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## **PROGRESSIVES UNDER PRESSURE: CONFRONTING THE GRADUAL RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

As authoritarian regimes rise globally, progressives face the urgent challenge of defending democracy without reinforcing the very divisions that fuel its decline. In one of Ernest Hemmingway's novels, a man is asked how he went bankrupt. He recalled that it happened in two ways: 'gradually and then suddenly.' This striking phrase resonates far beyond financial woes; it aptly describes how democracies unravel: gradually and then suddenly.

Today observers warn that we are entering a new authoritarian era, which means we are already deep in its throes, though still at its onset. While exaggerated alarmism should be avoided, the evidence is sobering. Right wing extremists, authoritarian populists, and ethno-nationalists are not merely gaining traction; they are often emerging as dominant political forces. Donald Trump is assembling a coalition of radicals, conspiracy theorists and oligarchs. In Italy, Georgi Meloni holds power. In Austria, the Freedom Party has evolved from right-wing populism to overt right-wing extremism, becoming the leading party in recent elections. Viktor Orban's decade-and-a-half rule in Hungary has transformed the nation into a quasi-authoritarian regime where democracy is a mere façade. Slovakia is rapidly following suit, embracing Orban's model. In Argentina, Javier Milei is crafting an authoritarian libertarianism that liberates markets while suppressing dissent. As W.B. Yeats lamented, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' This line, quoted often, captures our fraught political moment.

Progressive parties – social democrats, US Democrats and their counterparts – often respond to these developments by pledging to rebuild trust and regain public confidence. But what exactly is the message they claim to have understood? If the wrong lessons are affirmed, the consequences could be dire.

For decades, established social democracies largely ignored the gradual erosion of their voting base, clinging to 'business as usual.' Critics and warning voices pointed out the alienation of traditional constituencies: economically precarious 'regular people' who felt forgotten, disrespected and unheard. These disenfranchised groups turned toward authoritarian, anti-system parties in protest. Such analysis comforted progressives, implying that these voters were fundamentally good people making misguided choices. The solution seemed straightforward: make adjustments and regain their trust.

But what if this analysis, once accurate, has become outdated? Gradually and then suddenly, the situation may have shifted. A former head of government once shared with me a

disillusioned observation after attempting dialogue with disaffected groups: ‘**They want to see us on our knees.**’ This reflects a troubling phenomenon: people’s frustration turning into destructive anger and anti-system fury. What begins as a sense of abandonment can harden into closed, extremist world views, fuelled by relentless propaganda. Such voters no longer seek solutions or dialogue; they desire upheaval for its own sake. Attempts to regain their trust may now be futile.

The rise of authoritarianism presents democratic forces with a formidable challenge. They must firmly counter authoritarian, extremist and racist ideologies while defending democracy, liberalism, and social progress. Yet, polarization often exacerbates extremism. Democratic left-wing parties must protect the gains of modernity and pluralism without appearing as mere defenders of a stagnant *status quo*.

This creates a strategic paradox: how to resist authoritarianism without reinforcing the notion that progressive forces are out-of-touch representatives of a failing system? Purely defensive strategies rarely succeed. Worse, such approaches risk amplifying public pessimism, inadvertently validating the authoritarian narrative.

For decades, the strength of traditional left-wing parties lay in their ability to unite disparate constituencies: progressive urban professionals, middle-class employees and working-class communities, including those in rural and peripheral regions. Today, this ‘big tent’ approach faces immense challenges. The cultural and economic divisions within these groups make compromise increasingly difficult. Balanced messaging, essential for holding such coalitions together, often dilutes political clarity. In an era dominated by media-driven ‘branding’ this lack of clarity can be perilous. Add to this the polarizing forces of social media, and the difficulty multiplies.

Acknowledging these dilemmas is a necessary step towards effective strategies. Complex problems demand nuanced solutions:

- firmly defend core values: uphold democracy, pluralism and the rule of law;
- forge broad alliances and sensitively unite diverse constituencies;
- promote economic renewal, advance industrial and economic policies that create tangible improvements in people’s lives; and
- cultivate a spirit of progress and hope to counteract the prevailing mood of despair.

By addressing these challenges head-on, progressives can counter the gradual and potentially sudden erosion of democracy. The task is formidable, but the stakes could not be higher.

*Source: Progressives Under Pressure: Confronting the Gradual Rise of Authoritarianism by Robert Misik, award winning essayist in Vienna, Social Europe, December 16, 2024. Condensed by Mary Boyd.*

## **REVERSING THE CURRENT LOSS OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY – ADDRESSING DEBT IS CRUCIAL**

According to the Third World Network, it is increasingly urgency to address the structural causes of the loss of biodiversity. These include patterns of trade, investment and finance, and other longstanding economic pressures that push countries into debt and drive inequality across race, class, gender and colonial lines. There are now proposals to address one of those

structural challenges – ‘widespread indebtedness in developing countries’. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) met in Geneva, from 14 to 29 March 2025.

The CBD is the primary international treaty that aims to ensure the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the use of genetic resources.

Parties to the CBD are currently negotiating a post-2020 Global Diversity Framework (GDF), with specific goals and targets, meant to guide the implementation of their obligations for the decade 2020-2030. Debt has not previously been on the CBD agenda, per se, but there is increasing urgency to address the structural causes of biodiversity loss, including patterns of trade investment and finance and other economic factors that push countries into debt.

**There are three primary ways that debt should be considered in the negotiations of the CBD.**

- 1) Conditions governing sovereign debt for developing nations often require or offer incentives to them, to produce goods for export and develop extractive industries in order for them to earn foreign currency. This drives biodiversity loss further. The CBD Executive Secretary, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, has affirmed that it will be difficult to achieve CBD objectives without also addressing agricultural expansion in the Global South, driven by a need to ‘earn hard currency to pay their debts to international lenders’.
- 2) As a result of the conditions and terms of repayment, these debts limit public spending on public goods and needs within a country, including the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. This dynamic undercuts domestic public funding for biodiversity objectives. The Panel of Experts on Resource Mobilization (PERM), found that public funds play a key role in achieving biodiversity targets.
- 3) Ongoing ecological declines in developing countries, including significant losses of biodiversity, have not been compensated for by developed nations. They should be acknowledged, just as funds for CBD targets are raised and distributed – notably based on the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (CBDR). Currently, the GDF Target 19 calls for an increase in financial resources to at least \$200 billion per year. At the moment only \$10 billion per year is going to developing countries – a far cry from what is owed. The CBD must address these inequities as serious barriers to progress on biodiversity targets.

Currently, Target 15 of the draft GDF recognizes that certain sectors, including finance, have a large impact on biodiversity, and seeks to address this issue, eg with proposals for companies and investors to meet requirements regarding disclosure and risk. Target 16 places emphasis on responsible personal consumption in line with biodiversity objectives.

The Third Report of the PERM affirmed that *‘many biodiversity-positive projects will need to be financed out of public funds, given the fundamental nature of public goods, and an understanding that, while it will be important to increase private sector finance, this alone will never be sufficient for meeting all of the challenges of achieving the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.’*

Two critical limitations to more government spending on biodiversity are the channelling of public funds to external debt repayments, often with unfavourable conditions, and tax evasion and avoidance by private firms.

Developing countries debt is estimated at \$11 trillion, and the servicing of that debt is an estimated \$3.4 trillion annually. One study concludes that developing country resources flowing toward foreign debt repayment tripled from 2011 to 2020. These patterns co-relate with falling domestic spending. Now countries' climate vulnerabilities are being assessed by credit rating agencies, leading to an increase in sovereign debt interest rates for the most vulnerable. This leads to increased borrowing costs when the critical crisis in the world economy today is that of unsustainable sovereign debt. Adding insult to injury, the Group of 20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors met in Jakarta, on 17-18 February to discuss global economic recovery but offered no new actions to combat debt crisis.

*Source: TWN Third World Network, 'Info Service on Finance and Development' (Feb 22/2024) and TWN Third World Network, 'Info Service on Biodiversity and Traditional Knowledge' (Mar 22/2023). Edited by Mary Boyd.*

## VACLAV HAVEL ON HOPE

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but, rather, an ability to work for something that is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere". It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless, as ours do, here and now.

*Source: 'Disturbing the Peace: A conversation with Karel Havižd'ala' by Václav Havel (Knopf 1990). Translated from Czech by Paul Wilson.*

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