems struggle to provide basic education, healthcare and social protection to its citizens?

GATED COMMUNITIES AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

At the heart of this paradox lies a fundamental disconnect between Pakistan's ruling elite and the masses. Political leaders, bureaucrats, superior court judges, business tycoons and military officials have insulated themselves from the crumbling public sector by relying on parallel systems. They reside in gated communities and employ security services. Their children visit elite institutions such as armed forces or private schools. When they get sick, they are treated in military or private hospitals. Many have dual citizenship or hold permanent resident status in a developed country.

These parallel systems shield the elite from the failures in public education, healthcare and other sectors of Pakistan's social system. Consequently, the elite – not being reliant on public systems themselves – often have no motivation to improve them.

In contrast, defence spending remains non-negotiable because there is no private market for national security. If the state fails to defend its borders, the elite will lose their privileges along with everyone else. This explains why defence budgets are sacrosanct, whereas social sector allocations face cuts despite lofty political rhetoric.

Similarly, physical infrastructure – motorways, flyovers and underpasses – receives disproportionate funding because it facilitates the elite's urban-centric, car-dependent lifestyle. Meanwhile, rural schools, basic health units and clean water systems languish in neglect.

BIG PROMISES, TOO LITTLE ACTION

Pakistan has seen no shortage of grand declarations, including emergency action on education, social protection plans and universal healthcare pledges. However, these commitments rarely translate into meaningful budget increases. Year after year, social protection programmes remain fragmented and underfunded, leaving millions of children exposed to labour exploitation, malnutrition and violence. Funding is often being diverted to more “visible”

> “If Pakistan truly aspires to greatness, it must invest not only in fighter jets, but also in its children’s futures.”

projects that yield immediate political benefit rather than long-term human capital gains.

However, true national security cannot be measured in missiles and fighter jets alone. A nation’s real strength lies in the health, education and economic resilience of its people. Countries like South Korea and Singapore, once war-ravaged and poor, transformed their destinies by prioritising human development. Pakistan should do the same, recognising three main points:

1. Economic security depends on human capital: no nation can sustain growth without a skilled, healthy workforce. Investing in education and healthcare today will yield economic dividends in a decade.

2. Food and water security are integral to stability: malnutrition and water scarcity exacerbate poverty and conflict. Climate change is compounding the problem.

3. Social protection shields against shocks: robust safety nets prevent families from falling into poverty during crises. The solutions are evidence-based and well-known:

- Increase education and health budgets to at least four and three percent of GDP respectively.

- Prioritise primary healthcare and girls’ education, two of the highest-return investments.

- Strengthen social protection through unified, adequately funded programmes.

- Ensure equitable spending, bridging urban-rural and inter-provincial disparities.

However, none of this will happen unless Pakistan’s ruling elite recognise that their privilege cannot exist indefinitely amidst widespread deprivation. The marginalised – children out of school, mothers dying in childbirth, families drinking contaminated water – have no powerful lobby. Their voices are absent from budget debates where political elites have pushed through a 500 % increase in their salaries (for the National Assembly Speaker and the Senate Chairman) during the current budget (2025-2026) instead of prioritising public money for fulfilling basic needs of the people.

Pakistan stands at a critical juncture. It can continue on its current path, where defence and elite infrastructure devours resources while social sectors crumble. Or it can redefine security to include human dignity, opportunity and equity.

The choice is clear: a nation that neglects its people weakens its foundation. If Pakistan truly aspires to greatness, it must invest not only in fighter jets, but also in its children’s futures.

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ORGANISED CRIME

Train of destruction

Business tycoons and criminal organisations are wielding ever greater political influence in Latin America. Even in megaprojects, political, economic and criminal interests seem inextricably linked. One example is Mexico's new Maya Train.

BY SONJA PETERANDERL

In the rainforest of Mexico's Quintana Roo state, conservationist Elias Siebenborn wades through an underground cave, using his torch to guide him through the darkness. The cone of torchlight reveals bizarre formations of stalactites and stalagmites that are reflected in crystal-clear water – and steel pillars that have been rammed right through the middle of a natural artwork that has evolved over tens of thousands of years. Cast in concrete, the pillars have the job of underpinning the Tren Maya (Maya Train) tracks that run directly above this kilometres-long labyrinth.

> "While the railway was being built, Mexico's leading cartels and their offshoots widened their sphere of influence to include areas along its route."

Concrete seeps into the water through cracks in the pillars. A few months ago, Siebenborn noticed that machine oil was making the water in the underground pools more viscous and colouring it green – wreaking irreversible harm on the fragile ecosystem. "The government simply pushed everything through, even though much of it was illegal," says Siebenborn, who lives in the coastal city of Playa del Carmen and is using his smartphone, drone and GPS device to document the damage caused by the railway. "Nobody knows how long the train will run safely," he stresses.

The new railway line, a project in which Germany's national railway company Deutsche Bahn also was involved, links several states, beaches and towns in the rainforest and Maya sites in the south-east of Mexico. Former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's prestige project, rolled out at lightning speed despite considerable criticism from scientists, was supposed to create jobs and attract tourists. More than 10 million trees were felled to make way for the Maya Train, many stretches being built in haste and in some cases illegally, without the statutory comprehensive environmental impact assessments being conducted. More than 120 underground caves collapsed or were filled in.

Siebenborn recently encountered monkeys that were screaming at a passing train. They were leaping from treetop to treetop, yet no thought had been given to providing them with crossing points. Animals such as tapirs and jaguars now have to go for miles to find water. Time and again, animals end up straying onto the fenced-in railway lines or being forced onto roads where they get run over. Along the train route, new hotels, luxury residential districts and industrial complexes – for the most part unregulated – are steadily eating their way into the rainforest.

Nature and the local population are paying a high price for the megaproject. For others, on the other hand, the railway's construction and operation, not to mention the purchase and development of land close to the train line, represent nothing short of a gold mine. They include local and international businesses and politicians, as well as Mexico's military top brass, who now manage the railway project and are pursuing other controversial projects, such as hotels in

A Maya Train carriage arrives at a station in Campeche, Mexico.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Martin Zetina

the rainforest. Mexico's criminal organisations are also reaping the profits. As is the case with many megaprojects in Latin America, political, economic and criminal interests seem inextricably linked, blurring the boundaries between legal and illegal activities.

UNSUFFICIENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

The line at Playa del Carmen was originally supposed to be elevated, running along a road. However, in the face of opposition from hoteliers and other business owners who feared their land would decrease in value, the railway was promptly rerouted and now runs deep into the sensitive rainforest – without any studies of possible risks or environmental damage having been carried out.

Ex-President López Obrador had appointed prominent local businessman Daniel Chávez Morán as "honorary project supervisor". The two men are friends, and Chávez Morán's sons also have business relations with López Obrador's sons, as reported by the anti-corruption think tank Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad. Though the entrepreneur was at pains to deny any conflicts of interest, insisting that he would neither invest in the train nor accept any payment for his advisory role, he does own a luxury hotel located on the originally planned route.

According to Mexican water expert Guillermo D'Christy, the environmental impact report for the new route was submitted with a three-month delay – and was "merely a copy of the old report". He says the analysis doesn't even mention the 15,000 or so concrete and steel pillars that were drilled into the labyrinth of underground caves to stabilise the railway line and that now penetrate and pollute Mexico's second-most-important groundwater reservoir.

Amílcar Olán, another businessman, also received government contracts and was the main supplier of track ballast. He is friends with one of the ex-president's sons. Audio files published by the platform LatinUS revealed that he had provided low-grade material that had not been subject to the requisite quality checks. Recently a train derailed on a section of the line on which his material had been used.

GROWING INFLUENCE OF DRUG CARTELS

According to leaked Mexican intelligence reports, the "La Barredora" group, believed to be part of the Mexican drug cartel "Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)", was planning to provide 180,000 litres of stolen fuel per week for the railway construction work. One of the key figures belonging to "La Barredora" is the state of Tabasco's former Secretary of Public Security Hernán Bermúdez Requena, who was arrested this September. His nephew oversaw work on two sections of the railway line. Bermúdez Requena is alleged to have supported and coordinated criminal operations even while serving as police chief, and to have been implicated in murder, abduction and corruption.

While the railway was being built, Mexico's leading cartels and their offshoots widened their sphere of influence to include areas along its route. They profited from selling drugs to workers and anticipate new income streams from mass tourism – including extortion and protection rackets, as well as money-laundering potential through investments in hotel and residential complexes, restaurants or clubs.

Mexico's cartels have invested hugely in the country's booming tourism sector in recent years: between 2013 and 2023, more than 1800 tourism-related businesses such as hotels, restaurants or real estate companies, linked to organisations such as the Sinaloa cartel or the CJNG, were sanctioned by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Politicians, businesspeople and civil-society representatives are often involved in criminal networks.

> "Nature and the local population are paying a high price for the megaproject. For others, on the other hand, the railway's construction and operation, not to mention the purchase and development of land close to the train line, represent nothing short of a gold mine."

The US Department of Justice is currently investigating dozens of Mexican politicians suspected of involvement in organised crime. According to the online portal "Pie de Nota", the list of individuals that the US government is pushing to have extradited includes three former governors, five senators and four members of parliament. According to Reuters, at least 50 politicians and government officials have had their US visas revoked.

ARRESTS FOR SHOW

In many Latin American countries, the battle against organised crime is often just for show, its principal targets being heavily armed and tattooed gang members or cartel leaders. On TV, the army and police proudly present the drugs and weapons they have seized in raids, with large bags of drugs being set alight on air – yet deals are frequently done with gangs and cartels behind the scenes. In 2024, a US court sentenced Mexico's former security minister and anti-drug czar Genaro García Luna to more than 38 years in prison for accepting millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa cartel.

Honduran ex-President Juan Orlando Hernández was long seen as an exemplary leader in the fight against organised crime and a close ally of the US – yet in 2024 he was found guilty of organised crime himself. Though El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele likes to parade tattooed gang members wearing shorts in front of the cameras for the political PR videos he has made in his mega-prison CECOT, he rose to power thanks in part to deals he did with gangs to get them to lower their murder rate.

"As a rule, organised crime infiltrates politics from bottom to top – from the local level all the way up to the federal level," observes security expert Edgardo Buscaglia. In Mexico, criminal organisations such as cartels and indeed rich business tycoons, sponsor candidates they hope will do them political favours once in office – for example by making election campaign donations. Sometimes such organisations in Mexico also put forward their own "narco candidates" to stand in local or regional elections and get rid of rivals by pressuring them to withdraw or murdering them.

In the election year 2024, there were more than 750 attacks on politicians in Mexico, and 36 candidates were murdered. Mayoral candidate Yesenia Lara Gutiérrez was shot during a campaign event in the state of Veracruz, and the assassination was streamed live on Facebook. Colombian drug boss Pablo Escobar popularised the phrase "plata o plomo" ("money or lead") for this strategy of using money or violence to control politicians. Escobar even managed to become a member of Congress in 1982.

FIGHTING ORGANISED CRIME

"Organised crime is more than just trigger-happy pistoleros who have people killed," stresses Buscaglia. "A so-called cartel is simply one form of organised crime – yet its most damaging and common form, which erodes states and destroys democracy, is the way rich businesspeople gain a hold over politicians by illegally financing election campaigns, securing political favours for themselves and then enriching themselves through public contracts."

Buscaglia believes the only way to properly understand the phenomenon of organised crime and have any chance of tackling it is to view it in just the same way as the 1970 US Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO Act) does – "that is to say as a group of well-organised individuals who regularly commit crimes without necessarily carrying a weapon or being involved in drug trafficking." In Argentina for example, Buscaglia points out that the country's most highly respected entrepreneurs ended up in court after paying bribes to ex-President Kirchner. The corruption scandal surrounding the Brazilian construction and engineering firm Odebrecht, which was responsible for projects such as airports, ports and roads, revealed that millions of dollars had been paid to politicians, including heads of state. Odebrecht had a department dedicated solely to handling and disguising corruption.

"Institutional antibodies" could help proactively uncover criminal dealings, says Buscaglia. "Ideally, illegal election campaign funding, megaproject infiltration and conflicts of interest should be combated by conducting regular audits to verify for example the source of funds – rather than merely investigating them after the fact," he believes. "But in Mexico it will be virtually impossible to find any legally robust evidence of unlawful deals because there are no control mechanisms and hardly any investigations, and corruption at the highest level never even makes it to court."

SKYROCKETING COSTS, UNPAID BILLS

According to the think tank México Evalúa, the budgeted costs of the Maya Train have skyrocketed by 176 % – incurring additional costs equivalent to around $ 17 billion. The think tank also claims the train is not profitable, having covered only 10 % of its overheads in 2024. Dense rainforest has been paved over with modern, all but deserted railway stations – concrete constructions sporting just a few flower beds with neat rows of miniature plants. Some are like ghost towns, with more soldiers than passengers.

Just a few months ago, President Claudia Sheinbaum's new government acknowledged the environmental damage that has been caused by the railway. She intends to analyse the extent of the damage to the rainforest, caves and water and investigate how it could be curbed. It's not clear who will pay the bill – yet Sheinbaum is already planning to extend the Maya Train line to Guatemala and Belize.

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This research was funded and supported by Netzwerk Recherche and the non-profit environmental funding organisation Olin gGmbH.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Russian wooden dolls called Matryoshka depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin, US President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping at a souvenir shop in Moscow.

GOVERNANCE

The oligarchs' world order

The rich and powerful of today act differently than those of the past. A new kind of oligarch is on the rise: more authoritarian, less interested in stability, while highly interested in exerting power, be it through political positions or technological dominance. What kind of world order are we heading for?

BY DAVID LINGELBACH AND VALENTINA RODRÍGUEZ GUERRA

In 1985, as Mikhail Gorbachev began the reforms that would help end the Soviet Union six years later, another consequential process was beginning elsewhere. In three countries of the Global South, oligarchs were coming to power: José Sarney, scion of an old sugarcane family, was elected president of Brazil and eventually accumulated wealth we estimate at $ 1.5-2.5 billion. General Ibrahim Babangida took power in Nigeria in a palace coup, then proceeded to gather wealth we estimate at $ 15-30 billion. And Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge regimental commander, was appointed as Cambodia's prime minister, beginning the journey that led to a family net worth we estimate at $ 1 billion today.

According to our research at The Center for the Study of Oligarchs, 1985 was the first year since the end of World War II that the number of oligarchs running countries began to increase, both in the Global South and North. Since 1985, those numbers have been steadily climbing. Unlike other definitions, which define oligarchs as members of an oligarchy – a form of government in which power is held by a small group of people – we are not referring to a specific form of government here. We define oligarchs more broadly as economic and political actors who gain either wealth or power – and then use one to acquire the other. These wealthy and powerful elites are to be found around the globe and throughout history.

OLIGARCHS RUN SOME OF THE WORLD'S TOP ECONOMIES

So far in 2025, 33 oligarchs either have served or are currently serving as heads of state or government. This is one ready measure of how much oligarchs matter. 82 % of them are from the Global South, and all but one are male. Six of the world's top 20 economies are run by oligarchs. They include China's Xi Jinping, whose net worth we estimate at $ 1.6 billion; Donald Trump in the US, whose most recent net worth estimate is $ 7.5 billion; Vladimir Putin of Russia, whom we estimate controls $ 6 billion; Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia's president, with a family net worth of approximately $ 135 million; Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who controls $ 100 million; and the richest of the six, Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, who is estimated to be worth at least $ 100 billion. Another measure, even more striking, is this: 48 % of today's global GDP (purchasing power parity) is generated by oligarch-run countries.

During their rise over the past 40 years, oligarchs have profited from a world that has become more uncertain, unequal, and institutionally unstable. Since 2017, when Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States began and Mohammed bin Salman became de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, the liberal international order has been perishing. A new oligarchs' world order has been emerging. The years from 1985 to 2017 laid the ground by gradually normalising oligarchs as a feature of the global economy and international order, not a bug.

> "48 % of today's global GDP is generated by oligarch-run countries."

OLIGARCHS BENEFIT FROM AN INCREASINGLY UNSTABLE WORLD

Oligarchs can be classified as business or political in nature, depending on whether they gain wealth or power first, and their wealth and power can be of different sorts. Wealth can be self-made, inherited, gained through connections or a combination of the three. Power comes in three types: decision-making (ruling as head of state or government, for example); agenda-setting (through media ownership or financial contributions to political activities); or, as the so-called "tech bros" in the US have shown, by shaping the ways in which we think and act through technologies such as search engines or Artificial Intelligence. Despite their differences and even though they act largely independent of one another, they have common strategies that are leading them in a general direction. We call this direction the "oligarch's world order".

The oligarchs' world order is shaped by six major characteristics. First, it is powered by three structural drivers: inequality, uncertainty and institutional change. Rising wealth and income inequality have helped increase the number of oligarchs and their average wealth, enabling them to acquire various types of power. Increasing uncertainty generates opportunities, both economic and political, that oligarchs are particularly well-suited to exploit. And institutional change, particularly declines in formal institutions such as the rule of law, have given oligarchs fewer guardrails and allowed them to accumulate more wealth and power.

One oligarch who has built on all of these drivers is Russia's Vladimir Putin. Following the collapse of communism, wealth and income inequality in Russia increased rapidly, creating the first generation of oligarchs. Putin gained considerable public support by bringing these oligarchs under control and becoming himself the most powerful of them. The rising uncertainty during this period created multiple opportunities for wealth creation and power accumulation

> “The oligarchs’ world order is becoming more authoritarian.”

— without this instability, Putin’s sudden rise to power in the late 1990s could not have occurred. And declining rule of law created opportunities for Putin to both accumulate wealth and, paradoxically, emerge as a strongman providing stability.

Second, the oligarchs’ world order is becoming more authoritarian. If we consider the six oligarchs currently running one of the world’s top 20 economies, every one of them is authoritarian. 47 % of oligarchs ruling as heads of state or government in 2025 are located in countries categorised by Freedom House as not free, up from 42 % five years ago.

Third, the world order that these oligarchs are constructing for themselves forces the rest of the world to make stark choices. Oxford historian Margaret Macmillan recently spoke about three emerging spheres of influence: Xi in East Asia, Trump in the Western Hemisphere and Putin in Eurasia. The rest of the world is rapidly making choices about which sphere of influence to join or oppose. Those choices are likely to cause conflict and at the same time generate massive new wealth for the actors who get it right. Thus, the oligarchs’ world order will most probably make the world a great deal more unstable than what it is already.

Fourth, the oligarchs’ world order is as much about wealth creation for the oligarchs as it is about accumulating and exercising power. Today, seven of the world’s ten wealthiest people are oligarchs: Elon Musk, Larry Ellison, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Larry Page, Bernard Arnault and Jensen Huang. Most of them are US-based “tech bros.” Not so long ago, this was not the case. For example, Oracle’s Larry Ellison went from being a non-oligarch last year to the de facto controller of powerful media assets such as CBS, TikTok and, perhaps, CNN, should his son’s company merge with Warner Brothers Discovery. He is now the second wealthiest person in the world and one of the most powerful.

Fifth, the oligarchs’ world order is hard to understand because it doesn’t fit into our pre-established categories. Some oligarchs run states, but they run them differently than states have been run before. For example, El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele combines oligarchic methods such as control, personal branding and selective law enforcement with savvy digital populism and crypto-capital. Many oligarchs, though, exercise their power in non-state ways: by controlling the media, making financial contributions, or by dominating the media or technologies – think of Larry Ellison again.

Sixth, oligarchs employ different strategies to create their world order. Those strategies focus on increasing and exploiting inequality, uncertainty and institutional change, no matter what the consequences may be for the other aspects of the international order and the global economy, such as stability and predictability.

WHERE THE WORLD MIGHT BE HEADING

What are the prospects for and implications, if this oligarchs’ world order prevails? We will hazard four guesses:

1. We see a steady shift away from oligarchs needing to capture states in order to generate wealth and power. Instead, the new oligarchs’ model will increasingly hold power outside the state in technology-enabled forms that will be essentially unregulated. Aside from media and tech oligarchs, we envision more oligarchs like Mexico’s businessman Ricardo Salinas Pliego and El Salvador’s president Nayib Bukele, who holds political power yet weakens political institutions and diminishes the independence of the judiciary. Both promote non-state forms of money such as cryptocurrency and employ aggressive social media techniques to shape their followers’ preferences and actions.

2. Will the oligarchs’ world order be a more peaceful or a more conflict-prone one? It’s difficult to say, but the authoritarian nature of this order suggests that violence, whether in the form of wars or civil disorder, is likely to increase.

> “If we consider the six oligarchs currently running one of the world’s top 20 economies, every one of them is an authoritarian.”

3. The oligarchs’ sphere will continue to be male-dominated. While the occasional Cleopatra-like figure may emerge,

> "The new oligarchs' model will increasingly hold power outside the state in technology-enabled forms that will be essentially unregulated."

path dependence and gatekeeping will likely keep women at the margins of the oligarchs' club.

4. The oligarchs' world order is not a rule-based liberal international order focused on multilateralism and cooperation. Rather, it will be an age of opposing power spheres, in which every actor will have to choose which sphere to join or oppose.

HOW THIS WORLD ORDER MAY BE STOPPED

Can the oligarchs' world order be stopped, disrupted, reversed or at least contained? Permanent reversals of previous oligarchic orders have usually required structural breaks such as wars or revolutions. For example, the Japanese zaibatsu, which were powerful business conglomerates, were eliminated because of Japan's defeat in World War II and the subsequent American occupation. This broke the oligarchs, and the zaibatsu were replaced with the keiretsu system, which is still in place today and is intended to prevent the concentration of huge financial power. Revolutions, like those in Cuba in 1959 and Bolivia in 1952, reduced oligarchs' wealth and power through nationalisation. These are rare events, so it's best to not be too optimistic that recent trends can be easily stopped or reversed once they have fully evolved.

Containment may be a more realistic strategy. As we have written elsewhere, containment could consist of

- better understanding oligarchs, the factors that enable their rise, and how they think and act;
- discussing and agreeing within each society on what restrictions should be placed on oligarchs' activity, including limits on their wealth and power and the extent to which they can use one to acquire the other;
- mounting a broad and largely non-governmental containment effort, and
- fighting fire with fire by using oligarchs' tactics against them to reduce their wealth and power – these could include financial trading strategies or the exploitation of AI and blockchain technologies.

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IMPACT INVESTING

How to convince rich people to use their money for good

Private wealth could play a transformative role in tackling global challenges. Yet many wealthy individuals are hesitant about investing for impact. Changing mindsets, reducing risk and building trust are essential to unlock private capital for sustainable development.

BY NICO BLAAUW

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Donwilson Odhiambo

Investments in companies that supply underserved populations with essential goods such as food are a form of impact investing.

The dramatic rise in global inequality is not a new story. When Forbes began tracking billionaires in 1987, there were 140. Today, there are 3,028 – including 247 new entrants in the past year alone. Together, these billionaires sit on a combined fortune of $ 16.1 trillion. The richest 1.5 % of people now hold 48 % of global wealth.

Throughout history, humanity has never seen so few hold so much. Their assets would be more than enough to finance transformative global change – from addressing climate change to ending hunger and extreme poverty – while still leaving them extraordinarily wealthy. Yet rather than seeing investments in sustainability grow, we are witnessing the opposite. In 2024, investors withdrew almost $ 20 billion from US-based sustainable funds, and fundraising for environmental and social causes remains sluggish.

This begs the question of why the financial elite are not using their immense resources to make the world a better place. What holds the wealthiest back from pursuing a legacy of positive impact rather than accumulation?

> "Throughout history, humanity has never seen so few hold so much."

Sustainable development will not be achieved unless impact investment takes on a far more prominent role. The challenges facing humanity are too great for governments or NGOs to tackle alone. The private sector must contribute by funding scalable solutions that balance profitability with social and environmental responsibility.

This is the core idea behind impact investing. It seeks to channel capital towards enterprises that deliver both financial returns and measurable benefits for people and the planet. Companies such as Goodwell Investments, where I work, invest for example in early-stage African companies that provide underserved populations with essential goods and services.

BARRIERS TO IMPACT INVESTING

Impact investing seems like a win-win proposition: it is both responsible and profitable, advancing sustainability and social inclusion. Yet many wealthy individuals hesitate to engage. Their reluctance stems from a combination of structural and psychological barriers.

The psychology of wealth is very complex. Money represents freedom, opportunity and security. Preserving these liberties for oneself and future generations is a deeply human instinct. And as wealth accumulates, so does the desire to protect it. Many high-net-worth individuals therefore focus more on safeguarding their assets than on deploying them for social or environmental impact.

The next obstacle many high-net-worth investors encounter is their own wealth managers, who act as gatekeepers of capital. Even when clients express interest, advisers seldom propose impact-investment options. In fact, it is often the investors themselves who bring such opportunities to their managers' attention – not the other way around.

Financial advisers tend to emphasise risk and steer clients towards conventional, low-volatility portfolios. This reinforces the herd mentality financial markets are known for. Although some impact-investment advocates within financial institutions are working to change this mindset, they remain exceptions rather than the rule.

Impact investing also requires a particular mindset – one shaped by the way in which an investor accumulated their wealth. Do they see themselves as entrepreneurs? Which social or environmental issues resonate with them? What kind of legacy do they want to leave? For high-net-worth individuals, reflecting on such questions can provide the foundation for an entire investment strategy.

An impact-oriented mindset also means recognising privilege: the ability to accept limited liquidity and longer investment horizons in exchange for meaningful social and environmental returns.

BARRIERS TO IMPACT INVESTING IN AFRICA

These general barriers are only the first hurdles in a much longer race. New impact investors tend to stay within their comfort zones, focusing on risk mitigation rather than on creating measurable impact. Clean energy or digital technology are often seen as "safe" sectors.

When it comes to impact investing in Africa, those barriers become even more pronounced. Investing in the continent is still perceived as a second or even third step in an impact investor's journey – something to consider later, if at all. Without any personal or professional connection to the continent, many investors shy away. In doing so, they miss out on significant opportunities for both financial returns and transformative social impact.

The lack of personal connection is a real challenge. African investors are gradually increasing their share of investments on the continent. In 2024, the African Private Capital Association stated that 31% of active venture capital investors were African, making them the continent's single largest investment group. But to a lot of international investors, Africa feels far away. They often lack reliable information about opportunities on the continent – especially if their financial advisers fail to present them. Outdated perceptions persist, obscuring the entrepreneurial dynamism, the booming tech scene, the fast-growing population and the strong business potential that Africa offers.

This is one reason why focusing on companies that provide essential goods and services makes particular sense. Such investments create tangible social impact on the ground while offering investors accessible and resilient opportunities – ventures that can weather crises and still deliver sustainable returns.

> "It is crucial to present Africa as a continent of opportunity, not charity."

CHANGING MINDSETS

Financial and social returns can help shift investors' perceptions – away from viewing impact investments as charitable donations to recognising them as meaningful, long-term capital commitments. The main challenge, however, is to get them to take that first step.

Building relationships with impact-minded investors is crucial. These are individuals who may have personal ties to a particular region or sector, or who are driven by a strong interest in specific social or environmental issues. Trust and a sense of shared purpose are essential; without them, wealthy investors are unlikely to venture into unfamiliar territory.

Fund managers also have an educational role to play. They must make it clear that impact investing is not philanthropy but investment – with financial discipline, measurable results and a clear focus on both profit and purpose. From there, the emphasis should shift from perceived risk to demonstrated impact. That is the key to convincing more wealthy investors to commit their capital where it can truly make a difference.

The next step is to make investing easier. Mechanisms such as co-investment models, guarantees and blended-finance structures can help reduce perceived risk and make the first commitment feel less like a leap into the unknown. Instruments such as first-loss capital, outcome-based financing, revenue-sharing models and guarantees from development finance institutions should all be part of this "mindset toolkit".

Equally important is the power of direct experience. Reading about a promising venture in Nigeria or Uganda is one thing; meeting the entrepreneurs and seeing the positive impact of their work is quite another. Field visits can transform abstract ideas into tangible conviction.

When engaging with investors, it is crucial to present Africa as a continent of opportunity, not charity. This should happen through concrete data and proven success stories, where investments have delivered both measurable impact and competitive financial returns. The outdated narrative of "helping the poor" must give way to one of "partnering with innovators".

Despite today's economic uncertainty, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of impact investing. According to PwC, family offices were responsible for 54% of global impact investment deal volume in 2024. A family office is a company that manages the private wealth of a single family. In the US, an increasing number of these offices are adopting an impact-only approach. As millennials and younger generations assume greater responsibility for wealth management, their investment priorities are more strongly shaped by social and environmental considerations. Once convinced, they often influence older generations to follow suit. In general, it can be said that if the first investment proves successful, trust grows. Positive financial and social outcomes can turn wealthy investors into active advocates, encouraging their peers to also "do well by doing good".

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