

# The Public Eye



*May we never stop demanding  
freedom, dignity, and the  
end of occupation everywhere  
from Palestine to Kashmir*

As this issue heads to print, U.S. legislators have been demonizing student-organized Gaza solidarity encampments, calling for protesters' arrest and campus purges while holding hearings that weaponize accusations of antisemitism to silence criticism of Israel. Too many university leaders have capitulated to this bad-faith, neo-McCarthyite pressure, ceding their ground to the Right or eagerly following its lead.

The antidemocratic turn that this criminalization of protest exemplifies is the subject of our Spring 2024 issue on the far-right expansion of authoritarianism globally. In a timely commentary on the state's use of the "outside agitator" narrative to violently repress progressive movements—namely, Palestine solidarity activism and the Stop Cop City movement—PRA's Habiba Farh examines (p. 17) how "the powerful choose authoritarian control" to secure their rule over democratic challenges to their legitimacy.

Our first feature considers what's behind the global authoritarian surge—and what's to be done about it. As far-right leaders worldwide share tactics to consolidate their power, Meena Jagannath and Nikki Thanos of the Movement Lawyers Lab write (p. 3), "We cannot simply reform our institutions or file the perfect set of lawsuits to curb the threat of rising authoritarianism. We must build, slowly and purposefully, alongside social movements, and that requires a power-building approach to law and organizing."

As India wraps up national elections that could bring a third term to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, PRA's newest partner, Savera: United Against Supremacy, reports on the violent, far-right Hindu supremacist movement behind Modi's government. As Savera writes (p. 7), Hindu supremacism constitutes "a key part of a global far-right ecosystem" that poses a "critical threat to pluralism, democracy, and civil rights" the world over.

Taiwan's bitterly contested national elections were among this year's first. In an online feature, Kayo Chang Black examines the role of disinformation in the elections and what a split outcome reveals about the country's ongoing struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

Ahead of his re-election, Russia's Vladimir Putin declared 2024 "The Year of the Family." In her commentary (published with a pseudonym), Irina Smolevskaya scrutinizes (p. 11) Putin's appeal to "traditional family values" as a reversal of U.S. Cold War containment rhetoric appealing to domestic and transnational conservatives alike. Russia, along with Egypt and Iran, is among the leaders of a global anti-gender movement that draws on this rhetoric to wield growing influence at the UN. As Zoë Schott writes (p. 14), the movement's mission has shifted from attacking gender-focused spaces to *all* global policymaking to undermine LGBTQ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender justice—and ultimately, the UN itself.

The climate emergency requires coordinated global action, but as Ajay Singh Chaudhary argues in our excerpt of his book, *The Exhausted of the Earth* (p. 22, full excerpt online), the "right-wing climate realism" of those who benefit from the extractive economic system that fuels global warming upholds "business-as-usual."

Finally, we consider a few recent books in this issue. PRA's Ethan Fauré discusses U.S. immigration politics and considers how two books—*The Case for Open Borders* and *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*—challenge "border crisis" narratives (p. 20). And PRA's Annie Wilkinson speaks with the editors of *Conspiracy/Theory*, Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, about the reality-making power of conspiracism and its global spread (p. 23).

Our cover features a paste-up collage of Palestine solidarity art in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Its message reads, "May we never stop demanding freedom, dignity, and the end of occupation everywhere from Palestine to Kashmir." In *The Art of Activism* (back cover), Fearless Collective artist Vicky Shahjehan speaks with PRA about the inspiration behind her public art.

Between print issues of *The Public Eye*, PRA publishes regularly online at [politicalresearch.org](http://politicalresearch.org) and [religiondispatches.org](http://religiondispatches.org). We hope you'll visit us often.

Kitana Ananda, Editor

**POLITICAL  
RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATES**

THE PUBLIC EYE  
QUARTERLY

PUBLISHER  
Tarso Luis Ramos

EDITOR  
Kitana Ananda

COVER ART  
Vicky Shahjehan

PRINTING  
Park Press Printers

The Public Eye is published by  
Political Research Associates

Tarso Luis Ramos, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
Kitana Ananda, EDITOR

Abigail Battles, EDITORIAL COORDINATOR

Melanie Bouchard, OPERATIONS COORDINATOR

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[contact@politicalresearch.org](mailto:contact@politicalresearch.org)

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BY MEENA JAGANNATH AND NIKKI THANOS

# What Propels the Global Authoritarian Surge and How We Can Fight Back



Art created by Rommy Torrico for *Convergence* magazine.

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In the first *Dispatch on Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> we laid out the urgent need for progressive lawyers to join the fight for a multiracial, pluralistic democracy in the United States by not only protecting formal democratic rights but also accompanying communities in their struggles to democratize all areas of their lives—the workplace, the schools, the economy and more. Several recent Supreme Court terms have made it painfully clear that we all—especially progressive lawyers committed to multiracial democracy—

must acknowledge the limitations of the law and legal institutions. The courts are not and never have been a vehicle of social change on their own; social change requires shifting culture, systems, and power. To confront the growing threat of authoritarianism in the U.S., we urgently need more lawyers who can back up social movement organizers in a power-building project that is much larger than any one case or policy fight.

We also need to understand the international dimensions of the current crisis. Recently, our global team at Movement Law Lab, coordinating the Global Network of Movement Lawyers (GNML), worked with folks from over a dozen countries in a multi-month process to

analyze authoritarian tactics around the world and strategize about the right to resist. That process informs our offerings in this dispatch.<sup>2</sup> We will unpack what's behind the rise in authoritarianism both in the U.S. and globally, and what's at stake if we don't orient ourselves differently to the moment. We also offer our ideas on what that new orientation could look like.

The current moment is marked by an accelerating climate disaster; pandemic; geopolitical tensions and war; the erosion of democratic norms and institutions; food and energy insecurity; ongoing racism and xenophobia; a migration crisis; hostility towards women, queer, and trans people; and economic precar-

ity. These compounding global crises create heightened states of anxiety and instability the world over, generating a pervasive culture of despair and nihilism that limits a future where peace, political stability, and prosperity are accessible to the many.

Argentina, the Netherlands and now Indonesia have shown that authoritarianism is on the rise globally, and with it, a playbook is emerging for reshaping state institutions to serve anti-democratic ends. The more we can familiarize ourselves with “authoritarian-light” tactics—think

it is important to note that the Argentinian omnibus law incorporated multiple other tactics from the international authoritarian playbook, including watering down environmental protections and giving the legislature an unprecedented new power to grant law-making authority to the president himself.

***Any issue—no matter how local—is bound up with the worldwide rise of authoritarianism. We need to better understand the threat so that we can play our part in a pro-democratic front to both thwart authoritarian power grabs and build a better future.***

The rise of authoritarianism is thus a consequence and an aggravating factor for the compounding crises we are witnessing today, both in the U.S. and worldwide. Any issue, no matter how particular or local, that any progressive lawyer is hoping to advance is inextricably bound up with this current world moment and the rising threat of authoritarianism. We are all responsible for understanding the threat more fully so that we can better play our part in a pro-democratic front to both thwart authoritarian power grabs and build toward a better future.

#### **HOW AUTHORITARIANS REPRESS: THE GLOBAL PLAYBOOK**

The present challenges to democracy in the United States cannot be divorced from a broader global context; indeed, the U.S.’s role in deepening these crises is all too evident. Recent examples include refusing to remove intellectual property barriers to universal access to lifesaving COVID-19 healthcare products; spreading a surveillance and counterterrorism framework that has encouraged misuse and crackdowns on civil society globally; and the U.S.’s current role in facilitating the unfolding genocide in Gaza by providing unconditional military aid and diplomatic cover to Israel. We must also remember that the particular form of authoritarianism in the U.S., while it may have its own local characteristics, is not blooming in a vacuum, but rather in conversation with the Modis,<sup>3</sup> Netanyahus, and Orbáns<sup>4</sup> of the world.

Recent elections in the Philippines, Ar-

gentina, the Netherlands and now Indonesia have shown that authoritarianism is on the rise globally, and with it, a playbook is emerging for reshaping state institutions to serve anti-democratic ends. The more we can familiarize ourselves with “authoritarian-light” tactics—think of them as early warning signs—the more likely we’ll be able to interrupt a slip toward fascism. Authoritarian-leaning leaders are watching and building off their counterparts’ experiments to transform every layer of civic life. They’re sharing notes on how to: erode democratic institutions; crack down on democratic expression and protest; eliminate oversight and accountability mechanisms; concentrate power in the executive; tighten borders and strengthen anti-migrant policies; roll back gains in the fight against racism and heteropatriarchy; weaken regulatory frameworks to enable corporate capture of the State; and undermine efforts to stem climate change and environmental destruction.

One tactic to monitor is the criminalization of protest to suppress dissent and stymie accountability of authoritarian leaders. This tactic is often accompanied by a marked increase in surveillance and harassment.

In the U.S., as part of a wave of anti-protest legislation<sup>5</sup> across a number of red states, Florida’s “anti-riot” legislation<sup>6</sup> signed by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2021 created new criminal offenses and increased penalties for individuals who participate in, or even support those who participate in, public protests. In Argentina, new measures in the same vein include a protocol that gives greater license to law enforcement to use repressive tactics on demonstrators; President Javier Milei’s omnibus law<sup>7</sup> (since rescinded) also proposed a slate of new restrictions on the right to protest. Though the law was withdrawn,

Another common emerging tactic among global authoritarians is the use of social media platforms to spread disinformation and initiate smear campaigns against their opposition. For example, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s 2022 campaign used an altered photo to associate his opponent, Lula da Silva, with Satanism.<sup>8</sup>

In almost all cases, the groups on the frontlines demanding transparency and accountability are the first to be targeted. We’ve seen an uptick in tactics to decertify or forcibly disband human rights organizations and civil society groups, such those used in Hungary. In 2017, Hungary passed legislation that requires foreign-accredited universities to have a base in their home country, which it used to legitimize the expulsion of the Central European University from Hungary. It’s also becoming more common to “audit” NGO actors as a thinly veiled means of surveillance, as India did with its foreign funding audits; to blacklist or label civil society actors as “terrorist organizations”; and to search or close down offices. Last year the State of Israel designated seven human rights organizations as “terrorist” and raided the esteemed Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq’s offices<sup>9</sup> in a brazen move to chill dissent.

Again, we can already see ripples of these tactics close to home: far-right Attorneys General in the U.S. have begun probing the use of audits to target progressive 501 (c) (3) nonprofits<sup>10</sup> and are poised to place procedural hurdles to stymie public ballot initiatives and other participatory democratic mechanisms. Authoritarian-leaning regimes have also censored education and/or the mention of particular subjects, as several U.S. states have done with bills banning critical race theory or targeting trans folks, and Hungary did with the banning of gender studies.

## HOW AUTHORITARIANS ARE COMING TO POWER

Proto-fascists of late have gained power through a model of “electoral autocracy”<sup>11</sup> or “illiberal democracy” in the words of Hungarian President Viktor Orbán—essentially, a system that preserves some kind of formal elections at the same time that it concentrates power in the executive branch, shrinks space for protest, and weakens the independent press, among other measures. This would be the most likely path towards consolidation of authoritarian power in the U.S. if the MAGA bloc were to win in the 2024 presidential elections and succeed in fortifying authoritarian strongholds at the state and local levels.

Who is aiding the rise of authoritarians? Authoritarians are often backed by oligarchs, including financiers, bankers, leaders of extractive and other multinational corporations, and techno-oligarchs. In many cases, these ultra-rich individuals have more financial and political power than the nation-states in which they reside and conduct business. They often have more in common with each other than their fellow countrymen; just look at Elon Musk’s interest in lithium from northern Argentina<sup>12</sup> and his budding relationship with President Milei. Authoritarianism ultimately presents one solution to a core challenge the ruling class faces today: how to divert public attention away from the corruption,

real cause of worsening conditions—the influence-peddling of a motley crew of oligarchs who benefit from this particular form of racial capitalism. To consolidate public opinion in their own favor, authoritarians—often at the behest of the ruling political class—charge the oppressed as the cause of societal discontent, dislocation, crisis, and poverty. Common scapegoats include low-income people, migrants (especially Black and Brown migrants), Muslims/religious minorities, LGBTQ folks, indigenous groups, and drug users, as well as people facing mental illness and housing insecurity, among others.

In the U.S., these conditions have helped the Far Right consolidate power and metastasize White nationalist sentiment in the MAGA popular base. Populist demagogues often cast themselves as saviors who will take society back to an imaginary past time of prosperity. As the sustained popularity of the “Make America Great Again” banner and “Build the Wall” slogans advanced by Trump in his campaigning suggests, this tactic has no less allure in the U.S.

### DIRE CONSEQUENCES IF AUTHORITARIANISM GROWS IN THE U.S.

Authoritarianism is a threat to every progressive movement in every country where it arises—and, as the shared ‘playbook’ above demonstrates, it becomes a threat to progressive movements in other countries, as new “authoritarian-curious” leaders start adopting tactics used

smaller and sometimes invisible places. Authoritarian tactics are often tested out at a regional, state, or town level—just look at Florida and Texas. Oftentimes, especially in contexts where folks face multiple, simultaneous fires, those targeted zones get sacrificed. That is a mistake, and one we must urgently correct.

For example, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has moved a shocking number of draconian policies since taking office in 2018, including banning books, chilling protest, and undermining the independence of public universities and colleges. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott has defunded the legislative branch, used his office to retaliate against his enemies, bused migrants to Democratic states, and blocked judges from releasing prisoners who couldn’t post cash bail. If left unchecked, these “small” experiments grow and spread.

In Louisiana, recently elected Governor Jeff Landry learned from the Abbott and DeSantis playbooks and is planning to implement even more troubling restrictions in Louisiana. We can see a similar pattern of problematic tactics spreading from state to state in the fight for reproductive and abortion rights. Since June, 14 states have passed near-total abortion bans while two states have banned abortion past roughly six weeks of pregnancy, locking in the Supreme Court’s overruling of *Roe v. Wade*.

Second, democratic backsliding isn’t always easy for the public to see—and the powers that resource and manipulate our systems can be even more elusive. At the direction of the Federalist Society, the judiciary has been transformed into a powerful arm for advancing a reactionary right-wing agenda. Now that the Supreme Court has been captured, it is quite easy to see the role of the Federalist Society. For decades, however, the behind-the-scenes infrastructure that made the capture of the Court possible operated largely in the shadows.

Presently, those same forces are attacking Chevron deference, a well-established precedent in administrative law that says ambiguous policies are best interpreted by the agencies closest to an issue. If they win, it’ll be the court instead that makes the final call—a biased, undemocratic conservative court. Similar efforts are underway to

**Authoritarianism is a threat to every progressive movement in every country where it arises—and, as the shared “playbook” above demonstrates, as new “authoritarian-curious” leaders adopt tactics used elsewhere.**

nepotism, and wholesale theft of public goods that is a central feature of contemporary racial capitalism.

Fifty-plus years of neoliberalism have squeezed public coffers, leading to an overall decline in the quality of life for working people. Racist and xenophobic scapegoating serves to obscure the

elsewhere. To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., authoritarianism anywhere is a threat to multiracial democracy everywhere. First, most people think of presidents or heads of state when they think about authoritarianism, but the path towards authoritarianism begins long before authoritarians take federal power, in

## **Our very means of resisting are under attack. This is work upon which all our other work depends.**

file legal cases that would manipulate key pieces of legal doctrines<sup>13</sup> that allow people to access the courts, empower federal agencies to regulate highly specialized areas like environmental protection, labor<sup>14</sup> and food and drug safety, and the funding of those mechanisms. Meanwhile, 28 states have called for an Article V constitutional convention under the conservative balanced budget amendment effort<sup>15</sup>—just six states shy of the 34-state threshold needed for such a convention to take place. Though the Supreme Court ultimately struck down the independent state legislature doctrine, states have continued to chip away at voting rights and make attempts to undermine the electoral system.

The above examples make clear that we must keep our eye on secretive behind-the-scenes infrastructure and maneuvers from the MAGA bloc. At the same time, we also must take seriously the bloc's public statements and plans. The third thing our team has learned is that today's authoritarians often publicize—even boast—about their plans to concentrate power and erode protections for the most vulnerable. Nowhere is that clearer than in the Heritage Foundation-led Project 2025<sup>16</sup> document released last summer, a frighteningly specific handbook to unmake government as we know it and drive the country towards right-wing authoritarianism should any Republican win the next election.

In its 1,000+ pages, Project 2025 provides a roadmap to dismantle federal government institutions by centralizing executive authority, blurring the separation between church and state, firing (or making it easy to fire) civil service workers<sup>17</sup> and filling those vacancies with ideologically aligned individuals, and weaponizing the executive branch. The plan also proposes sweeping legislative changes: hardline immigration policies, a rollback in climate action, the criminalization of abortion access, privatization of public education, and much more. If they are successful in implementing even a small portion of this plan, no sector of society will be untouched.

A recently released report<sup>18</sup> by United to Protect Democracy lays out six elements of the authoritarian playbook expected to be wielded in the event of a 2024 MAGA presidential win: (1) abuse of the executive pardon; (2) abuse of prosecutorial powers to target opponents; (3) abuse of regulatory power to reward loyalty and punish opposition or oversight; (4) expansion of the use of federal law enforcement; (5) wielding military power domestically; and (6) a refusal to leave office at the end of the term. The report paints a chilling picture of emboldened cronies, weaponized police and prosecutorial powers deployed against critics, sanctioned political violence, chilled speech or dissent, degraded safety and privacy for those deemed as opponents, and dictator's rule without limits. It is but the latest analysis that details the extent to which the MAGA faction intends to consolidate power behind an autocratic leader and transform government as we know it.

So very much is at stake—including core rights that we often take for granted, and the contours of the terrain on which we're accustomed to waging fights. To allow our democracy to erode and give way to the MAGA bloc (as per their own plans) would mean the loss of the very means by which we have won rights, resources and participation for our communities. It would mean the disappearance of a civic space that has been important both for making affirmative demands and holding leaders accountable.

As we see voting rights, the right to protest, a free press, free speech, access to books, the right to organize, and privacy rights being undermined; as we see our people surveilled, harassed and charged under the frame of terrorism;<sup>19</sup> as we see police militarized and omnipresent; as we lose our ability to challenge unjust laws and frameworks through traditional legal means—our very means of resisting are under attack. This is work upon which all our other work depends.

### **A POWER-BUILDING APPROACH TO DEFEAT AUTHORITARIANISM**

To be clear, a MAGA 2024 presidential win presents acute threats, but the

threats we outline above are chronic—they will continue to simmer on a slow burner around the United States and throughout the world. The tactics used by authoritarians will continue to be shared, mimicked, and refined across borders. But this is not cause for despair; quite the contrary. We know what kind of fight-back strategies work, and we have the potential to not only defend against the authoritarian threat but also catapult our country towards a profoundly different, pluralistic, multiracial democracy.

The final takeaway from our global mapping of authoritarian trends is that the best push-back strategies are powered by a vibrant and protected civil society. The role of organizers is thus central—as agitators, mobilizers, popular educators, and pollinators between sectors. The role of lawyers is similarly multifold. We need lawyers to continue to defend the gains of the past and challenge harmful policies. We also need lawyers by the tens of thousands to defend communities in day-to-day democracy fights that are much closer to home—for example, in unionization efforts, participatory budgeting processes, and neighborhood school boards. While these efforts take place on U.S. terrain, we must remain in mindful solidarity with peoples' struggles around the world as the authoritarian wave is a global phenomenon.

Those who have borne the brunt of economic and political injustice in the U.S.—notably Black and Indigenous people—have long called out the hypocrisy of U.S. democracy, and they are right. We cannot simply reform our institutions or file the perfect set of lawsuits to curb the threat of rising authoritarianism. We must build, slowly and purposefully, alongside social movements, and that requires a power-building approach to law and organizing. We'll explore all that and more in the dispatches to follow.

*Meena Jagannath is the Director of Global Programs for the Movement Law Lab.*

*Nikki Thanos is the Director of Training and Praxis for the Movement Law Lab.*

BY SAVERA

# A Global Trail of Violence

## India's Hindu Supremacist Movement and Its Role in the Transnational Far Right



Collage of Narendra Modi and Donald Trump, saffron flags, and the logo of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Credit: PRA)

This article is composed of edited excerpts from *The Global VHP's Trail of Violence*, a report by PRA's new partner, Saveria: *United Against Supremacy*. Saveria is a multiracial, interfaith, anti-caste coalition committed to combating Hindu supremacy, White supremacy, and the intersections between them.

Excerpted from *The Global VHP's Trail of Violence*, by Saveria (January 2024), 4–5, 8–9, 11, 13–15, 17, 19, and 21. Reprinted with permission from the authors with edits for clarity and style.

**H**indu supremacy's century-long and frequently violent history includes over five decades of patient institution building in the United States. While Hindu Americans, like other minority communities, have faced racism in the U.S., a subsection of the community has responded not with anti-racist solidarity but a supremacist pol-

itics of their own. Hindu supremacists have emulated far-right organizational and ideological structures, first drawing inspiration from Mussolini's Blackshirts in the 1920s, and today exhibiting deep affinities and collaborations with White supremacist projects in America—with avowed allies like Steve Bannon, an honorary chairman of the Republican Hindu Coalition, a paradigmatic example. In particular, White supremacy and Hindu supremacy unite around a shared project of spreading Islamophobia in the U.S., but they also jointly oppose many progressive causes, including affirmative action and civil rights protections. These efforts have also produced deep fault lines within Indian American communities—most notably along the lines of religion and caste—while creating a wedge between communities of color and fracturing coalitions otherwise opposed to White Christian nationalism.

In India, the Hindu supremacist move-

ment holds prime responsibility for rendering the 1.4-billion-strong country's government authoritarian. In its pursuit of a Hindu ethno-state, the Hindu supremacist movement has violently targeted minorities; arbitrarily detained, harassed and killed political opponents (including outside its borders); and pursued a crony capitalism that has deepened the wealth gap, evicted indigenous communities off their land, and devastated the environment. India has recently been downgraded to an "Electoral Autocracy" by the V-Dem institute and to a status of "partly free" by Freedom House.<sup>1</sup>

Among the central progenitors of this politics has been the global institution of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, henceforth VHP), whose key overseas node is its American arm—which is the subject of this report. This report seeks to educate Americans about the true nature of the global VHP, the extent of its harms in the U.S., its enabling

## ***In a world as interconnected as ours, far-right movements, and threats to democracy and pluralism more broadly, are deeply transnational phenomena.***

of violence in India, and its entrenchment in and influence over American politics and civil society.

The rise of far-right tendencies within the ethnic and religious minority community of Hindu Americans raises the specter of multiracial compradors of White supremacist projects in the U.S. The links between White supremacists and Hindu supremacists in the U.S. are merely one example of broader affinities between far-right movements, and the rise of an “international ethnonationalism,” with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India joining the likes of Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Benjamin Netanyahu, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump in eroding democratic norms and institutions. In a world as interconnected as ours, far-right movements, and threats to democracy and pluralism more broadly, are deeply transnational phenomena. Supremacist and ethnonationalist movements across the world are no longer merely faraway conflagrations; their progenitors are well-networked, their strategies and language shared, and their impacts contagious.

However, a lack of awareness about Hindu supremacy has led well-meaning centrist and progressive institutions to misrecognize Hindu supremacists as representative of the wider, far more diverse, and more liberal Indian American community. American politicians and civil society are frequently hoodwinked into collaborating with and legitimizing a far-right movement that operates under the guise of being a minority community within the U.S.’s multicultural framework. This has routinely meant that organized and well-financed Hindu supremacists can infiltrate and influence spaces where they do not belong.

Pro-democracy actors in the U.S. must better understand the connections between these seemingly far-flung developments and the health of our democracy. This report offers a robust and insightful analysis of this phenomenon, taking as its starting point the deep transnational

reach of the Hindu supremacist movement, and its organizational breadth and sophistication, before walking readers through the impact these actors have had on our own, similarly fragile democracy. The Global VHP has sat at the center of this network for over five decades, founding a sprawling network in the U.S., while remaining closely tied to its parent organization in India.

[ . . . ]

In this report, we examine the VHP’s destructive footprint across the world, with an emphasis on India and the United States, arguably its two largest and most politically significant chapters. The report summarizes a significant body of reporting and analysis that has identified the VHP as a key player in a decades-long process of wrenching apart Indian society. While the report focuses on key examples of spectacular violence in which the VHP has been clearly implicated, a focus on outbreaks of mass violence alone would understate the extent of harms faced by Muslims and other minorities in India. The VHP’s role in spreading hate speech and conspiracy theories; in acts of violent mobilization, intimidation, and harassment; as well as in acts of physical violence, is endemic. While the VHP’s American presence (the VHP-A) has played key roles in facilitating, protecting, and materially and politically supporting the VHP in India, including during these instances of mass anti-Muslim violence, the VHP’s destructive impact has not been limited to India. In the United States, the VHP-A has played a harmful role in multiple spheres: through their collaborations with other supremacist organizations and ideologies; their attacks on U.S. civil society organizations; their role in moving Indian American communities to the right, and their unvarnished Islamophobia and bigotry. Actors in U.S. civil and political society must see the VHP-A, despite its claims to be the representative of a minority community, as a key part of a global far-right ecosystem, and as the critical

threat to pluralism, democracy, and civil rights that its actions betray it to be.

### **WHAT IS HINDU SUPREMACY? HINDUTVA IDEOLOGY AND THE VHP’S GLOBAL ROOTS**

Hindu supremacy, sometimes referred to as Hindu nationalism or Hindutva, is a century-old ethnonationalist political ideology distinguished from Hinduism by its emphasis on the absolute hegemony of Hindus in India.<sup>2</sup> Hindu supremacists seek to create a Hindu state around a narrow interpretation of Hinduism based on a glorified, mythical past.<sup>3</sup> This political goal involves the expulsion or subordination of Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities in India. It also intensifies the violent subordination of oppressed-caste and indigenous communities (Dalits and Adivasis, respectively).<sup>4</sup> Hindu supremacists reject the notion of a secular, pluralistic, democratic India, and seek to redefine the territorial boundaries of the country and encompass territories across Asia based on ancient Hindu scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

The roots of the VHP, and of Hindu supremacy more broadly, can be traced back to the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Corps). Founded in September 1925, the RSS drew inspiration from Italian fascist Benito Mussolini’s military academies and youth organizations.<sup>6</sup> Since its inception, the RSS has developed a sprawling network of subsidiary organizations around the world, like Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as charities, religious organizations, and labor unions.<sup>7</sup> This network empowers the RSS and its organs, like the VHP, to operate under many names in different sections of society.<sup>8</sup> The RSS, which has repeatedly been involved in anti-minority violence, was banned once during British rule and then thrice by the post-independence Indian government, including after Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a member of the RSS, Nathuram Godse.<sup>9</sup>



**Sangh Parivar** A vast network of organizations across the world centered around the Hindu supremacist RSS as a central node. While the RSS formally acknowledges its control over less than three dozen organizations, research suggests that the entire network spans tens of thousands of organizations.<sup>10</sup>

**The VHP** was founded in India in 1964, and in 1970 the VHP-A was founded in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Both wings were set up on the orders of M.S. Golwalkar, the second Supreme Leader of the RSS.<sup>12</sup>

**M.S. Golwalkar** The second Sarsanghchalak (Supreme Leader) of the RSS—and one of its chief ideologues. In *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Golwalkar argues that Hindus should be inspired by the genocidal treatment of Jewish people by the Nazis as a model of how to treat religious minorities in India.<sup>13</sup>

Under the guise of so-called “religious regeneration,” the VHP seeks to mobilize Hindus both in India and outside to convert the current Indian secular republic into a theocratic nation, often through violent agitation. Over the past five decades, the VHP—together with its youth militias, the Bajrang Dal and the Durga Vahini—has been responsible for a long and gruesome history of violence, particularly against Muslim and Christian minorities in India. In 2018, the VHP was designated as a “militant religious organization” by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>14</sup>

The VHP has always been a transnational entity, seeking to build international networks to support an otherwise nativist cause. As of 2019, the VHP had a self-declared presence in 29 countries across the world.<sup>15</sup> Its U.S. wing has been the “crown jewel” in this network, playing a critical role in the significant harms the VHP has wreaked worldwide.

In the United States, the VHP-A has formally founded dozens of organizations, projects and programs, including student, advocacy and temple wings. It has also informally birthed or remained closely tied to dozens of organizations committed to similar Hindu supremacist goals.<sup>16</sup> In this mode, the VHP-A operates as the apex body of a similar hydra-headed network of organizations, taking on a role in the U.S. analogous to that of the RSS in India.<sup>17</sup>

However, by claiming to be a purely “religious” organization and claiming to represent Hindus in the U.S., the VHP-A has enjoyed significant privileges and access to domestic political power, including undeserved representational legitimacy and even funding from government sources.<sup>18</sup> The harms caused by the VHP have left an indelible impact not just on communities in India and its diaspora, but the broader American political landscape as well.

#### THE VHP'S ROLE IN ANTI-MUSLIM VIOLENCE IN INDIA

Hindu supremacist violence in India is frequent and widespread, making it difficult to convey the full scale of harm perpetrated by an organization like the VHP. Given the scale of anti-Muslim rhetoric, public mobilization, verbal harassment, and physical violence, particularly against Muslims, no description of the VHP's involvement in violence can be exhaustive. Although some data remains available, attempts at collecting independent data on hate crimes have been stymied by censorship and harassment by the Modi government.<sup>19</sup> Scholars studying the Hindu Far Right have convincingly demonstrated that riots and pogroms against Muslims and other minorities are often the outcome of a long process of misinformation campaigns, conspiracy

theories, and other forms of hate speech that dehumanize targeted communities.<sup>20</sup> Acts of violence that mark the “culmination” of these campaigns are often described as organic and spontaneous conflagrations between communities, but more commonly tend to be deliberate and strategic choices, outsourced to lesser-known militias whose ties to larger organizations like the VHP are often obscured. This report follows scholarship on the Hindu Far Right in understanding various forms of violence—discursive and physical, and quotidian and spectacular—to be interconnected rather than discrete categories. In this context, it is critical to understand the extent to which the VHP is at the forefront of long-running campaigns that use dehumanizing language to incite violence against religious minorities. Most often—and as is the case with various far-right groups globally—this rhetoric is grounded in language marking out targeted communities, largely Muslims, as threats. For example, the VHP has played a key role in bringing to existence a variety of misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories targeting Muslims. Among the concepts popularized by Hindu supremacist leaders are:

- “**Love Jihad**,” a conspiracy theory claiming that Muslim men are conspiring to lure away Hindu women in order to forcibly convert them to Islam;<sup>21</sup>
- “**Land Jihad**,” which argues that Muslims are deliberately purchasing or occupying private and public lands to

**The VHP seeks to mobilize Hindus both in India and outside to convert the current Indian secular republic into a theocratic nation, often through violent agitation.**

achieve demographic advantage;<sup>22</sup>

- **“Flood Jihad,”** which accuses Muslims of orchestrating floods;<sup>23</sup>
- **“Thook Jihad,”** which suggests that Muslims “spit” on Hindus to spread infectious diseases;
- **“Halal Jihad,”** which argues that Halal food certifications reflect a coordinated attempt to threaten the Indian economy and raise money for terrorism; sometimes also described as “economic Jihad,” which argues that ordinary Muslim businesses and individuals are engaged in a coordinated effort to cause economic harm to Hindus;<sup>24</sup>
- **“Fertilizer Jihad,”** which blames Muslims as primarily responsible for the overuse of fertilizers in the agricultural sector;<sup>25</sup>
- **“UPSC Jihad,”** which claims that Muslims are “infiltrating” the Indian bureaucracy by gaming and manipulating the rules of national civil service exams organized by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC);<sup>26</sup> and
- **“Population Jihad,”** a Hindu supremacist adaptation of the Great Replacement Theory, which asserts the existence of a coordinated attempt by Muslims to become the majority community in India, overtaking Hindus.<sup>27</sup>

These patently false conspiracy theories are typically followed by calls to boycott Muslims; calls for Hindus to take up arms; and, finally, explicit calls for violence. In a similar fashion, the cause of cow protection has also been regularly used by VHP and Bajrang Dal units to incite or justify several acts of violence, including lynchings.<sup>28</sup> A recent article in the *Journal of Democracy* compared this phenomenon, and the broader situation in India, to the Jim Crow era in the U.S., citing hundreds of lynchings, largely of Muslims, since the BJP’s rise to power in 2014.<sup>29</sup> Even if under-reported, statistics taken from public sources display a frightening picture. Conservative but defensible estimates from sources such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) list the VHP and its youth militias as responsible for 62 violent incidents (24 violent demonstrations, 34 occasions of mob violence, an armed clash and 3 attacks) between 2016 and 2019 alone.<sup>30</sup> HindutvaWatch’s half-yearly report on Hindu supremacist violence in India, covering the first six months of 2023, identified the VHP and its youth wings as perpetrators of hate speech acts a staggering 62 times—in other words, a reported incident every 3

days.<sup>31</sup> In recent years, these trends have only accelerated, and the VHP has been allowed an environment of near-total impunity. The *Guardian*, for example, recently wrote that “Hindu vigilante groups such as VHP have been allowed to operate freely and have increasingly begun to take the law into their own hands.”<sup>32</sup> Increasingly, emboldened by this impunity, VHP leaders have advocated for the ethnic cleansing and/or genocide of the country’s Muslim citizens, and have themselves perpetrated mass violence against Muslims on a local scale.<sup>33</sup> These, for example, are the words of a VHP General Secretary: “You see, this is no less than a civil war. And in a civil war, we have to pick up the weapons. We cannot just give speeches. We will fight the way it is needed.”<sup>34</sup>

*To learn more about the Global VHP’s role in violence against India’s religious and cultural minorities, its influence in U.S. politics and civil society, and its role in advancing supremacist and anti-democratic forces as part of the global Far Right, read Saveria’s full report, *The Global VHP’s Trail of Violence*. and its new report on the VHP’s U.S. wing, *Cut From the Same Cloth: The VHP-A’s Ties to Its Indian Counterpart*.*

## TIMELINE: THE GLOBAL VHP IN MAJOR EVENTS

1992

### Babri Masjid Demolition

The hegemony of Hindu supremacist groups in India today can be traced back to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, a violent campaign led and orchestrated by the VHP beginning in the 1980s that culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid by a VHP-led mob in December 1992. In the months that followed the mosque’s demolition, anti-Muslim riots in a number of Indian cities killed approximately 2,000 people.<sup>35</sup> “The mobilisation of the karsevaks and their convergence to Ayodhya and Faizabad was neither spontaneous nor voluntary. It was well orchestrated and planned.”—The Liberhan Commission

2002

### Gujarat Riots

Under the watch of Narendra Modi, then serving as Chief Minister of the state, a pogrom took place in Gujarat in 2002, with targeted and coordinated violence against Muslims. Muslims were killed en masse and cleansed from entire neighborhoods, and subject to targeted lootings and horrific instances of sexual violence and torture.<sup>36</sup> In total, nearly 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed.<sup>37</sup> A UK government inquiry into the violence, recently made public by the BBC, concluded that the violence was pre-planned and that “the VHP and its allies acted with the support of the state Government.”<sup>38</sup>

2008

### Anti-Christian Riots in Odisha

In the Kandhamal district of Odisha, after a VHP-led social boycott of Christians in the district, VHP members attacked Christian minorities, their homes and places of worship, leaving three dead and hundreds displaced.

2020

### Delhi Riots

The Delhi Riots were a wave of anti-Muslim violence in North East Delhi that coincided with President Trump’s February 2020 visit to the city. Beginning on 23 February 2020, after Hindu supremacist leaders had made violent and provocative speeches against peaceful sit-in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Hindu supremacist mobs attacked Muslims engaged in non-violent protest. This prompted a week of communal violence where mobs roamed the streets of India’s capital, attacking Muslims. Of the 53 people killed, over two-thirds were Muslim.<sup>39</sup> In addition, thousands of Muslims were also displaced, and forced into selling their property out of fear of the violence recurring.<sup>40</sup>

BY IRINA SMOLEVSKAYA

# Putin's "Year of the Family"

How Russia Revives and Reverses U.S. Cold War Rhetoric



Collage of the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin, and a Bible overlaid on a map of Russia (Credit: PRA)

On December 31, 2023, President Vladimir Putin wished Russia a “Happy New Year” from the safety of the Kremlin, the traditional site of the presidential New Year’s Eve address since the 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The familiar picture presented a stark contrast to the military spectacle of the previous year’s address.

At the end of 2022, Putin shocked the country and the world by addressing the nation from a military base in Rostov-on-Don—a southwestern city by the Russia-Ukraine border—against the backdrop of stern-looking soldiers.<sup>2</sup> This year’s change in venue, however, was not the only thing that signaled Rus-

sia’s return to the safety of tradition. In a scaled-back speech that lasted only 3 minutes and 44 seconds—his shortest New Year’s Eve address in recent years—Putin declared 2024 the Year of the Family in Russia. He mentioned Russia’s war on Ukraine only in passing. While many publications, including the *BBC*, *Daily Mail*, and *The New York Times*<sup>3</sup> noted the conspicuous absence of more explicit references to the ongoing bloody conflict, none commented on the main subject of Putin’s address: the advancement of traditional family values.

At first glance, the phrase “traditional family values”<sup>4</sup> might appear absurd when

applied to a large, multiethnic country—one that toyed with rather radical ideas about free love, abortion, and the dissolution of marriage about one century ago.<sup>5</sup> But when positioned against the past century’s social and political changes, Putin’s marriage of “tradition” and “family” acquires a new meaning.

According to Russian sociologists, the “demographic crisis” that has haunted Russia since its colossal losses in World War II<sup>6</sup> reached the level of a “demographic Chernobyl” after the Soviet Union’s collapse.<sup>7</sup> From 1993 to 2023, Russia’s population has, in fact, declined by over 4,000,000 people.<sup>8</sup> Exacerbated by emigration trends,

war efforts, and declining birth rates, Russia's current population decline indicates, from the Kremlin's standpoint, a crisis of the nation and threatens Russia's position as a global superpower.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Putin's rallying cry of traditional family values is not surprising at all. In fact, it is so familiar and self-explanatory to most Russian audiences that it does not have to be stated explicitly. But make no mistake. Although the word "tradition" was absent from Putin's 2023 New Year's Eve address, advancing traditional family values lies at the core of his current political agenda.

Using a strategically vague and slippery framing of "tradition" allows Putin's administration to appeal to domestic and transnational conservative movements alike. During the All-Russian Family Forum's Year of the Family launch in January 2024, for example, Putin defined "traditional family values" as "strong and reliable ties between generations, respect for parents, care for elders, and our grandparents' love" and the continuation of "simply normal human values."<sup>10</sup> In his New Year's Eve speech a few weeks earlier, Putin spoke of "a true big family,"

Originally used to describe U.S. foreign policy in the 1940s through the 1980s, containment became a powerful metaphor for cultural narratives that, as Alan Nadel writes, "equated containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender rules, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression."<sup>14</sup> As such, the image of an Anglo-Saxon, God-fearing, nuclear family happily raising their children in the suburbs and adhering to traditional gender roles also became a symbol of American exceptionalism, a standard to which other nations should aspire, and a weapon in the U.S.-Soviet competition for global influence. Today, the same weaponization of family values that was once used by the United States to sustain Christian anti-Communist attitudes underlies Putin's war on the "woke" West.<sup>15</sup>

The question is not how this happened. We know how. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. evangelicals flooded Russia just as the country was rebuilding its economy and culture and as the ties between Russian political and religious institutions were, once again,

people destined to revive traditional family values and save the world from the cultural and spiritual decline ushered in by liberal multicultural elites.<sup>18</sup> This growing emphasis on the centrality of Russian culture, language, and a nationalist version of history is what Helge Blakkisrud terms Putin's redefinition of national identity "from a predominantly civic understanding based on citizenship and identification with the state, to a more ethnic one focused on Russian language and culture, one in which the ethnic Russians take centre stage."<sup>19</sup> Used to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this reframing of Russian identity and mission also finds sympathetic ears in the West.<sup>20</sup> Putin's disdain for liberal democracies, coupled with his emphasis on traditional family values and restoring Russia's "historical unity," resonates with the U.S. Far Right's mission to bring about a White ethnostate.<sup>21</sup>

Putin's revival and reversal of right-wing U.S. Cold War rhetoric demonstrates that he is aware of the double advantage that evoking familiar yet broad concepts—such as "tradition," "Russian," and "the West"—can grant in today's political context, 30 years after the end of Soviet Communism and amid growing authoritarianism worldwide. References to the West are kept purposefully vague so that the Kremlin's "pro-family" battle aligns with U.S. conservatives and White nationalists' own culture war against "woke elites,"<sup>22</sup> rather than treating them as anti-Russian threats to be countered. For instance, at the 2024 Year of the Family launch, Putin positioned Russia in opposition to other countries that he claimed were destroying family values without making any specific references: "As you know, today some countries are cynically destroying the institution of the family and common, simply normal human values are cynically broken down and replaced by false ones. Traditional family values drop out of favour in these countries. But we, on the contrary, will preserve, strengthen, and pass them on to future generations."<sup>23</sup> Putin's rhetoric paints the dangerous West in deliberately broad strokes to elicit strong emotional response from his Russian supporters and attract support from those religious

## **Using a strategically vague and slippery framing of "tradition" allows Putin's administration to appeal to domestic and transnational conservative movements alike.**

"faith of our fathers," and "one big family" as a metaphor for "the Motherland" and its "national interests...freedom and security."<sup>11</sup> Analyzing these rhetorical shifts in context reveals that Putin's "traditional family values," at its core, refers to an ethnically pure, heteronormative family structure defined by a strict division of labor, an alignment with Christian views on marriage, and a focus on childbearing. As such, it "does not simply refresh [Russian] pre-revolutionary values,"<sup>12</sup> but rather strategically blends the state's ideological discourse with contemporary teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church and the far-right rhetoric of the global pro-family movement,<sup>13</sup> while evoking and reversing an American Cold War rhetoric of containment culture.

growing stronger. This ideological exchange marked a new stage in Orthodox Christianity characterized by close ties between U.S. evangelicals and Russian conservatives.<sup>16</sup> The question we should ask instead is what Putin's celebration of family values tells us about where Russian national and international politics are heading.

Encompassing a wide range of global trends, from anti-LGBT legislation to a growing anti-abortion agenda to the rise of ethnic nationalism, Putin's "war on woke" positions the liberal democratic West as the major threat to Russia's traditional family order.<sup>17</sup> This ideological agenda advances the myth of Russian civilizational exceptionalism by positioning ethno-cultural Russians as God's chosen

and political agents in the West who share his far-right views.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, Putin's positioning of the traditional family as the basis of Russia's national security and economic development taps into a White supremacist rhetoric of family values and demographic decline that has come to define the Global Right's war on reproductive rights.<sup>25</sup> The parallels are not coincidental. Since the establishment of the World Congress of Families (WCF) in 1997,<sup>26</sup> the U.S. Christian Right has worked closely with Russian Orthodox leaders, politicians, and conservative oligarchs to export the

to protect life from the moment of conception, citing the legislation of "многих стран" ("many countries") in another purposefully vague reference<sup>32</sup>—indicates that this might not be the case for long. With Putin emphasizing how "important [it is] for us to have more large families,"<sup>33</sup> the Kremlin will likely continue to try to use incentivized or forced population growth to resolve Russia's demographic and international concerns.

In light of his recent victory in Russia's March 2024 presidential elections, Putin's New Year's Eve declaration speaks volumes about his ongoing national and

As Russia's geopolitical borders and national identity continue to shift, Putin's choice to center traditional family values in his 2024 campaign is telling and alarming. In the Kremlin's rhetoric, the "traditional" family—that is, a heteronormative, Christian, Russian family with three or more children—is a defining feature of Russian exceptionalism that also becomes the solution to Russia's demographic decline. While vague and slippery at first, Putin's revival and reversal of right-wing U.S. Cold War rhetoric, in fact, relies on a purposefully ambiguous articulation of "tradition," "the West," and "Russian." This calculated blurring of terms allows Putin to rally support for his regime from within Russia while attracting the backing of various conservative agents around the world—most visibly, the U.S. Christian Right, White nationalists, and the global "pro-family" movement.

## **As Russia's geopolitical borders and national identity continue to shift, Putin's choice to center traditional family values in his 2024 campaign is telling and alarming.**

idea of "the natural family"—a White, Christian, heteronormative two-parent household with children—across Eastern Europe and the West through a series of international and regional conferences.<sup>27</sup> Russia's pronatalist policies of the last two decades are a testament to the success of this cooperation.<sup>28</sup>

Since the first Year of the Family in 2008,<sup>29</sup> the Kremlin's focus has shifted from raising the overall quality of family life through social projects in health care, education, and housing to encouraging women to bear more children by offering monetary incentives in the form of maternity capital and by restricting access to reproductive services.<sup>30</sup> Russian "crisis pregnancy centers" with biased counseling, mandatory waiting periods, and restrictions on late-term abortions bear, as Carol Mason notes, the unmistakable signs of "US antiabortion tactics and rhetoric" in an attempt "to thwart abortion as a supposed cause of demographic demise."<sup>31</sup> Russia's "traditional family values" rhetoric is further aided by an ideological and institutional alliance between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church. Although abortion is still legal in Russia, Putin's New Year's Eve speech—which came mere days after the Holy Synod called upon Russian law

international political agenda. With the Russian Orthodox Church advocating for a complete abortion ban and some regional attempts to ban abortions in local private clinics,<sup>34</sup> Putin's statement that "a true big family is of course a family with children" indicates that the state's attack on reproductive rights, including access to abortion, birth control, and family planning services, is likely to intensify in the coming year.<sup>35</sup> Of course, the speech contains some obligatory nods toward the country's ethnic diversity: "We, the multinational people of Russia, shape its future."<sup>36</sup>

But with Russia's war on Ukraine entering its third year, troubling trends in the 2021 Russian census,<sup>37</sup> and the ongoing "Russification" of the nation's civic identity since the Second Chechen War,<sup>38</sup> the President's words about the equality of all Russian citizens, irrespective of their ethnicities and nationalities, ring hollow. Rather, Putin's current emphasis on Russian historical unity and adhering to traditional values suggests that the Kremlin's long-term project is that of cultural imperialism: "We are one country, one big family."<sup>39</sup> With the ethnic Russian population declining faster than that of Russian minorities,<sup>40</sup> "one family" evokes the image of an ethnically pure Russian traditional family "with three or more children."<sup>41</sup>

*Irina Smolevskaya is an educator and researcher with a background in Linguistics, American studies, and Gender and Women's studies. Her work focuses on the Cold War cultural narratives and their reverberations among the far-right groups in the present moment. Due to a reasonable fear of persecution, the author has decided to publish using a pseudonym.*

BY ZOË SCHOTT

# The Anti-Gender Movement

How the Global Right Aims to Dismantle the United Nations



A collage of the UN flag, a Pride flag, and a poster that says “Trans Rights Are Human Rights” (Credit: PRA)

Approaching midnight on the final day of the 2022 United Nations (UN) World Health Assembly (WHA), a technical World Health Organization (WHO) strategy on HIV, viral hepatitis, and sexually transmitted infections response was put to a vote<sup>1</sup> for the first time in history.<sup>2</sup> The Assembly, which typically makes decisions by consensus, had found no other path forward. The WHO had allowed the technical strategy to become subject to rare political negotiations at Russia’s request, turning the process into a long and contentious one.<sup>3</sup> States like Indonesia and Nigeria campaigned against evidence-based mitiga-

tion strategies like comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sought to exclude LGBTQI and other marginalized communities,<sup>4</sup> prioritizing their conservative aims over the global interest in an equitable, evidence-based infection response.<sup>5</sup>

These conservative-led states’ tactics came right out of an organized U.S. Christian Right’s playbook for pursuing its anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQI agenda at the UN. Still, despite decades of Christian Right advocacy and mobilization at the UN, attacks on the WHO’s work on infection response and other “unexpected spaces” like it have been rare—that is, until recently.

In the last five years, large Member

States such as Egypt, Iran, and Russia have increasingly used UN policymaking processes and specialized agencies that are not dedicated to gender issues to advance right-wing “anti-gender” agendas.<sup>6</sup> These states have brought the anti-gender movement into the halls of the International Labor Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, and more, with the U.S. Christian Right’s backing. Together, they leverage divisions over gender issues, aiming to undermine the UN to the point where it becomes powerless to protect human rights and ceases to be a barrier to right-wing social policymaking on national and sub-national levels.

## **Already adamantly opposed to LGBTQI people’s existence, U.S. Christian Right actors oppose the term “gender” itself, arguing that it conflicts with a Christian notion that each person is created male or female by God.**

### **THE U.S. RIGHT’S ROLE IN THE MOVEMENT’S TRANSNATIONAL GROWTH**

Conservative governments and U.S. Christian Right nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are part of a global anti-gender movement that has grown over the last three decades. The movement unites diverse religious and right-wing actors in opposition to “gender ideology,”<sup>7</sup> an umbrella term invented<sup>8</sup> to disparage feminism, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), CSE, and LGBTQI identities. At the UN, these actors work to roll back progress on gender justice by calling into question the human rights of women, girls, and LGBTQI people;<sup>9</sup> removing references to abortion from policymaking documents;<sup>10</sup> and adding language excusing states from accountability for violating the human rights of these groups.<sup>11</sup> They often do so under the guise of protecting “the (traditional) family” or “parental rights.”<sup>12</sup>

As Pam Chamberlain outlined in an early PRA report, U.S. Christian Right NGOs like the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) and Concerned Women for America first engaged with the UN in the mid-1990s.<sup>13</sup> Taking their cues from the Holy See,<sup>14</sup> they rushed to thwart feminist policymaking gains that they viewed as an “attack on the family.”<sup>15</sup> The Christian Right’s influence at the UN spiked in the early 2000s when George W. Bush helped groups like Focus on the Family and Family Research Council (FRC) gain access to the UN as accredited civil society.<sup>16</sup>

These organizations were born out of the anti-government Christian Right of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> They were also influenced by the Old Right isolationists of the Cold War who opposed the UN’s existence, viewing it as a “One World Government” that threatened America’s sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> Small organizations found institutional support from isolationist think tanks like the Heritage Foundation<sup>19</sup> and the larger U.S. conservative movement, sharing funding and board members as well as their sponsors’ contempt for the UN.<sup>20</sup> As a result,

Christian Right organizations obtained UN consultative status and became active in the late 1990s with open disdain for the institution they sought to undermine.<sup>21</sup>

### **THE U.S. CHRISTIAN RIGHT’S LEADERSHIP IN THE UN’S GENDER-DEDICATED SPACES**

For decades, U.S. Christian Right organizations have directed their efforts at UN spaces where feminists have made significant progress on gender and SRHR, like the yearly convenings at the Commission on the Status of Women and Commission on Population and Development.<sup>22</sup> They have lobbied conservative-led states to remove or weaken language on gender equality, reproductive health, and LGBTQ human rights in the negotiated resolutions and treaties that set global policy and human rights norms. Such organizations have become so ubiquitous in gender-dedicated spaces<sup>23</sup> that progressive states and feminists expect opposition<sup>24</sup> and come prepared.<sup>25</sup>

Advocates must contend with claims that, as C-Fam president Austin Ruse puts it, UN agencies have been “taken over by radicals, who change them into engines of radical social policy.”<sup>26</sup> For the Christian Right, the UN’s initiatives on reproductive health—viewed as a coded phrase for abortion<sup>27</sup>—and gender equality are proof of this takeover.<sup>28</sup> Already adamantly opposed to LGBTQI people’s existence, U.S. Christian Right actors oppose the term “gender” itself,<sup>29</sup> arguing that it conflicts with a Christian notion that each person is created male or female by God.<sup>30</sup> When “gender equality” becomes “equality between men and women” at their suggestion, the UN’s efforts ignore how gender shapes lived experience, and non-binary and trans people are excluded.

Claiming that the UN is overturning “traditional values based on morality under the guise of protecting ‘human rights,’”<sup>31</sup> as Family Watch International (FWI) president Sharon Slater has, Christian Right organizations increasingly justify their attempts to weaken the UN’s human rights mechanisms by asserting nations’ sovereignty. They echo conser-

vative activist Phyllis Schlafly’s 1990s-era claim that the UN would exercise “obnoxious control”<sup>32</sup> over U.S. citizens, and holds that UN entities overstep their mandates when they address gender.<sup>33</sup> As punishment, these bodies are to be cut off at the knees with sovereignty provisions that weaken their ability to hold states accountable for rights violations.<sup>34</sup> Making the Old Right proud, Christian Right actors also call for defunding the UN.<sup>35</sup> The Trump administration was obliging: asserting its anti-abortion stance, it withheld U.S. funds from the UN’s family planning agency in 2017, leading to a \$32.5 million loss.<sup>36</sup>

In the 2010s, U.S. Christian Right organizations grew their power by partnering with conservative governments that saw human rights as a threat to their power<sup>37</sup> and sought to limit their accountability for them based on religion, culture, and sovereignty,<sup>38</sup> like many in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).<sup>39</sup> The movement with a soft spot for the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>40</sup> also found common cause with Putin’s Russia and many African states,<sup>41</sup> eventually influencing some like Uganda toward enacting draconian anti-LGBTQI legislation domestically.<sup>42</sup> They also helped build coalitions of “pro-family” states large enough to push through language in negotiations or break consensus.<sup>43</sup> One is the Group of the Friends of the Family (GoFF),<sup>44</sup> which C-Fam helped bring into being in 2015.<sup>45</sup> It counts Iran, Saudi Arabia,<sup>46</sup> and Syria<sup>47</sup> among its membership and partners with Concerned Women for America, FWI, and FRC.<sup>48</sup> These organizations gain access to delegates through the GoFF, which provides them with strategies for advancing anti-gender agendas at the Commission on the Status of Women<sup>49</sup> and beyond.

### **WHAT’S NEW: THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT IN “UNEXPECTED” SPACES**

The anti-gender movement’s newest chapter is especially dangerous. UN advocates like Estelle Wagner of International Planned Parenthood Federation’s UN Liaison Office “have seen a substantial esca-

## **If the anti-gender movement's mission creep continues unabated, the UN could become a hollow shell of an institution, allowing governments to flout human rights unchecked.**

tion of anti-gender efforts across the UN since 2019, not just in the increase in rhetoric and aggressiveness of tactics, but also in the expansion to new, unexpected fora and administrative processes.<sup>50</sup> The number of incidents in these “unexpected” UN spaces rose from at least one in 2019 to nine by 2023,<sup>51</sup> and the number of states involved has jumped from six to 90.<sup>52</sup> The majority of the 20 most vocal states—headed by Egypt, Iran, and Russia—are GoFF members.<sup>53</sup>

Such efforts have also become more coordinated, with states increasingly negotiating as members of shared-interest groups like the OIC. This coordination helps members take advantage of collective influence<sup>54</sup> and demonstrates the movement's growing ability to wrangle multiple states toward a single anti-gender position.<sup>55</sup> Efforts also appear more systematic, with states<sup>56</sup> working together to block gender language wherever it appears.<sup>57</sup> For example, in 2023, conservative-led states emboldened by their gains at the 2022 WHA stridently opposed references to gender and sexuality in multiple WHO documents, including internal human resources policies.<sup>58</sup>

As if they had FWI's *Family Defense Handbook*<sup>59</sup> or Alliance Defending Freedom's (ADF's) UN language negotiations white paper<sup>60</sup> on hand, these states attacked unsuspecting UN institutions using the same tactics as the Christian Right's campaigns against the UN's gender-dedicated spaces. At the 2022 WHA, these tactics led to an unprecedented vote, a weaker statement of adoption, and a document compromised by a sovereignty provision<sup>61</sup> as states called the WHO's technical authority into question and accused the entity of stepping outside its mandate to promote sexual rights.<sup>62</sup> In other negotiations, U.S. Christian Right organizations watched attentively<sup>63</sup> as states repeatedly claimed<sup>64</sup> that the UN was exceeding its mandate<sup>65</sup> and competence<sup>66</sup> while insidiously<sup>67</sup> trying to create “new rights.”<sup>68</sup> And they de-

lighted when, at their suggestion,<sup>69</sup> states withheld funds,<sup>70</sup> barred a new mechanism from discussing gender,<sup>71</sup> broke with consensus,<sup>72</sup> or rejected resolutions encroaching on sovereignty.<sup>73</sup> Once leveraged mainly at gender-dedicated UN entities, these attacks now target any UN institution that dares to affirm gender equality or human rights.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Unexpected UN spaces on the new anti-gender front are less equipped to defend against such attacks.<sup>74</sup> In these spaces, anti-gender states deliberately seek conditions<sup>75</sup> where they will encounter fewer feminist advocates<sup>76</sup> as well as delegates who are less familiar with gender issues and more likely to accept weaker language.<sup>77</sup> As a result, anti-gender campaigning has also blocked, weakened, and delayed the UN's vital work on other issues like global health—as seen at the 2022 WHA—while undermining the credibility and efficacy of its institutions.<sup>78</sup>

While far from perfect, the UN is the principal global institution for setting human rights norms and holding states accountable for rights violations. Without it, there is little standing in the way of human rights backsliding or violations for those who live in countries like the U.S. with constitutions that do not guarantee equality or everyone's human rights.

Attacks on the UN serve the aims of a broader U.S. conservative movement that seeks to weaken the UN while enacting domestic policies that violate civil and human rights. This is no fanciful notion, but an imminent threat. The plan to do so is laid out in a 900-page policy prescription for the next Republican administration written by Project 2025, a collaboration between former Trump officials and leading right-wing groups that researcher Peter Montgomery calls a “fast road to fascism.”<sup>79</sup>

Created by the Heritage Foundation in collaboration with C-Fam, ADF, and FRC,<sup>80</sup> it's unsurprising that Project 2025 is ex-

ceedingly hostile toward global bodies. It calls for the U.S. to be wary of international organizations that promote “radical social policies as if they were human rights priorities”<sup>81</sup> then lays out a plan for how and when the next administration should withdraw from them.<sup>82</sup> The rest of the document outlines steps the new administration can take to ensure support for the family “color[s] each of our policies”<sup>83</sup> from health care to foreign policy.<sup>84</sup> This is its rationale for calling for a de facto abortion ban through restrictions on medication abortion<sup>85</sup> and rescinding regulations prohibiting discrimination against LGBTQI people,<sup>86</sup> among other human and civil rights violations.

That said, there is hope. Progressive governments and the UN can resist anti-gender campaigning in unexpected UN spaces by preparing delegates and staff working across all issue areas to defend gender equality wherever attacks occur. Policymaking and governance processes should also be made more transparent and participatory. In our daily lives and organizing, we can counter the anti-gender movement by calling out its false narratives about abortion, CSE, and LGBTQI people and sharing personal stories that illustrate the movement's real-life harm.

But if the anti-gender movement's mission creep continues unabated, the UN could become a hollow shell of an institution, allowing governments to flout human rights unchecked. With the threat of another Trump presidency and authoritarianism increasing worldwide, we need the UN's international principles now more than ever.

*Zoë Schott (she/her) is a sexual and reproductive rights advocate and researcher with a focus on global anti-gender movements and multilateral advocacy. She currently serves as Outright International's Program Consultant, United Nations and Humanitarian Programs. For more information, see her LinkedIn.*



BY HABIBA FARH

# From Palestine to Atlanta, Outside and Foreign

The Institutional Policing of Dissent



A collage of a protestor at the Stop Cop City protests, a police officer, and Palestinian flags (Credit: PRA)

On January 28, CNN’s “State of the Union” host Dana Bash asked Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi whether she worried that Arab Americans, young people, and progressives would sit out of the 2024 U.S. presidential election due to President Biden’s support for Israel. While recognizing the need to “try to stop the suffering in Gaza,” the former House Speaker’s response pivoted quickly to attacking protests calling for a ceasefire, alleging that some were “connected to Russia.” This is “Mr. Putin’s message,” she said, warning viewers to “make no mistake, this is directly connected to what he would like to see [...] I think some financing should be investigated. And I want to ask the FBI to investigate that.”<sup>1</sup>

Pelosi’s appeal for federal policing of protests comes after several months of consistent calls from the American public to stop what the International Court

of Justice has ruled a possible genocide.<sup>2</sup> Polls show that a majority of U.S. citizens support a ceasefire,<sup>3</sup> especially Democrat voters, amid a global resurgence of solidarity with and organizing for Palestine since October 7th. That pressure has moved U.S. officials, including Pelosi. Though 2024 began with Pelosi accusing protestors of being connected to “Mr. Putin,” by April the Democratic leader was one of 40 Congressional signatories to a letter asking President Biden to halt arms transfers to Israel while investigating an Israeli airstrike that killed seven aid workers, one of whom was an American citizen.<sup>4</sup> However, even as establishment Democrats worry increasingly about Israeli state violence, U.S. civil society and the state continue to criminalize and punish dissenters.

Demands for legislators, universities, corporations, and institutions to call for an immediate ceasefire and divest from

Israel have been met with widespread repression. Since October 7th, Palestine solidarity activists on college campuses have been doxxed,<sup>5</sup> suspended,<sup>6</sup> and arrested;<sup>7</sup> doctors have been fired for expressing solidarity online;<sup>8</sup> and Palestinian authors have been censored, including being uninvited from talks and awards.<sup>9</sup>

As officials malign popular protests organized by “foreign” and “outside” agitators to authorize repression of them, what are the implications for progressive movements? What does this portend in a heightened domestic and international political climate ahead of the 2024 presidential election? And what are the stakes and opportunities of this moment?

## OTHER OUTSIDE AGITATORS: FOREST DEFENDERS IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Politicians, elected officials, and law enforcement framing progressive movements and activists as foreign agents or

provocateurs is not new. Used since slavery to dismiss, criminalize, and brutalize dissenters,<sup>10</sup> the “outside agitator” trope became a mainstream fixture in American politics in response to the growing internationalist Third Worldist and U.S. Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was famously accused of being an outside agitator for his work in Birmingham, Alabama. King responded to these allegations in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”:

“I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”<sup>12</sup>

Sixty years later, King’s words remain as relevant as ever.

stroy construction equipment and throw stones, Molotov cocktails, and fireworks at law enforcement.<sup>16</sup> Police detained 35 “agitators” (in their words), 23 of whom were charged with domestic terrorism, and subsequently doxxed them by posting the protesters’ mugshots and their states of residence, proof that they were, indeed, “outside agitators.”

At a June 5, 2023, Atlanta City Council meeting, activists addressed this “outside agitator” accusation while taking on the city’s attempts to delegitimize their movement and push through Cop City’s construction without public accountability. Melina Abdullah, an academic-activist from Los Angeles who co-founded Black Lives Matter’s L.A. chapter, stood before the city council and proclaimed, “I am what you would call an outside agitator.” She continued:

“But I bet you wouldn’t have called Martin Luther King an outside agitator. Martin Luther King came to Montgomery, Alabama to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott [...] You see we know as Black people, as Black organizers, that

cations while continuing to struggle for freedom. After listing examples of the violence that law enforcement had inflicted on Cop City protesters, Abdullah continued, “You have literally stolen lives!” She was referring to the assassination of Manuel “Tortuguita” Paez Terán, a Venezuelan environmental activist who law enforcement framed as an agitator who exchanged fire with police, despite having their hands up when the police shot them with 57 bullets.<sup>18</sup> Invoking those who were arrested and charged, Abdullah proclaimed, “When you are claiming prisoners of war—war has been declared on us! And we will fight back!”

## DISSENT DURING VOLATILE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

While framing activists as outside agitators is not new, what is new is how U.S. liberals and some progressives within the Democratic Party—and not only the openly exclusionary or repressive Far Right—are pushing a new wave of political repression. Pelosi’s call for the FBI to investigate protesters and their funding can be understood as part of this effort to empower the FBI, the Department of Justice, and other law enforcement agencies to target political dissenters through domestic and foreign terrorism laws and anti-protest legislation. By limiting opportunities to mobilize and silencing dissent, prosecutors and law enforcement use such laws to neutralize and disrupt movements for justice.

Like authoritarian leaders and governments in Egypt and India,<sup>19</sup> Pelosi employs rhetoric used to quell mass mobilizations by criminalizing dissent and justifying state violence against protesters. These actions will further centralize state power<sup>20</sup> at a time when most Americans already have “unfavorable views” of Republicans, Democrats, and Congress,<sup>21</sup> and Biden’s approval rating sits at a low 38 percent.<sup>22</sup> It is a historic moment. Amid widespread dissent, established political parties and institutions are experiencing a legitimacy crisis. To save itself, the state, its institutions, and its collaborators will do whatever it takes to maintain the status quo—that is, to ensure that the state has power and the people it represents do not.

## **Like authoritarian leaders and governments in Egypt and India, Pelosi employs rhetoric used to quell mass mobilizations by criminalizing dissent and justifying state violence against protesters.**

In 2023, the Atlanta Police Department (APD) accused Stop Cop City activists of being “outside agitators,” “violent agitators,” and charged them with domestic terrorism<sup>13</sup> to undermine the grassroots movement’s years-long effort to prevent construction of the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center<sup>14</sup>—a massive police training center known colloquially as “Cop City”—on protected forest land. Georgia’s Attorney General, Chris Carr, used the state’s Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) law—typically used to punish organized crime—to charge 61 people for acts that included organizing mutual aid funds, distributing flyers, and serving as a protest observer.<sup>15</sup> An APD statement claimed that on March 5, 2023, a “group of violent agitators used the cover of a peaceful protest” to de-

our freedom is bound up with one another. So, when community movement builders alert us to what is happening in Atlanta, we fly from Los Angeles and leave our children and do the work that is required for Black freedom.”<sup>17</sup>

In reclaiming the “outside agitator” label, Abdullah rooted Stop Cop City in a history of Black struggles for collective liberation while recognizing that what happens in Atlanta—or any city—does not remain there. Abdullah and other activists heard the Forest Defenders’ plights, made personal sacrifices, and traveled across the country to organize against the new police training facility and the dangers it poses for their wider communities.

Despite their attempts to reclaim it, protesters like Abdullah recognize the “outside agitator” label’s deadly impli-

## **When politicians, elected officials, and law enforcement frame dissenters as foreign, outside agitators, they inadvertently reveal how struggles and movements for justice are interconnected.**

While Pelosi turns to the FBI to repress progressive dissent, MAGA Republicans have turned against the FBI and Department of Justice. Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Jim Jordan, and Marjorie Taylor Greene want to defund both federal law enforcement agencies for investigating them and members of their constituencies.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of which party pushes or pulls at these institutions, their politicization indicates that *both* parties are now using authoritarian tools to maintain their power in the face of democratic challenges from below and within to their legitimacy—whether it's dissent from their constituents or institutional attempts to hold them accountable for wrongdoings.

### **POWER STRUGGLES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES**

Amid such political repression, organizers have developed strategic campaigns to voice dissent. Muslim and Arab American organizers urged community members and progressives to vote “uncommitted” or “no preference”<sup>24</sup> during the 2024 Democratic presidential primaries in Michigan,<sup>25</sup> Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Minnesota, among other states, to protest Biden's enabling of genocide against their people and relatives overseas, to push for a permanent ceasefire, and stop U.S. aid to Israel.

The Uncommitted movement's success in these states has prompted some “vote blue no matter who” Democrats to call up fears of a second Trump term and preemptively blame protest voters for potential harm to other vulnerable communities. They position Arab and Muslim Americans within the “outside agitator” narrative for caring for those outside the imperial core. This framing criminalizes and demonizes diasporic communities impacted by the Global War on Terror—historically marginalized communities that the Democratic party needs to secure the 2024 election. If they continue to alienate these communities and their

allies in swing states' key districts, the Far Right could in fact take control of local, state, and federal institutions.

If anything, government leaders and police invoke the foreign, outside agitator to deflect critiques of structural injustices, systems, and dynamics, offsetting the state's responsibility for violence onto racialized communities such as Arabs, who have long been portrayed as “ambiguous insiders”<sup>26</sup> in U.S. media and politics. Pelosi asking the FBI to investigate calls for a ceasefire over spurious allegations of foreign funding thus threatens the party's constituencies and endangers people who have experienced FBI harassment.

Politicians like Pelosi thus justify increasing law enforcement powers and funding to repress dissent while diverting attention from their political failures. Instead of interrogating how their campaigns could be transformed democratically to reflect the needs and concerns of their constituents, the powerful choose authoritarian control. When the outside agitator narrative is activated, social and political movements must reexamine their strategies to meaningfully dissent from harmful policies and build power since, as Abdullah said, “war has been declared on us.”

While organizing over the last four years against Atlanta's Cop City, activists have encountered police violence and faced numerous serious charges;<sup>27</sup> testified for over 13 hours to Atlanta City Council;<sup>28</sup> petitioned for referendum votes;<sup>29</sup> and been detained and physically harassed during SWAT-like raids,<sup>30</sup> with limited success for their efforts. Similarly, Palestine solidarity activists have been brutalized by law enforcement<sup>31</sup> and counterprotesters with unknown chemical agents<sup>32</sup> and guns;<sup>33</sup> doxxed by Zionist organizations;<sup>34</sup> fired from their jobs;<sup>35</sup> arrested for protesting in elected officials' offices;<sup>36</sup> and in the case of Representative Rashida Tlaib, censured by her House colleagues for using the phrase “from the river to the sea” on social media.<sup>37</sup>

How can activists organize and mobilize movements if they are maligned and criminalized for every way they dissent?

### **OUTSIDE, YET TOGETHER**

When politicians, elected officials, and law enforcement frame dissenters as foreign, outside agitators, they inadvertently reveal how struggles and movements for justice are interconnected. Indeed, what we see from the state's response to Stop Cop City protesters and Palestine solidarity activists is how interconnected these movements are politically, economically, socially, and environmentally. Atlanta—a city that lies at the intersections of multiple movements—is a site for experiments in surveillance and policing before this infrastructure is exported nationally and internationally.<sup>38</sup> This is why Palestinian movements and Muslim and Arab groups impacted by the Global War on Terror have expressed solidarity with the Forest Defenders<sup>39</sup> and vice versa, as organizers connect the dots between U.S. settler colonialism, Israel's military assault on Palestinians, and anti-Black policing.<sup>40</sup> These groups have seemingly different demands, yet their worldviews exist in an abolitionist framework that threatens status quo institutions and structures. These “outside/foreign agitators” challenge the legitimacy of authoritarian actors at a time when American democracy is at a crossroads: the U.S. either radically transforms into a multiracial, just democracy, or it descends further into White supremacist authoritarianism.

This struggle does not begin or conclude with the 2024 elections—it's part of a global struggle against fascism and authoritarianism. And in this struggle, outside agitators aren't entirely outside—they're in growing solidarity with one another.

*Habiba Farh is a research analyst at Political Research Associates monitoring legislation and discourses addressing hate crimes, terrorism, and extremism. She has written on intergenerational political repression on historically marginalized communities in the U.S., Arab-American diasporic politics, U.S. foreign policy on the Middle East, and Islamophobia and anti-Arab bigotry in American policy and law.*

BY ETHAN FAURÉ

## Beyond “Border Security”

Reframing the 21st-Century Border Crisis Narrative



*A protestor holding a sign saying “Open the Borders” (Credit: PRA)*

After months of negotiation, a group of U.S. senators unveiled a bipartisan “border security” plan in February 2024. “Our immigration laws have been weak for years,” declared Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), one of the proposal’s lead negotiators, in a press release. “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to close our open border and give future administrations the effective tools they need to stop the border chaos and protect our nation.”<sup>1</sup> To stop the “chaos,” Lankford and his fellow senators proposed placing additional burdens on asylum seekers while allocating billions of dollars to fund immigration enforcement, detention facilities, and border wall construction.

Centrists touting the proposal boasted of how many concessions they made to their right-wing colleagues. President Biden and

Democratic party members went on record agreeing with their opponents’ policy prescriptions—abandoning progressives in pursuit of so-called “border security.”<sup>2</sup>

While laws enacted in the 1990s created the contemporary immigration enforcement regime,<sup>3</sup> most high profile—if ill-fated—“reforms” have at least gestured toward addressing the status of people left behind or marginalized by the current system and its laws. A “pathway to citizenship” for some undocumented people has been a prominent feature of past proposals that paired immigration reform with resources for border security (i.e., militarization).<sup>4</sup> That pretense of concern for people and improving their material circumstances is gone. It is now bipartisan consensus that the U.S. has a “border crisis.” Instead of addressing people’s needs, political leaders’ solutions to this crisis

(as they’ve defined it) are designed to increase migrants’ suffering.

Such cruelty was not isolated to the U.S.-Mexico border either. The Senate proposal was part of a broader package that included billions of dollars to support Israel’s ongoing genocidal actions in Gaza,<sup>5</sup> exemplifying the immense violence of this legislative effort.

The Senate deal didn’t go far. Former president Trump—sensing that any effort to address the situation, no matter how draconian, would threaten his election chances—opposed the bill and lawmakers lined up behind him. Only four Senate Republicans initially voted for the bill<sup>6</sup> and Speaker Mike Johnson declared the proposal “dead on arrival” in the House.<sup>7</sup> In U.S. immigration politics-as-usual, any efforts to make the country’s immigration system more humane must be

## **Colonial powers may make such legal acknowledgments generations too late, but the violence of border enforcement lasts.**

paired with far more resources to harden its borders. The former almost never occurs, outside of some presidents' insufficient executive actions that can be—and have been—reversed.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, since 2003, the government has nearly tripled funding to its enforcement agencies.<sup>9</sup>

“Border security” thus remains a top priority for the U.S. and governments around the world, rather than the people who cross borders who have already been subjected to violence, war, climate catastrophes, and economic distress. Border-crossing migrants are treated as pawns in a rhetorical game between political parties with no interest in addressing the 21st century's actual crises.

The nature and pervasiveness of the “border crisis” narratives underwriting this politics require reexamination. Such narratives are used to justify border regimes rooted in White Christian hegemony and colonialism. Two recent books about border politics—one theoretical and holistic, the other more granular and journalistic, offer some food for thought.

John Washington's *The Case for Open Borders* (Haymarket, 2024) makes a cogent and compelling case for ending the border regime. “The call for open borders is not a pie-in-the-sky dream but an urgent response to the reality that closed-borders advocates deny: people move and will not stop moving,” Washington notes early, recognizing the brutality and global inequality that borders both create and reinforce. “To expect them to, or try to stop them, is to incite misery, enormous and futile expenditure, and war. To try to stop humans from moving is to try to stop humans from being human,”<sup>10</sup> he says. The author pairs his on-the-ground reporting and experience living in the U.S. borderlands with leading scholarship, ably summarizing histories of colonization and the establishment of contemporary borders while demonstrating their impacts on individual lives through interviews with migrants and asylum seekers from around the world.

In one chapter, Washington examines histories of European colonialism and the mutability of borders when they serve White supremacist goals. Of particular focus is “White Australia,” official policies that British colonists and the Australian government enacted throughout the 20th century to exterminate, dispossess, and enslave Aboriginal people.<sup>11</sup> Such policies were the cornerstone of Australia's post-World War II “populate or perish” campaign to encourage White settlement and industry across the continent. It wasn't until 1992 that the Australian High Court finally voided the legal framework of “terra nullius” that fostered violent settlement and conquest for over ninety years. Aboriginal land rights were finally officially recognized, but “[i]t was too late. The land was taken. The borders had been conjured and weaponized,” Washington writes. “The fiction of the border had taken on, and was living, a life of its own.”<sup>12</sup>

Colonial powers may make such legal acknowledgments generations too late, but the violence of border enforcement lasts. Washington goes on to address border regimes' adverse effects with chapters dedicated to political, environmental, and economic arguments for opening borders. The economic arguments are the least useful, for reasons Washington readily admits in the chapter's introduction. Reducing migrants to their economic output—such as correctly noting that they are “not a drag on the economy”—further dehumanizes by commodifying them.<sup>13</sup> Economic arguments over migration feature heavily in most U.S. immigration debates, with restrictionists and expansionists justifying their respective stances with reams of data and reports. Even as closed-border advocates' arguments rely on misinformation and selective data, economic arguments for loosening borders or doing away with them entirely often reinforce a system that exploits workers and widens inequality.

Though discussing these economic arguments contextualizes the political

debate about immigration, Washington's book excels when it embraces a more holistic approach. As he notes, open borders “must be part of a more profound readjustment of global politics that includes the abolition of the inequality regime set in place by postcolonial capitalism.”<sup>14</sup> A chapter titled “How Do We Get There?” admirably provides concrete suggestions to work toward that vision.

Washington's global lens—necessary for envisioning a world without borders—isn't a close examination of the movements and institutions upholding and hardening current borders. Instead, *The Case for Open Borders* is, as its author writes, a “more discursive, winding, descriptive, historical, and sometimes personal”<sup>15</sup> book. Though its argument that borders have failed us is compelling, the book would benefit from more consideration of what we're up against.

Washington's book focuses on the United States, he says, “not only because I live here as a citizen of the country and because I know and have crossed its borders far more than those of other countries, but also because the United States has a unique immigration history.”<sup>16</sup> The history is indeed unique, but the horrors and contradictions of continued border enforcement are not, as another recent book makes clear.

*My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route* (Melville House, 2022), by Irish journalist and author Sally Hayden, details the recent history of deadly European border controls by reporting on migrants' harrowing journeys from Africa. The primary setting is Libya, where several migration routes from eastern and western Africa converged amid a violent power struggle following the 2011 revolution and Muammar Gaddafi's killing. Though Hayden examines the role of global powers and institutions—namely, the EU and various United Nations agencies' efforts to halt migration across the Mediterranean—her book focuses squarely on the perilous situations that African migrants experience because of Europe's closed borders.

Global migration routes are exceedingly dangerous, with thousands dying or gone missing annually.<sup>17</sup> In crafting a nar-

rative about global migration to Europe, Hayden presents powerful first-person migrant testimonies. A direct message from an Eritrean man incarcerated in a migrant detention center in Tripoli leads Hayden to these underreported stories, drawn from interviews with hundreds of refugees and migrants from Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and elsewhere across Africa. As a London-based journalist, Hayden notes that, “Unexpectedly, my geographic distance from Libya was exactly the reason that refugees trusted me to do this.”<sup>18</sup>

Hayden’s reporting from the continent also captures the abusive and deadly conditions inside Libyan detention centers like Abu Salim, a long-term detention and torture site notorious for a 1996 massacre killing hundreds of political prisoners.<sup>19</sup> Many detainees were placed in these facilities after their attempts to cross the Mediterranean were intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard in EU-funded interceptions beginning in 2017. The book details such actions in pursuit of “Fortress Europe”—a strategy carried out with little transparency by well-compensated bureaucrats, and that ultimately proved ineffective in keeping migrants away.

Although Hayden doesn’t make many comparisons to U.S. policy regarding migrants travelling across South and Central America—understandably, given her location and those of her sources—many of the same cruel border and detention policies persist in this country. Just as European officials support Libyan authorities to intercept boats crossing the Mediterranean, U.S. officials rely on Mexican authorities to stop migrants before they reach the U.S. southern border.<sup>20</sup> Those who manage to reach the U.S. border are subject to detention, often in for-profit facilities, a policy President Biden campaigned on ending but has since expanded.<sup>21</sup> Every migrant who makes a perilous border-crossing journey despite undergoing such excruciating conditions is a testament to the failures of such half-baked policymaking. “Fortress”-style policies of Europe and the U.S. merely make those conditions worse. Describing herself as a journalist instead of an activist, Hayden doesn’t offer much in the way of policy prescriptions. Instead, her book records

European powers’ violence and recognizes the humanity of migrants bearing the brunt of it. “I wanted to write a work of journalism, making sure that this period of time, and this episode of European shame, was documented,” Hayden notes toward the book’s end.<sup>22</sup> On this count, Hayden’s engaging and heart-wrenching work absolutely succeeds.

Immigration and border crisis narratives are a perennial feature of national elections and 2024 has proven no different. For years, U.S. right-wing media has elevated such narratives to the point where lawmakers openly espouse “Great Replacement” conspiracy theories once relegated to the corners of White nationalist discourse.<sup>23</sup> The response to a Republican leader openly quoting Hitler and promising (again) to pursue a campaign of record deportations<sup>24</sup> should not be to pursue the policies demanded by that leader’s party, as President Biden is doing currently.<sup>25</sup> Instead, our society should reject generations of border-hardening policies that inflict harm and create false senses of security. The resources used to shore up those failed policies could be redirected to whole-of-government responses to the realities of our unstable world.

In short, our fragmented globe needs a bold new vision for migration in the 21st century. Washington’s book shows us how it is possible. Hayden’s shows us why it’s so desperately needed.

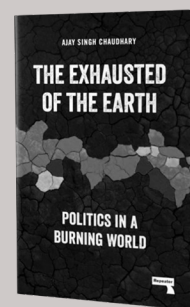
*Ethan Fauré is a researcher focusing on movements promoting anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and White nationalist ideologies. They joined PRA after working with the Center for New Community for five years, authoring groundbreaking reports on anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim activity in the U.S. Ethan works closely with other researchers, journalists, national organizations, and grassroots activists to deepen their understanding of these forces—informing resistance efforts and their work building power across the country.*

BY AJAY SINGH CHAUDHARY

## Right-Wing Climate Realism

“Business-as-Usual”

The idea of right-wing climate realism can strike many as odd in the first instance. Since, the assumption runs, climate change is universal, since we can turn to a “scientific” politics, there is only one “climate realism,” and the primary task is to communicate, persuade, and teach the science from which the one-true-politick will emerge. All that stands in the way of this is the intransigence of non-believers. This is, perhaps ironically, a familiar story: it is a Christian story of gospel and evangelism. But the science does not have a single politics. Right-wing climate realism encompasses a plausible and thoroughly realistic—in terms of power and in terms of ecology—set of positions in which a business-as-usual scenario is absolutely worth it. Even given the staggering social and ecological costs, it might even be salutary, and not in some short-term or self-deluded sense. Right-wing climate realism then, in its simplest form, is a political-ecological scenario of the concentration, preservation, and enhancement of existing political and economic power.



To read the full article excerpted from Ajay Singh Chaudhary’s *The Exhausted of the Earth: Politics in a Burning World* (London: Repeater Books, 2024), visit [politicalresearch.org](http://politicalresearch.org).

BY ANNIE WILKINSON

## Conspiracy / Theory

Author Q&A with Lisa Wedeen and Joseph Masco



A collage of a protestor holding a sign that says "Wake Up! Ppl", syringes, magnifying glasses, and question marks (Credit: PRA)

Conspiracy theories and their role in popular politics have attracted enormous attention—primarily disparagement—in recent years. But what do we lose when we routinely dismiss all forms of theory that resemble oft-stigmatized conspiracy theories? And what can we learn from juxtaposing “aspects of conspiratorial thinking” (p. 2) with an authorized, intellectual practice of critical theory as distinct “modes of interpretive assessment” (p. 10) of power and causation in the world? These are among the provocative questions that scholars Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen pursue in their edited volume, *Conspiracy / Theory* (Duke University Press, 2024). Their book engages the tensions and counterintuitive affinities between these

two forms of worldmaking—theorized through the analytical framework of “conspiracy / theory”—across 17 diverse case studies.

PRA sat down with Wedeen and Masco to discuss the political and analytical stakes of connecting the dots between *conspiracy theory* and *critical theory* and how elucidating their “nuanced resemblances,” seemingly hidden in plain sight, might provide greater clarity and insight into what Wedeen aptly describes as our current political moment’s “epistemic murk.” Their March 2024 interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**Your groundbreaking book makes valuable contributions to our understanding of how conspiracy theories**

**work as well as how they do work in the world. One thing you establish is that while conspiracy theories are often portrayed as aberrations of reason and rationality, they “cannot simply be bracketed out of reasoned discourse” (p. 434). Rather you cite their pervasiveness as an accessible means of rendering the complexities of the world more legible, in ways that are perhaps not so dissimilar from the aims of critical theory. Do academic critical theorists and street-protesting QAnon followers have more in common than we might acknowledge?**

**Masco:** In fact, one of the volume’s commitments was to discern the various logics of dismissal of conspiratorial

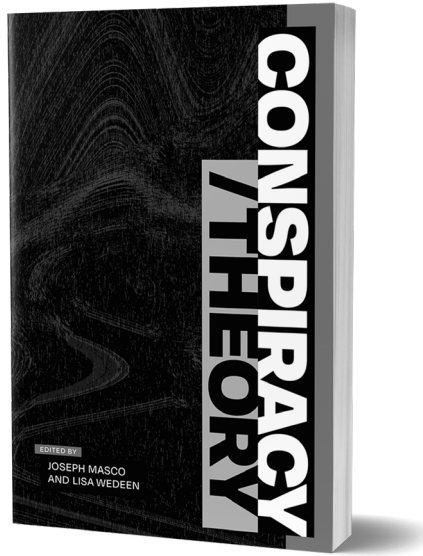
thinking and how this has served as a kind of boundary mechanism for what can be properly discussed, particularly in the U.S. We distinguish between conspiracy, conspiracy theory, and critical theory, and offer our own configuration of a conspiracy / theory formula to provide readers with clarifying terms they can use to interrogate the narratives they encounter and ask more precise questions about the motivations and evidentiary apparatuses of those narratives.

These careful distinctions also allow us to separate out folks who are actually trying to explain something that they're genuinely worried about—and maybe being hurt by—in a complicated world that subjects people to imbricated systems of violence at massive scales versus those engaged in information warfare who are willfully trying to confuse and polarize populations. We also differentiate these two categories from a third group that is just having a blast telling wild stories online, perhaps to make a buck.

**Wedeen:** We also acknowledge important differences between critical and conspiracy theory while offering a new framework of analysis that can move beyond them, allowing us to explore elective affinities between them. One of these is the pleasure derived from establishing connections and unearthing dynamics of meaning and power that are not always immediately visible. Critical theorists find pleasure in connecting the dots and generating solidarities in the process, with the aim of producing a political alternative to the conventional status quo. This aspiration—the prospect of upending social and political structures, however understood—is something that critical theories and even right-wing forms of conspiratorial thought share, despite having deep differences.

**You point out that those who consume or share conspiracy theories often feel they exercise analytical rigor and pay attention to evidence, which runs counter to stereotypical portrayals of conspiracy theories as superficial or irreverent toward factual truth. Is this pursuit of “truth” another affinity with critical theory? What are the political implications of this affinity?**

**Masco:** There are many mass-media accusations of “conspiracy theory” when no theory is actually being presented. Figures like Donald Trump and his circle are making accusations to dismantle or injure their political opposition, or distract [people] from their main concerns. If you were to ask, “What’s their theory?” you



Cover of *Conspiracy/Theory* (Credit: Duke University Press)

would find they don't have one; rather, their accusational politics is designed to do this work.

Our volume distinguishes between that kind of enterprise and people who are trying to understand the worlds they live in—those who experience the fundamental difficulty of understanding massively scaled, violent systems that can't be seen in their entirety. They don't have perfect information about how these systems emerged and what they're doing. And yet, they know these systems affect their lives profoundly, whether it's global finance, climate, or global militarization's rebounding effects. These are not easy things to theorize from the point of view of an individual experiencing the world through their own cognitive and sensory capacities, with uneven access to knowledge resources.

**Wedeen:** To Joe's point, we underscore how difficult it is to know something in these conditions. There is an oversaturation of information, some things are unknowable, and the internet era has also produced a kind of high-speed eventfulness that has dramatically changed our reading practices. In turn, these conditions of “epistemic murk” make political judgment much harder than it would be otherwise. But it's not like conspiracy theorists have a monopoly on spurious correlation. We see this in a variety of enterprises, including those that have the academy's authorization.

**Several of the volume's contributors show how conspiracy theories can be leveraged across global contexts to empower worldmaking and ease the “epistemic precarity,” or uncertainty of knowing under such violent conditions, that you're discussing. But you also insightfully point out that this epistemic insecurity can be hijacked for “gaslighting on a planetary scale” (p. 7) when conspiratorial reason is deployed by actors seeking to “hack perception and emotion” (p. 433–34) to control public understanding or consolidate authoritarian political power. I must ask, in a spirit that's partly dead serious and partly tongue-in-cheek: is there a global authoritarian conspiracy afoot?**

**Wedeen:** The volume tries to appreciate the kinds of hidden and not-so-hidden conspiracies that are real and partially organize our lives. They are plural, not singular, and they inherit the logics of capital accumulation, including commodity fetishism<sup>1</sup> and new structures of financialization, as well as racialized and gendered hierarchies and exploitative labor practices. For instance, one of the book's examples is about how oil companies deny climate change while raising the height of their offshore drilling platforms.<sup>2</sup> It's hard not to think about such projects in terms of a conspiratorial narrative that offers some traction for understanding what is going on in the world at present. The effort is to go beyond thinking of this as paranoid fantasy only, and as also speaking to truths in the world.



**Masco:** One thread linking many authoritarians right now is their dedicated efforts to control and confuse efforts to seek collective truths that people can activate their political lives around. Lisa has written extensively about this. It's critical for being able to see the actual conspiratorial practices employed by any given state. In the U.S., for instance,

**theories can sometimes productively challenge established orthodoxies. How does your analysis inform how we think about this paradox that conspiracy theories pose for open democratic societies?**

**Wedeen:** We might practice a kind of attunement that embraces a sense of cu-

**While conspiracy has become a derogatory, negative discursive frame, the actual origin of the concept of “conspiracy” is about how you get together with others to dream up a potential that doesn’t yet exist and that hasn’t been done before.**

we’ve had a multi-decade project by polluting industries and the billionaire class to do anti-democratic work to resist the expansion of civil rights and access to the vote and to control the courts in ways that have been radically successful in recent years. If you had made that claim a few years ago, it would likely have been properly captured by the conspiracy theory frame and eliminated from public discourse. And yet, we now have decades of scholarship on this, showing exactly how that machinery was built and its aims. Moreover, it was designed to operate in stealth because it’s anti-democratic, and these policies could not be achieved through democratic means. We need to be attentive to and not be confused by efforts to obfuscate this or to suggest that it’s pathological rather than perfectly political to imagine that a security state might not be properly transparent with its citizens or that a polluting industry doesn’t have an interest in regulatory capture and capturing the courts.

**I have observed in my own work that efforts to contain or mitigate the corrosive impact that conspiracy theories can have on our ability to forge or sustain a shared reality often rely on “exposing” them as false. Your analysis suggests that this is inadequate, not only because some conspiracy theories turn out to be true, but also because, like critical theory, conspiracy**

theories can sometimes productively challenge established orthodoxies. How does your analysis inform how we think about this paradox that conspiracy theories pose for open democratic societies?

riosity and humility or political discernment that doesn’t expect that a conspiracy theory has to necessarily be false. One that understands that when people are so confused by the epistemic murk confronting them, the confusion becomes an alibi for non-judgment and conspiracy theories become a means to scale the impasse by offering other claims and ways of addressing a problem. There are many ways of doing this—my work with experimental documentaries questions the genre of conventional documentary filmmaking, for example, and art and humor can be more accessible modes for attunement that offer a more nuanced understanding.

**Masco:** The fact that we have many problems that we don’t have the right vocabulary for means that people are straining to come up with an explanation for something that concerns them in a heartfelt way. We should not be hardened to those efforts—we should be able to join in with them in some kind of collective enterprise. Our book makes the powerful point that there has never been a political moment that does not have conspiratorial potential in it. And it reminds us that any collective act of worldmaking has a conspiratorial element to it. While conspiracy has become a derogatory, negative discursive frame, the actual origin of the concept of “conspiracy” is about how you get together with others to dream up a potential that doesn’t yet exist and that

hasn’t been done before. To maintain the easy negative frame around these practices is to cede the territory of a certain kind of collective action that I think we are all calling for to confront the real challenges of this historical moment. So, we can begin to argue for some conspiratorial practices here that are in a positive key. That includes positive conspiracies toward making a better world, one that’s potentially sustainable and nonviolent and filled with the potential for people to live better lives.

*Lisa Wedeen, Ph.D., is the Mary R. Morton Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and Associate Faculty in Anthropology at the University of Chicago. She is the author of numerous books, edited volumes, and articles, including Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria (2019), and co-directs the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory (3CT). Her current research explores violence and temporality.*

*Joseph P. Masco, Ph.D., is Professor of Anthropology and of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. He is the author of numerous books, edited volumes, and articles, including The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror (2014), and co-directs the Engineered Worlds research project, one of many in which he examines the material, affective, and conceptual force of technological revolution and its aftermaths.*

*Annie Wilkinson, Ph.D., researches transnational anti-gender movements, mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism as a Senior Research Analyst for Political Research Associates.*

### What Propels the Global Authoritarian Surge and How We Can Fight Back

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#### The Anti-Gender Movement

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#### Conspiracy/Theory

**1** A political economic term that theorizes how capitalist systems obscure the connection between commodities and the social relations (i.e., people and their labor) that produce them.

**2** Joseph Dumit, "Adrian Piper and Alien Conspiracies of Bullying and Whistleblowing," in *Conspiracy/Theory*, 269. Since the 1970s, oil companies have anticipated rising sea levels and built higher rigs to expand oil production while funding public denials of climate change.

## The Art of Activism: An Interview with Cover Artist Vicky Shahjehan

**What was the motivation behind the paste-up that we've used for the cover art in this issue?**

The idea for this street art was sparked by a conversation with 'J,' an independent writer, during the Fearless Collective's retreat in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She admired the henna artwork I created for Palestine and envisioned creating a large poster of the artwork on a tall building. We did a smaller scale paste-up of Palestine solidarity posters with fragments of reclamation, liberation, and power, and cut out elements from each poster: a Palestinian woman, sunbird, hands with the Palestine map, a pomegranate.



Copyright: Vicky Shahjehan, Fearless ambassador.

We decided to put the collage up across the Rio Cinema [in Colombo], so that everyday people walking by the road would catch a glimpse of it.

J's friend from Kashmir shared a powerful text that inspired us both because it speaks to the need to end occupations everywhere. This felt like the spirit of what we wanted to say [with our art] in solidarity with everyone resisting occupation and working for liberation.

**What first drew you to art as a medium of resistance?**

Many years ago, I experienced a lot of personal challenges for being a different gender in my community, and that really drove me on how I can shift [people's] understanding. It took a long time to convince people to learn and accept the way I am. Later, they defined me as an artist rather than focusing on my gender.

From there, my journey began to evolve and unfold with the women of our community as part of the Fearless Collective, a feminist art collective which intervenes and reclaims public spaces across South Asia. I was chosen through their ambassador program in Sri Lanka during the economic crackdown, [which] drew me into the medium of [art as] resistance.

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