



The Rise of Illiberalism and the Cultivation of Political Narcissism

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The rise of illiberalism and the cultivation of political narcissism are neither accidental nor merely a reaction to the perceived “excesses” of modernity. Rather, they represent the contemporary expression of old-fashioned despotism, combining nationalist mythology, punitive moralism, institutional engineering, and digital spectacle.

Throughout much of the 20th century, democracy in Latin America was battered by military dictatorships that seized power through thunderous coups, marked by the march of boots and the roar of tanks. Today, in the 21st century, democratic decline unfolds more quietly and, paradoxically, with legitimacy: it is no longer the military that intervenes, but citizens themselves who, through the ballot box, elect narcissistic leaders that turn politics into a personalistic project.

Democracy no longer collapses in the shadows of military barracks, but amid applause, viral campaigns, and promises of national salvation. Although coups have become rare, there remain politicians, candidates, and parties that openly and unabashedly defend dictatorial processes and trivialize the genocides committed by Latin American dictatorships, as in Argentina and Chile.

In contemporary times, we observe a global trend in which societies blindly elect leaders of a new right wing. These figures promise paradise on *earth, order, a firm hand, and a return to so-called Western values*—a vision that often resembles the Middle Ages or the 1950s, when religion permeated political life at every level.

Through this moralized rearview mirror, narcissistic and populist figures ascend

to power with the intention of hollowing out democracy and reshaping it into a mechanism designed to elevate – exclusively – themselves and preserve their hold on power. The clearest example is Viktor Orbán in Hungary, idolized by figures of the ascendant new right, who advanced a political, social, and cultural project under the banner of *illiberal democracy*. The outcome has been the consolidation of a narcissistic leadership style that disregards boundaries, thrives on conflict, and turns politics into a mirror reflecting only his own image: violence, anger, insecurity, rage, and a destructive impulse.

The Elected Messiahs

Developing autocracies and theocracies require only the ballot box, social discontent, and an army of trolls on social media. Once elected, the messiahs deploy a discourse that fuses indignation with promises of a *better past*. Yet their real transformation begins by dismantling everything capable of limiting their power: troublesome parliaments, independent judges, critical media, and political opponents. Order becomes a pretext for legitimizing the concentration of power, and what is most serious is that many societies

buy into it. Politics, marked by a marked proneness toward autocracy, is reconfigured through a friend-enemy logic in which dissent is treason and democracy is weakness.

The profile of these new authoritarian regimes—perfectly exemplified by Donald Trump—reveals unmistakable traits: they are personality-driven politicians who refuse to govern through proposals or consensus, relying instead on messianic narratives and hate speech that swiftly transform into hate crimes. The narcissistic politician does not listen—he dictates. He does not negotiate—he imposes. Social media becomes his preferred stage, where every speech, gesture, and provocation is meticulously crafted to maximize attention and adoration, feeding his fractured ego and driving the destruction of the other, the *enemy*. Within this ecosystem, data and human rights matter less than the currency of *likes*, while the republic surrenders to a grotesque spectacle that summons inquisitions and imposes morality through power.

This political machinery thrives on constant conflict. Calm is the enemy of narcissistic leadership, for without crisis its figure loses relevance. Hence enemies are invented, threats exaggerated, and polarization deliberately inflamed. Democracy is transformed into a battlefield between irreconcilable sides, where the adversary ceases to be a holder of different ideas and becomes an enemy to be defeated or expelled from the public sphere.

We, the Good Ones

The discourse is reduced to its most extreme simplicity: us—the good, the decent, the true nationals—against them—the caste, the traitors, the anti-patriots, the mental

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parasites. This division is not accidental but a deliberate strategy of power: it obstructs agreements, demolishes bridges, and legitimizes authoritarian measures under the pretext of “defending the people”.

In this process, institutions cease to function as guarantors of rights and are recast as obstacles. Congress is depicted as a nest of corrupt individuals; the justice system as a network of sell-out judges; regulatory agencies as useless bureaucracies; and journalism as nothing more than personal persecution of the leader of the political cult. The goal is unmistakable: to concentrate power in the leader and drain any structure capable of limiting it. Dissenters are silenced, publicly shamed, or prosecuted. Ideas cease to be debated: voices are eradicated. The democratic architecture remains standing but is stripped of its foundations.

None of this would be possible without a segment of society willing to applaud it. Authoritarianism cannot exist without an audience. A portion of citizens, driven by fear, frustration, or fatigue, accepts the whip as a cure for uncertainty, while others openly celebrate it. The problem lies not



Forms of Democracy

All of this requires us to clarify what we mean when we speak of democracy. Democracy is not an ideology; that much is evident. It entails the capacity to debate ideologies within a framework of tolerance, without jeopardizing the fundamental conditions that make such dialogue possible. Democracy, in reality, is a system of government founded on the principle that power originates with the people—the inhabitants of a territory—who participate in decision-making either through direct voting or through elected representatives. There are multiple forms of democracy – direct, representative, and mixed systems – and today, as mentioned before, even the concept of illiberal democracy has entered the discourse.

only in the fragility of institutions, but also in the erosion of democratic culture. We have forgotten that democracy is not merely about voting; it is about accepting limits on power, coexisting with dissent, and safeguarding the human rights we have achieved—even for those who do not think or live as we do. Without that collective memory, authoritarian experiments appear seductive... until the moment arrives when it is too late.

Re-learning liberal democracy requires acknowledging that it is not a natural state but a fragile construct—one that must be nurtured—sustained by rules, tolerance, and active participation. Its defense also requires dismantling political narcissism, which in turn calls for a more demanding and more critical citizenry, one less dependent on the myth of the savior.

We do not need messiahs to embody the nation; what we need are solid institutions, a free and responsible press, an end to political *bullying* and hate speech, societies prepared to abandon mythical thinking, and politicians who recognize that power does not belong to them.

Modern democracy rests on the principle of universal suffrage, granting all citizens the right to vote regardless of gender, economic status, or skin color. What we call democratic states are systems founded on human and civil rights, safeguarded and codified in a constitution—an agreement that defines relations between society and government. This framework establishes rules that regulate governance, delineate citizens' rights, explain the division of power, and specify the protections available to individuals.

History reminds us that democracy was not born perfect or inclusive. As Franklin and Higginbotham (2010) note, Jefferson—the man who declared that “all men are created equal”—owned hundreds of slaves and treated Black people with cruelty. The authors describe that “Slavery in the United States has always been the great wound of the original sin, a scar running from top to bottom across a body otherwise admired and emulated.”

Power and Society

The persecution of those who resisted segregationist policies exposed the United States' stark double standards. While promoting a democratic ideal that proclaimed the equality of all people, the nation simultaneously repressed the rights of its own citizens.

In essence, *democracy* is a political system that grants citizens the power not only to choose who governs their country but also who must cease to do so. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) contend that democracy, without adjectives, is best defined as the union of *popular sovereignty* and majority rule—nothing more, nothing less. Consequently, they argue, democracy may take direct or indirect forms, and may be liberal or non-liberal.

In fact, the very etymology of the term points to the idea of self-government by the people—that is, a political system in which the people themselves govern.

It is no coincidence that most basic definitions regard democracy, above all, as a method for selecting rulers through competitive elections. As such, free and fair elections constitute a defining feature of democracy: rather than changing rulers through violent conflict, citizens agree that those who govern should be chosen by majority rule—without forgetting that this does not grant them absolute power, nor does it transform them into monarchs.

And it is certain: democracy is about the right to vote, yet the history of suffrage is complex. Even the 18th-century revolutions, inspired by ideals of equality and freedom, failed to extend voting rights beyond white men of legal age. During the 19th century, various movements fought for the expansion of voting rights. Groups such as abolitionists in the United States, who defended the right

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of Black people to vote, and suffragettes, who fought to extend voting rights to women, played an indispensable role in broadening this fundamental right.

“Cultural Decline”

Within this conceptual framework, Viktor Orbán's notion of illiberal democracy consists of electing a despot who imposes a nationalist, xenophobic, homophobic, and conspiracy-driven agenda while dismantling democratic institutions at will. It becomes a form of *democratic despotism*, supported by allies abroad who likewise proclaim that their actions are “for the defense of freedom,” insisting that supposed threats endanger “Western civilization.”

It is the actors embedded within illiberal democracy and the new right who seek to redefine hard-won personal freedoms, recasting them as if they were symptoms of what they themselves label *cultural decline*. In this context, the very concept of democracy is manipulated: reduced to a mere ritual of ballot boxes stripped of political liberalism, to permanent plebiscites that legitimize power while dismantling the checks and balances meant to restrain it.

That this can occur in any society is not mere speculation; it is a warning grounded



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in historical evidence. Anne Applebaum (2021) emphasized that any society can abandon democracy, and that no one is immune. History suggests, she asserts, that in the long run all societies are vulnerable to such trajectory.

The tradition of political thought had already anticipated this dilemma. Montesquieu drew a clear distinction between monarchical government and despotism. In his view, republics rest on virtue, monarchies on honor, and despotisms on fear.

While the actions of a king in a monarchical system are constrained by law and tradition, the rule of a despot is marked by arbitrariness and caprice, with power concentrated in the hands of a single individual or a small elite, and with no meaningful limits to their authority. The novelty of the 21st century is not despotic logic—which is ancient—but its packaging: electoral procedures staged as mere spectacle and social media serving as a permanent amplifier of the cult of the leader.

El Salvador and the Democratic Drift

It is worth pausing to examine a case that illustrates this drift: El Salvador under Nayib Bukele. Bukele has consolidated power in an authoritarian and abusive manner, relying on his popularity. He proclaimed himself

the winner of the presidential elections, secured re-election, and claimed nearly all seats in the Legislative Assembly even before the “official numbers” were released. His method for consolidating power involved dissolving the Supreme Court of Justice, disregarding the constitutional principle of alternation in power, diverting public funds to his campaign, and intimidating the magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

In Bukele’s own words following his re-election: “It would be the first time in El Salvador that there is a single political party in a democratic system, with the entire opposition crushed”.

In Bukele’s conception of democracy, he alone speaks while others are expected merely to take notes. Behind the propaganda, the country’s economy has deteriorated, and poverty has risen. Bukele governs with a small circle of confidants—his brothers—in a style that reflects a deeply personalistic vision of democracy. His vision is contested, and although homicide rates have dropped, humanitarian organizations criticize his heavy-handed policies for violating fundamental rights and affecting innocent citizens.

Aligned with the rhetoric of new authoritarianism, Bukele has blamed external

enemies—ranging from NGOs to George Soros and the media—while dismissing his critics as members of the elites. His government has been accused of consolidating increasingly authoritarian power, seeking to isolate the country from the international financial system and criminalizing criticism and independent journalism.

El Salvador has fallen thirty places in the press freedom index. Thousands of Salvadorans have been expelled, many of whom are now seeking political asylum abroad. The government is increasingly described as a rising dictatorship, marked by the militarization of both the police and society.

A few months ago, Bukele—in characteristic new right-wing fashion—demonstrated his government’s embrace of religion, effectively ending secularism. As he declared: “God wanted to heal our country, and he did. Let us give glory to God if we so desire. Why does that bother you; why does that affect you? Perhaps it affects you because the people of your countries, whom you have indoctrinated with atheism, might return to believing in God.” Today in El Salvador, a moralistic and corrupt cult has taken hold, where public displays of devotion are fused with political obedience, and sacred rhetoric serves as a shield against any form of criticism.

The Illiberal Thread

Despots do not view elections as a temporary delegation of authority, but rather as a blanket endorsement for their rule. Within this framework, elections cease to be genuine competitions between political projects and instead become plebiscites designed to reaffirm the leader’s power. In the end, despots will not risk their power in fair elections; instead, they

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will use the authority they already hold to turn elections into a farce that merely validates their rule—just as Hugo Chávez once did and Nicolás Maduro continues to do in Venezuela, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua with his dictatorship, and Vladimir Putin in Russia. In all these cases, a democratic façade is preserved—ballot boxes, voter rolls, campaigns—while genuine pluralism is extinguished through the banning of opponents, judicial capture, media censorship, and the persecution of civil society.

At first glance, majority rule is honored; yet in reality, alternation is abolished and rights are emptied of substance. The common thread is unmistakable: first, define the adversary as an internal enemy or foreign agent; second, transform checks and balances into *obstacles to governance*; third, invoke an existential threat—cultural decline, globalist conspiracy —; fourth, centralize authority; fifth, sacralize power. The outcome is a democracy stripped of liberalism, a despotism with ballot boxes.

For all these reasons, defending democracy today requires more than the mere demand for regular elections. It calls for the rebuilding of democratic culture: accepting limits on power even when those we favor are in office; insisting that constitutions remain living documents that broaden protections rather than rigid excuses for closing the political game. It

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also demands dismantling the emotional machinery of political narcissism: no leader can resolve complexity, no savior can restore order by decree without cost.

A Response to the “Excesses” of Modernity

The only mature path forward is to strengthen institutions, professionalize administrations, safeguard judicial independence, protect the press, and cultivate education for pluralism. This is not about returning to an idealized past—a past that never truly existed, or that was ideal only for the few who benefited from it—but about honoring the sole legacy that has advanced democracies: the expansion of rights and the limitation of arbitrary power.

Ultimately, the illiberal boom and the cultivation of political narcissism are neither accidental, nor simply responses to modernity’s “excesses.” They are the contemporary face of ancient despotism: a fusion of nationalist mythology, punitive moralism, institutional engineering, and digital spectacle. In light of this project, it is worth recalling historical experience: democracy is rarely destroyed overnight, but it is rather drained away little by little. It does not collapse solely through the will of a tyrant, but through the gradual renunciation of citizens to defend it. The solution,

then, is not to passively await the cycle of disappointment to run its course, but to act in advance: to embed tolerance into daily practice, to insist on transparency, to value political sobriety over incendiary rhetoric, and above all, to reject the emotional shortcut offered by the strongman.

Democracy is civilized conflict, not perpetual cultural war; it is pluralism governed by rules, not submission through fear; it is alternation under constraints, not obedience to a leader chosen for the epic task of “saving the homeland.” History reminds us that democracy rarely collapses in a single blow—it erodes step by step, until reaction comes too late. That is why defending it, without hesitation or detours, must take place now. ✦

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