

Downgrading Democracy from Within

Federico Finchelstein
Professor of History
The New School for Social Research

By becoming the leader of the world's most powerful country, Trump enabled and gave legitimacy to authoritarians worldwide. They are now his orphans but the success and defeat of antidemocratic politics is not defined by the rise and fall of Trumpism. To be sure, Trumpism has been extremely influential worldwide but not as an incubator but rather as cheerleader for other autocrats. He was more of a legitimizing influencer than a creator of politics. He had told Orban in 2019, "You're respected all over Europe. Probably, like me, a little bit controversial, but that's OK." Similar praise has helped Nayib Bukele in El Salvador where after winning the presidential election in 2019, he stated, "President Trump is nice and cool and I am also nice and cool... We will get along really well." They got along so well and they shared their impatience with the workings of democracy, that Bukele preceded Trump in an attempt to occupy the Congress. In February of 2020, the Salvadorean caudillo directed military troops and police forces to occupy the building and when he entered it, and as Trump's goonies would later do, he sat in the presiding chair. Bukele said a prayer from a seat normally occupied by the president of the parliament, Mario Ponce. Before leaving the building, Bukele gave lawmakers one week to approve his proposals. It is clear that Bukele had followed, and often, anticipated Trump's playbook. Like Trump, Bukele used, and abused, social media announcing government decisions from Twitter and even communicating with members of his cabinet in this way. He also declared on twitter that "I am officially the coolest president in the world." Another time, he "ordered" citizens to go to sleep while tweeting at 2.46 Am. Rather than being idiosyncratic, this novel use of the media landscape, followed the Trumpist pattern and presented the country with alternative realities which were coupled with planned attacks on the legitimacy of the free press. Similarly, Bolsonaro in Brazil famously coughed at journalists when he was positive with Covid-19, and also used violent, homophobic and misogynistic slurs when addressing journalists or referring to independent media. Two reports by press freedom organizations concluded that 2020 was the most dangerous year for professional journalism in recent Brazilian history, and Bolsonaro's government was the main source of the attacks. The use of violence against dissenters is presented in the context of Bolsonaro's reactionary calls to change the Brazilian people in religious traditional ways and arm the population to prevent a dictatorship of the left from taking hold. In reality, it is Bolsonaro who is taking Brazil into a dictatorial path. While Trump used law enforcement for acts of violence, including rubber bullets and tear gas, to clear peaceful protesters from outside the White House, and then the Trump campaign claimed that this never happened, despite numerous eyewitness accounts and video of the scene; after storming Congress, Bukele later justified his actions by claiming that he was not a dictator because he had

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eventually retreated. Like in Trump's infamous bible moment in the summer of 2020, Bukele equated freedom and the sacred with his ability to assault institutions at the request of the people and even identified his attacks on democracy and the independent press with his defense of "freedom of expression" which for him "is the essence of democracy, but there is an elite who despises ordinary people." This kind of distortion of authoritarianism, which presents itself as a defender of democracy, has a sad and old history that goes from Hitler, Franco and Pinochet to Bolsonaro and Trump. In 2019, Bolsonaro celebrated the 1964 coup that led to the most murderous military dictatorship in Brazil's history. He falsely claimed that this dictatorship had established democracy in Brazil, even arguing that it had not really been a dictatorship. In 2018, Bolsonaro in a conversation with Orban told him that the Brazilian people did not know what a dictatorship is, suggesting that the military junta that ran the country from 1964 to 1985 could not be classified this way. This attempt was no different from the classic fascist lie that fascist dictatorships were true forms of democracy.

Trump's dictatorial plan to reverse the results of the presidential election via the violence of armed citizens was also presented as a defense of democracy. This was a dangerous example to other democracies under threat. Some learned the wrong lessons. Bolsonaro's son Eduardo, a former policeman and the chair of the Foreign Affairs committee in Congress, was in Washington in early January and after the events he stated that if the insurrectionists had been better organized, they would have been able to take the Capitol and make their demands heard, and had "a minimum of bellicose power" to avoid casualties on their side. In 2018, warned it would take just two soldiers to shut down the Supreme Court. These statements are symptomatic of a deep change in the history of populism.

Populism in power has been a historical reformulation of fascism in democratic terms that after 1945 (that is, after the defeat of fascisms) left behind central elements of fascism to participate in democratic politics. Thus, the fascist-style lies were no longer central and also in this sense populist were clearly post-fascists. In fact, more traditional populists from Hugo Chavez in Venezuela to Silvio Berlusconi in Italy used lies in the more conventional style of the politicians of other political traditions, including conservatives, liberals and socialists. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt argued, politics and lies always go together but in fascism lies increased both quantitatively (fascists lie blatantly) and qualitatively (fascists believe their lies and try to transform reality to resemble their lies). In this specific sense, the lies of Trump and Bolsonaro, or Bukele or Modi, are more fascist than populist. These post-fascist leaders understand politics with an extreme version of the friend-enemy logic which is intrinsically alien to democratic principles. The coronavirus epidemic has helped this fascist playbook of lies and imagined enemies reach new extremes.

Bolsonaro initially claimed in 2020 that Brazil as a "a great Nation" was not very vulnerable to the virus. He later said that Brazil, in order to combat the virus, "has to stop being a country of fags" and that his "war" against the opposition is not of political nature because it is one where the future of the nation is at stake. In practice, this nationalist politics of hatred meant basically doing nothing to fight the virus, and as a result, Brazil today is leading the world in Covid deaths and new cases. The United States (especially under Trump) and India joined this

opprobrious podium of criminal neglect and promotion of disease which has genocidal implications.

Around the world, far-right leaders' responses to the pandemic feature key elements of fascist ideology. Bukele presented a mix of extreme lockdowns with the science denialism of Trump and Bolsonaro. As with Bolsonaro and Trump, he promised unscientific cures, saying he uses hydroxychloroquine, "I use it as a prophylaxis. President Trump uses it as a prophylaxis. Most of the world's leaders use it as a prophylaxis." While in power, post-fascist autocrats denied science and blamed others for the disease, their kindred leaders in the opposition, denounced scientific recommendations and used racism and xenophobia to denounce dictatorial tendencies by mainstream politicians.

This was the case, for example, with Thierry Baudet and his right-wing populist Forum for Democracy (FvD). Baudet questioned Prime Minister Mark Rutte's lockdown policies as a "corona dictatorship" put in question the Covid-19 virus itself. Baudet also said that George Soros "invented" Covid. This kind of political paranoia reflected in conspiracy theories is not new. It had already been studied seventy years ago by Theodor Adorno and his collaborators in their studies of the authoritarian personality. These fanatic believers have the need for the complexity of the world to be explained to them in a simple way through the idea that everything the leader says is true. It is in this context that this type of lies and delusions become even more "viral." But are these politics effective? Baudet successfully increased his seats from two to eight in the recent March election. More spectacularly, Bukele won a parliamentary election after having ordered military troops to storm parliament one year before. Although in Trumpist style he first claimed fraud, he did not need to insist on this propaganda lie because he actually won the elections in a landslide, winning around two-thirds of votes which gave him a supermajority. After winning, he identified this win with the absolute need to ignore the opposition. Just before the election, the glorification of violence and the militarization of politics increased dramatically. Bukele's Vice President Félix Ulloa said that Salvadorans face a new civil war: "this new war, with new actors, has already begun. And we started it by winning on February 3, 2019." His ministers and propaganda men present differing views as made by elites, "corrupt" and "rats." Bukele's popularity is currently higher than those of the Evangelical and Catholic churches and presently shows that Trumpist style of post-fascist politicism can be successful. But is Bukele an outlier?

As in the case of Bolsonaro and Trump, the election model of Bukele is that of the Pinochet campaign for the 1988 NO vote. They understand elections as plebiscites to put down democracy. At that time, Pinochet tried to legitimize his dictatorial power with votes. He lost. When Trump lost his bid for reelection he pretended the big lie of stolen victory justified his most fervent followers to storm congress as Bukele had done. Having won, Bukele may pretend to do the same but, of course, his impressive electoral victory does not provide him with a mandate to destroy democracy from within.

Does the Trump recipe still really work? Netanyahu got inconclusive results in the recent March election in Israel and we will soon know about Keiko Fujimori in Peru, Jose Antonio Kast in Chile in presidential elections this year and later Orban, Marine Le Pen and Bolsonaro in 2022

will test whether populist extremist politics as usual can continue to be electorally successful after Trump. But not everything is up to them. A lot depends on how seriously these extreme right-wing autocrats and their fascists and paramilitaries are confronted. The risk they pose to democracy must be taken with great concern and within the framework of the law. For example, what was surprising about the Capitol assault is that while in the United States minorities and people who raise legitimate popular demands against racism, discrimination and inequality are generally being repressed without any haste—Trumpist right-wing coup rioters, in other words, American "domestic terrorists," were treated with a velvet glove when the use of force was actually necessary. They should have been repressed and arrested immediately. It is necessary to remember that fascism triumphed in the past when justice and the State ignored the illegality of its violence. That Trump has not paid for his actions is also very concerning and this sends a message to other global autocrats. They can attack democracy without paying any price. And yet, as dangerous as it is, what is certainly more dangerous is the internationalization of these fantasies and politics of hatred by parties and leaders that historically have been different to the post-fascism of autocrats, and for this reason they should know better.

Trumpism light

Conservative or even social-democratic leaders in Europe, Latin America and beyond want to use the appeal of Trumpist positions on "law and order" and immigration restrictions while trying to avoid the charges of populism, homophobia, misogyny and racism. These politicians have no plans to vocally embrace Trump's style or to present themselves as populists. In fact, they are populists on a diet, which means that, dangerously, the media and many voters ignore the impact that Trumpism is having on them.

This is the case of mainstream politicians, like President Emmanuel Macron in France, Boris Johnson in the UK, Senator Marco Rubio or Mitch McConnell in the US, Mark Rutte in the Netherlands, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, in Spain, Rafael López Aliaga in Peru, or Denmark's Social Democrats. They embrace the politics of hatred by excluding immigrants, celebrating histories of exclusion, or downplaying the rights of minorities and glorifying the unrestrained violence of law enforcement. They make use of Trumpist elements as they distance themselves from Trump publicly. By presenting a façade of respectability and decorum they cynically use what they understand as Trump's appeal.

In the Netherlands, Rutte has survived his own government's racist child benefit scandal and won the most recent elections in March by adopting his by now standard practice of xenophobia light or soft-populism without reaching the extremes of populist Trump-like parties like those of Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet. Rutte outflanked the far right by arguing that he is a more *respectable* politician. In a recent debate with far-right populist Geert Wilders, Rutte said "I too want less immigration. But whilst you were angrily Tweeting from the couch, I made sure that the amount of migrants, the amount of refugees from Syria coming from Turkey decreased by 90 percent." Even if successful in the short run, the adoption of key elements of the radical-right agenda by mainstream parties increases vote share for the radical-right.

In France, President Emmanuel Macron made a rightward tilt as a way to presumably counteract the right-populism of Marine Le Pen. Macron made law and order and islamophobia key tenets of his government. To be sure, Macron's policies are not new to France. His predecessors also sporadically adopted policies advocated by lepenism but his recent use of xenophobia and the American style of culture wars to score points against the right, makes Macron one of the most significant present examples of Trumpism light.

Similar examples abound throughout the world. For example in Denmark, Social Democrats successfully adopted their own xenophobic version of Rutte's message to immigrants and minorities, "Act normal or leave." Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen campaigned on an anti immigration message, supporting bans on Muslim women wearing burqas, and forcing certain "ghetto children"—those who live in designated "ghettos" where half the population are "non-Western" immigrants—to undergo lessons in "Danish values." Similar situations can be seen in Austria with PM Sebastian Kurz having dropped his far-right allies and now allied with the Greens and in Peru, where mainstream conservative Presidential candidate Rafael López Aliaga has embraced an anti-immigration message regarding Venezuelan and invents the danger of his country becoming a dictatorship like Cuba or Venezuela if the left wins. López Aliaga, nicknamed Porky, has embraced this demeaning term and even dressed as a Pig for an interview in a comedy show. He has differentiated himself from Bolsonaro, arguing, "Bolsonaro insults the gay community, I am inclusive, the community must be welcomed, as Pope Francis says." López Aliaga said he represses his own sexual desire by thinking of the Virgin Mary and flails himself with a cilice because that is a Christian virtue for him.

Similar extremism by the center right can be found in Spain where, one of the most important politician of the conservative Popular Party, Isabel Ayuso stated, "when they call you fascist, you know you are acting correctly and you are on the good side." As with Lopez Aliaga, Ayuso warned that the significant incoming elections in Madrid opposed freedom to communism. This "communism or freedom" message is not new. Italian neo-fascism and lepenism in France have applied it for several decades. It was also repeated by Cold War champions such as the Argentine dictators of the so-called dirty war and by Augusto Pinochet in Chile. More recently it was used by Trump and Bolsonaro and also Alternative for Germany (AfD). But in contrast with the cases of Spain, Peru, France or Austria, in Germany, under Angela Merkel's leadership, the center right has not engaged in this idea that autocrats can be defeated by putting their paranoia, ideology and xenophobia on a diet. When considered historically, this is the wrong lesson to be taken by Trump's defeat. In short, if Trump's or Bolsonaro's politics of anti-science and denialism are subtracted from the xenophobic packaged which is itself flattened, the outcome is also anti-democratic. When these forms of auto presented anti-populism defeat populism democracy also suffers. Thus, rather than helping defeat populist policies, center-right anti-populists are in fact becoming attenuated but still harmful lite versions of them. To be sure, most of these leaders adopt xenophobic policies domestically but they also embrace the rule of law and multilateralism. They are not full-fledged populists and certainly not autocrats. Populism combines both democracy and authoritarianism, but defeating populism can also lead to a devaluation of democracy. This is the case when, in contrast with the broad anti racist coalition that elected Joe Biden, populism is confronted with a moderate version of the

same autocratic politics.