

4 Newsletter

KH Presse Anglais

Following the 2024 Election Cycle

5 February 2024

Around the world

This week you will discover two new sections in which I will drop suggestions for things to watch or listen to.

‘The Podcast of the Week’ and ‘Arts and Culture’

In Europe

■ In Finland – Between the two rounds of the presidential election

What you need to know about the election : <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-you-need-know-about-2024-finnish-presidential-election-2024-01-25/>

Results after the first round

Centre-right party ahead in Finnish presidential election

Liberal Green party is a close second and goes through to second round, while far-right Finns have been knocked out

Miranda Bryant *Nordic correspondent*

The Guardian, Sun 28 Jan 2024

Finland’s former prime minister Alexander Stubb and the country’s former foreign minister Pekka Haavisto have progressed through to the second round of the presidential elections, knocking out a rightwing populist candidate.

With all votes counted, Stubb, of the centre-right National Coalition party, had won 27.2% of votes, while the liberal candidate Haavisto, a member of the Green party who is running as an independent, had secured 25.8%, election officials said.

Heading into the vote, experts had thought far-right Finns party candidate Jussi Halla-aho might make it to the second round. In the event, he came third with 19% of the vote. Voter turnout was 74.9%.

The high-stakes election – the first since Finland joined Nato – to replace two-term president Sauli Niinistö saw a record turnout among advance voters. More than 44.6% of those who were able to vote in advance did so, the equivalent of 1.9 million people. “This is more than I dared to believe,” Stubb, 55, told YLE.

“We made it to the second round. That is now clear,” Haavisto, 65, told the crowd at his election party in Helsinki on Sunday night. “I am very happy and satisfied. We have worked hard for this.”

A runoff between the two top candidates will be held in two weeks’ time, on 11 February. To be declared president, the winning candidate must receive more than 50% of votes.

After a last-minute surge by Halla-aho, liberals had feared there could be two rightwing candidates in the second round. But early results suggested that was unlikely.

“I am concerned, but now we have to follow the will of the voters,” Haavisto, who would be Finland’s first out gay and Green president, [told the Observer](#) on Friday at a campaign event.

Taking place against a backdrop of escalating geopolitical drama on the border with [Russia](#), Finland's first election since joining Nato is seen as the most high-stakes in living memory.

The president – who is head of state and commander-in-chief of the army and is responsible for foreign policy, in cooperation with the government – represents Finland at Nato summits and in meetings with international leaders, so is seen as crucial to the country's direction.

Stubb, who was prime minister from 2014 to 2015 and has spent eight years in government, [told the Guardian](#) on Friday that he came out of political retirement because of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

He said: "Having been in government for eight consecutive years and having held all the key portfolios, I felt in 2016 that I had very much done it for God and country, as they say. My plan was not to return to politics, or certainly not to national politics ... but Putin's attack on [Ukraine](#) changed it."

In the current climate, he said, foreign and security policy was "existential" for Finland, which has closed its entire land border with Russia.

After Finland joined Nato in record speed last April, he said the country was entering "a new age in Finnish foreign policy".

He said: "When it became evident, right at the beginning of the war, that our path towards the alliance would begin, I felt strongly that this was a new age in Finnish foreign policy and perhaps I could throw my hat into the ring once again."

The election so far has centred largely on international and security issues, including Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, the US elections and Nato membership. But in the past few weeks, debates between the nine candidates had focused more on domestic issues, benefiting the Finns party candidate.

■ In Germany – The AfD party lost local election despite lead two weeks before

<https://www.dw.com/en/afd-loses-run-off-in-first-vote-since-mass-deportation-story/a-68108758>

Christian Herrgott of the conservative CDU beat out far-right [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#) candidate Uwe Thrum in a regional run-off election in the eastern [German](#) state of [Thuringia](#) on Sunday.

The vote was viewed by political observers as a barometer for the AfD's popularity at a time when damaging headlines may have dented its alarming nationwide momentum.

The vote was the first since Correctiv, an investigative journalism outfit, published a [report outlining a November meeting in which AfD politicians and far-right extremists](#) — including Austrian neo-Nazi Martin Sellner of the [Identitarian Movement](#) — discussed plans for the mass deportation of foreigners and unassimilated German citizens should they come to power.

The story sparked outrage and led to numerous [rallies across the country](#) in which more than one million people turned out to demonstrate against right-wing extremism and for democracy.

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/01/29/en-allemande-le-parti-d-extreme-droite-afd-essuie-un-revers-electoral-inattendu_6213568_3210.html

How EU leaders forced Viktor Orban to fold and support Ukraine aid

Meeting in Brussels on Thursday, January 2, EU leaders unanimously adopted a €50 billion financial aid package for Kyiv over four years, a decision which had been blocked in December by the Hungarian prime minister.

By [Philippe Jacqué](#) (Brussels correspondent) and [Philippe Ricard](#) (Brussels, special correspondent)

Published on February 2, 2024



On the left, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and President Emmanuel Macron. On the right, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, at a meeting on the sidelines of the European Council, Brussels, February 1, 2024. LUDOVIC MARIN / AFP

The European Union and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had feared the worst: The persistent obstruction by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban against the EU's massive aid package for Kyiv, at a time when the US Congress has continued to tear itself apart over funding support for Kyiv. On Thursday, February 1, against all expectations, the 27 EU member states managed – in a matter of minutes – to get the nationalist leader to [back down and activate](#) the €50 billion aid package that had been promised to Kyiv, set to be distributed over four years.

It was barely 11:26 am when European Council President Charles Michel announced the news: "We have a deal," he wrote on X. "This locks in steadfast, long-term, predictable funding for Ukraine." In order to reach this compromise, Michel had called an early morning meeting with Orban, French President Emmanuel

Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The Hungarian prime minister, while repeating his criticism of the support given to Ukraine – he has called for a ceasefire between Kyiv and Moscow and for peace talks – eventually agreed to support the other 26 member states. In return, he secured a commitment for regular high-level debates on the implementation of these funds. While Budapest has recently demanded an annual review over these funds, subject to a unanimous vote, the agreement reached allows for the possibility of asking the Commission to propose a budget review "if it is needed, within two years." "No gifts were made to him," asserted the French president at the end of the negotiations.

Six weeks of intense negotiations

It's a relief for Ukraine. Zelensky thanked EU leaders for establishing the support mechanism for Ukraine. "Europe demonstrated the exact type of unity that is required. All 27 EU countries acted together," he stated on X. "Continued EU financial support for Ukraine will strengthen long-term economic and financial stability, which is no less important than military assistance and sanctions pressure on Russia."

In March, following the green light to the aid package that is expected from the European Parliament at the end of February, the 27 member states hope to be in a position to make the first payments to Kyiv. This would represent an unprecedented level of aid for an EU candidate country with which accession negotiations have not yet begun. "Russia cannot count on any fatigue from Europeans in their support for Ukraine," said Macron.

It took six weeks of intense negotiations to reach this point, during which exasperation mounted with each passing day against the illiberal Hungarian leader, the only one from the 27 member states who has maintained contact with Vladimir Putin. On Thursday morning, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk summed up his counterparts' mood as they arrived at the summit: "There's no problem with the so-called Ukraine fatigue, for sure. We have Orban fatigue now," he said, denouncing the Budapest strongman's "very strange and very selfish game." "Viktor definitely wants to be the center of attention every time we are here but it shouldn't be like this," Kaja Kallas, the Estonian prime minister, reminded the press the previous day. "I don't want to use the word blackmail, but I don't know a better word."

Over the last few days, various thinly veiled threats have been made. Some suggestions were made regarding Article 7.2 of the European Union Treaty and threatening its activation against Hungary – the article would suspend the voting rights of a member state that is accused of violating the rule of law. Others warned that a prolonged freeze on European aid to Budapest could risk causing macroeconomic destabilization. This prospect was raised in a Council document which, after being leaked, sent shockwaves through the markets this week, at a time when the Hungarian economy is already in a slump.

Dire situation for Ukraine

These warnings did not prevent European leaders from responding to Orban's concerns about the procedures that have been set in motion against breaches of the rule of law, the issue which is at the heart of the tug-of-war between Brussels and Budapest. In December, the Commission conveniently released almost €10 billion of the around €30 billion in funds intended to be allocated to Hungary that had been frozen by the EU executive.

In order to finally reach an agreement, the 27 member states reiterated on Thursday that the dispute would be handled in a "fair and proportional" manner, despite Orban's constant denunciations of a "political" style of management by the European Commission. "Basically, nothing changes, but the Hungarian prime minister had to be reassured," says a source. "Mission accomplished. Hungarian funds will not end up in Ukraine," the nationalist leader boldly asserted at the end of the summit.

While American support for Kyiv remains hostage to divisions in Congress, the Europeans can pride themselves on keeping their commitments. "This decision is also a signal to the American taxpayers, a demonstration that the EU assumes its responsibility and we know that we must show our leadership, must show that we are reliable and credible," said Michel, aware that the situation is dire for the Ukrainians. The counter-offensive launched at the beginning of last summer has amounted to nothing. Russian attacks are a daily occurrence. Furthermore, a subtle power struggle has pitted Zelensky against his commander-in-chief, Valeriy Zaluzhny, particularly on the issue of mobilizing additional soldiers, as demanded by the army.

Ukrainian agricultural products

In this context, Ukraine will also be able to count on €21 billion in bilateral military aid this year – budgeted by at least half of the EU countries – according to Josep Borrell, the head of European diplomacy. In passing, Scholz said that "not all member states are doing enough" – implicitly targeting France, Italy and Spain. The agreement is also a relief for Europe's leaders, following an initial setback on the issue in December.

Beyond Ukraine, the compromise paves the way for a substantial increase in the Commission's budget to finance projects in the fields of migration (nearly €10 billion by 2027), economic competitiveness and defense – fulfilling French and Italian aspirations.

Orban may have fallen in line on financial assistance to Ukraine, but also used his time in Brussels to take up another battle: That of Ukrainian agricultural products, whose competition with domestically-produced ones has been criticized by EU farmers and by some European leaders, including Macron. Even before folding to his peers, the Hungarian leader appeared on Wednesday evening at a barricade set up by demonstrators in the European district of Brussels. "The European Commission should represent the interest of the European farmers vis-a-vis Ukraine and not represent the interest of Ukrainian farmers against the European ones," he repeated in a message broadcast by his political party, Fidesz. "The solution is to change those in charge in Brussels" at the European elections scheduled for June 6-9, he advocated, as if to launch the election campaign. This is yet another way of saying that his support for Ukraine is not a foregone conclusion.

Les Vingt-Sept font plier Viktor Orban pour soutenir l'Ukraine

Réunis à Bruxelles jeudi, les chefs d'Etat et de gouvernement de l'UE ont adopté à l'unanimité une enveloppe financière de 50 milliards d'euros sur quatre ans en faveur de Kiev, une décision bloquée en décembre par le premier ministre hongrois.

Par [Philippe Jacqué](#) (Bruxelles, bureau européen) et [Philippe Ricard](#) (Bruxelles, envoyé spécial)

Le Monde, 01 février 2024

L'Union européenne (UE) et le président ukrainien, Volodymyr Zelensky, redoutaient le pire : un blocage persistant de la part de Viktor Orban, le premier ministre hongrois, contre le plan d'aide massif de l'UE en faveur de l'Ukraine, au moment où le Congrès américain continue de se déchirer sur le financement du soutien à Kiev. Contre toute attente, les Vingt-Sept sont parvenus en quelques minutes, jeudi 1^{er} février, à faire plier le dirigeant nationaliste afin d'activer [l'enveloppe de 50 milliards d'euros](#) promise sur quatre ans à Kiev.

Il était à peine 11 h 26 quand Charles Michel, le président du Conseil européen, a annoncé la nouvelle : « *Nous avons conclu un accord, a-t-il écrit sur le réseau social X. Cet accord garantit un financement stable, prévisible et à long terme pour l'Ukraine.* » Afin d'arracher un compromis, M. Michel avait réuni en tout début de matinée Viktor Orban, le président français, Emmanuel Macron, le chancelier allemand, Olaf Scholz, la présidente du conseil italien, Giorgia Meloni, et Ursula von der Leyen, la présidente de la Commission.

Le premier ministre hongrois, tout en répétant ses critiques sur le soutien apporté à l'Ukraine, lui qui réclame un cessez-le-feu entre Kiev et Moscou et des pourparlers de paix, a alors accepté de soutenir les vingt-six autres Etats membres en échange de débats réguliers, au niveau des dirigeants, sur la mise en œuvre de ces fonds. Tandis que Budapest exigeait ces derniers jours un droit de regard annuel sur cette enveloppe, assorti d'un vote à l'unanimité, il a juste été convenu d'inviter « *si nécessaire, dans les deux ans* », la Commission à proposer la révision du budget concerné. « *Aucun cadeau ne lui a été fait* », a assuré le chef de l'Etat français à l'issue des tractations.

Six semaines d'intenses négociations

C'est un véritable soulagement pour l'Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky a remercié les dirigeants de l'UE d'avoir mis en place la facilité pour l'Ukraine. « *Il est très important que la décision ait été prise par les vingt-sept dirigeants, ce qui prouve une fois de plus la forte unité de l'UE*, a-t-il rappelé sur X. *La poursuite du soutien financier de l'UE à l'Ukraine renforcera la stabilité économique et financière à long terme, ce qui n'est pas moins important que l'assistance militaire et la pression des sanctions sur la Russie.* »

Dès mars, après le feu vert du Parlement européen attendu fin février, les Vingt-Sept espèrent être en mesure d'effectuer les premiers versements à Kiev. Il s'agit d'une aide d'une ampleur inédite pour un pays candidat à l'UE avec lequel les négociations d'adhésion n'ont pas encore commencé. « *La Russie ne peut donc pas compter sur une quelconque fatigue des Européens dans leur soutien à l'Ukraine* », s'est félicité Emmanuel Macron.

Avant d'en arriver là, il a fallu six semaines d'intenses négociations, pendant lesquelles l'exaspération est montée au fil des jours contre le dirigeant illibéral hongrois, le seul des Vingt-Sept à parler encore à Vladimir Poutine. Jeudi matin, le premier ministre polonais, Donald Tusk, a résumé l'état d'esprit de ses homologues en arrivant au sommet : « *Il n'y a pas de lassitude vis-à-vis de l'Ukraine, mais une lassitude à propos d'Orban* », a-t-il dit, en dénonçant « *le jeu étrange et égoïste* » de l'homme fort de Budapest. « *Si nous sommes ce 1^{er} février à Bruxelles, c'est bien du fait de Viktor Orban*, avait rappelé la veille Kaja Kallas, la cheffe du gouvernement estonien, devant la presse. *On sent de plus en plus de frustration et d'impatience chez les dirigeants européens.* »

Ces derniers jours, les menaces avaient fusé de manière plus ou moins voilée. Certains évoquaient l'activation contre la Hongrie de l'article 7.2 du traité de l'Union européenne qui prévoit de retirer les droits de vote d'un pays membre accusé de violation de l'Etat de droit. D'autres brandissaient le risque d'une déstabilisation macroéconomique en cas de gel prolongé des aides européennes en principe dévolues à Budapest. Une perspective évoquée dans un document du Conseil qui, après sa fuite, a fait tanguer les marchés cette semaine, alors que l'économie hongroise est déjà en plein marasme.

L'heure est grave pour les Ukrainiens

Ces multiples mises en garde n'ont pas empêché les dirigeants européens de tenter de répondre aux préoccupations de Viktor Orban au sujet des procédures enclenchées contre les manquements à l'Etat de droit, au cœur du bras de fer entre Bruxelles et Budapest. En décembre, la Commission avait opportunément débloqué près de 10 milliards d'euros de fonds en principe attribués à la Hongrie, sur la trentaine de milliards gelés par l'exécutif européen.

Afin d'arracher enfin un accord, il a été rappelé jeudi par les Vingt-Sept que ce contentieux serait traité de façon « *équitable et proportionnelle* », alors que Viktor Orban n'a de cesse de dénoncer une gestion « *politique* » de la part de la Commission européenne. « *Sur le fond, rien ne change, mais il fallait rassurer le premier ministre hongrois* », indique une source. « *Mission accomplie. Les fonds hongrois ne finiront pas en Ukraine* », a affirmé, bravache, le dirigeant nationaliste à l'issue du sommet.

Alors que le soutien américain à Kiev est toujours otage des divisions du Congrès, les Européens peuvent se targuer de tenir leurs engagements. « *Notre accord européen est d'ailleurs un signal clair pour les Etats-Unis,*

les Européens démontrent qu'ils peuvent être fiables et crédibles dans leur soutien à l'Ukraine », a assuré Charles Michel, conscient que l'heure est grave pour les Ukrainiens. La contre-offensive lancée au début de l'été dernier a tourné court. Les attaques russes sont quotidiennes. Et une sourde lutte de pouvoir oppose le président Zelensky à son chef d'état-major, Valeri Zaloujny, en particulier sur la question de la mobilisation de soldats supplémentaires, exigée par l'armée.

Autre cheval de bataille

Dans ce contexte, l'Ukraine pourra également compter cette année sur 21 milliards euros d'aides militaires bilatérales, budgétées par au moins la moitié des pays de l'UE, comme l'a rappelé Josep Borrell, le chef de la diplomatie européenne. Au passage, Olaf Scholz a estimé que *« tous les Etats membres n'en font pas assez »*, visant implicitement la France, l'Italie et l'Espagne. L'accord est également un soulagement pour

Au-delà de l'Ukraine, le compromis ouvre la voie à une augmentation substantielle du budget de la Commission pour financer des projets en matière de migration (près de 10 milliards d'euros d'ici à 2027), de compétitivité économique ou de défense, comme le souhaitent notamment la France ou l'Italie.

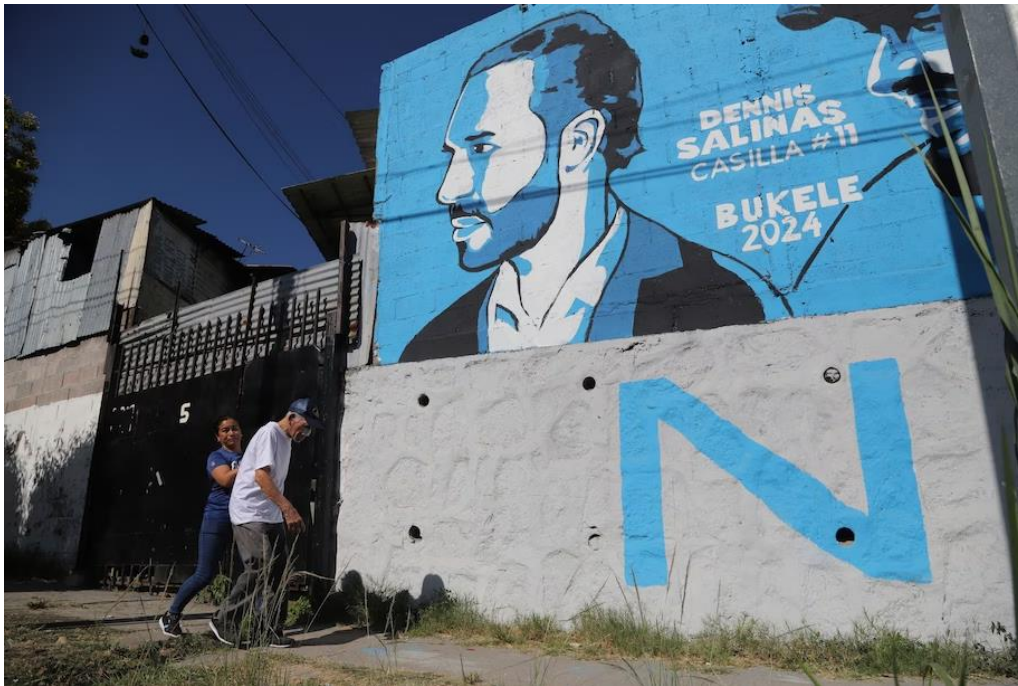
Si Viktor Orban est rentré dans le rang sur l'assistance financière à l'Ukraine, il a profité de son passage à Bruxelles pour endosser un autre cheval de bataille : celui des produits agricoles ukrainiens, dont la concurrence est pointée du doigt par les agriculteurs de l'Union, et par certains responsables continentaux, y compris Emmanuel Macron. Avant même de céder à ses pairs, le Hongrois s'était présenté, mercredi soir, sur une barricade installée par les manifestants dans le quartier européen de Bruxelles. *« La Commission doit représenter les intérêts des fermiers européens à l'égard des Ukrainiens, non l'inverse »*, a-t-il répété dans un message diffusé par son parti, le Fidesz. *« La solution est de changer les responsables bruxellois »* lors du scrutin européen prévu du 6 au 9 juin, a-t-il préconisé, comme pour lancer la campagne électorale. Une nouvelle façon de dire que le soutien à l'Ukraine n'a rien d'une évidence pour lui.

TODAY'S WORLDVIEW

The inescapable appeal of the world's 'coolest dictator'



Analysis by [Ishaan Tharoor](#), Columnist, *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2024



A woman guides an elderly man on a sidewalk past a New Ideas campaign mural promoting President Nayib Bukele, who is running for reelection, in the Mejicanos suburb of San Salvador, on Jan. 24. (Salvador Melendez/AP)

El Salvador is the site of a startling — and, to many liberals, disturbing — political project. Under President Nayib Bukele, who won reelection in a crushing landslide over the weekend, the country has shifted from what was a functional multiparty democracy to a de facto one-party state. Backed by a parliamentary supermajority, Bukele packed the country's constitutional court with loyalists. They later issued a ruling that allowed him to circumvent prohibitions against presidents holding office longer than one term.

Bukele is embarking on a second five-year stint in office where his power will be paramount, the country's legislature a rubber stamp for the agenda of the executive and the opposition a feeble shadow. And Salvadorans are ecstatic. Bukele commands some of the highest approval ratings of any leader in the world and won Sunday's presidential vote by close to a 90 percent margin.

His astonishing popularity hinges on one critical issue: Since winning the presidency in 2019, Bukele has masterminded a sweeping crackdown on gangs and cartels that proliferated for years throughout El Salvador and through networks across the region. His tough approach has lowered the country's once world-leading homicide rates and brought a degree of safety to Salvadoran neighborhoods. It's also inspired politicians, especially on the right, across Latin America to try to replicate the Bukele model.

Critics, though, point to its heavy-handed overreach. For two years, the country's legislature granted Bukele emergency powers to carry out his fight against crime. "Bukele's government has used emergency powers to jail more than 72,000 suspects — giving El Salvador the world's highest lockup rate," explained my colleague Mary Beth Sheridan last year. "They face mass trials of up to 900 defendants. Human rights groups say many were arrested arbitrarily. The government has acknowledged some errors, freeing around 7,000."



Fireworks light the sky as supporters of Bukele celebrate during the presidential and legislative elections in San Salvador on Sunday. (Handout/AFP/Getty Images)

Bukele, 42, has scoffed at these concerns, including those of the Biden administration, which said in 2021 that the court ruling that paved the way for Bukele's second term "undermines democracy." Suave and irreverent, Bukele then jokingly rebranded his bio on Twitter, now known as X, as "the coolest dictator in the world."

The vast majority of Salvadorans appeared unfussed, drawn instead to the populist promise inherent in Bukele's pitch to smash a failed status quo that presided over stagnation, corruption and poverty. "It will be the first time in a country that just one party exists in a completely democratic system," Bukele exulted before cheering crowds on Sunday night, adding that "the entire opposition together was pulverized."

That's largely undeniable. "El Salvador's traditional parties from the left and right that created the vacuum that Bukele first filled in 2019 remain in shambles," noted the Associated Press. "Alternating in power for some three decades, the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) were thoroughly discredited by their own corruption and ineffectiveness."

The Salvadoran president cast the election as a referendum on his way of doing things in a society traumatized by decades of violence. “Why are there so many eyes on a small (Latin) American country?” Bukele said to his supporters. “They’re afraid of the power of example.” Bukele’s bio on X no longer mentions anything about being a dictator. Now, he simply identifies as a “philosopher king.”



Bukele greets supporters from the balcony of the National Palace next to his wife Gabriela de Bukele, after declaring himself the winner in the presidential election in San Salvador on Sunday. (Jose Cabezas/Reuters)

Bukele’s success in El Salvador reflects a set of politics that transcends his small Central American nation. In both developing and developed countries, democracies are facing historic tests. Polls show mounting public apathy from voters, particularly young people, and deepening disenchantment with the ideals of liberal democracy itself.

“There’s this growing rejection of the basic principles of democracy and human rights, and support for authoritarian populism among people who feel that, concepts like democracy and human rights and due process have failed them,” Tyler Mattiace, Americas researcher for Human Rights Watch, told the AP.

For this reason, Bukele has become a cause célèbre among the U.S. right. “The American liberal media cannot comprehend that enforcing hard authority might make a society better, and counterintuitively, more free and liberal,” declared the American Conservative, adding that Bukele “provides a time-tested, successful alternative to the liberal model of governance.”

But the path forward for Bukele is far from smooth. His anti-gang measures are wildly popular, but his country’s economic position remains fraught — inflation is on the march, and El Salvador still has high rates of poverty and unemployment. Bukele’s attention-grabbing, quixotic bid to make bitcoin legal tender in El Salvador has done little to address deeper problems.

“Showmanship is no substitute for governance, and the second term will inevitably increase pressure on Bukele to address the state of the economy,” wrote Christine Wade, a political scientist focused on Latin America at Washington College. “With food insecurity on the rise and exports in decline, Bukele will have to have to address the country’s socioeconomic ailments with policies that prove more effective than his stalled Bitcoin initiative.”

“If prices continue to rise and the government is unable to respond, Bukele’s five-year run of strong popularity may end in his second term,” Valeria Vásquez, senior analyst for Central America at Control Risks consultancy, told Americas Quarterly. “However, given the erosion of the political opposition and the country’s checks and balances, it will be difficult for any serious challenge to emerge.” Indeed, there’s one overwhelming reality in El Salvador: “The Bukele Model is this,” Juan Martínez d’Aubuisson, an anthropologist who has studied El Salvador’s gangs, told Sheridan. “Concentrating all the power in one man.”

In Pakistan

Pakistan stages another unfair election

Analysis by [Ishaan Tharoor](#), Columnist, *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2024



Supporters of Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif attend a rally in Kasur, Punjab, on Tuesday, ahead of Pakistan's national elections. (Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes. A bit more than a half decade ago, Pakistan staged national elections in a cloud of controversy. The eventual winner was boosted by the tacit support of the South Asian republic’s long-meddling military, which put its thumb on the scales in favor of its chosen candidate. The opposition saw its chief leaders sidelined on criminal charges that their supporters claimed were trumped up. They decried the result as “rigged.”

Fast forward to this week, as Pakistan holds its latest general election on Thursday. A similar dynamic prevails, though the cast of characters has been flipped. Former prime minister Imran Khan, who surged to victory in 2018, languishes in prison on a slew of charges that make him ineligible to contest the election himself. Meanwhile, three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif stands a strong chance of winning a fourth mandate. The corruption cases that kept him out of the running in 2018 — and sent him into self-imposed exile the following year — have been waved away by military authorities now more amenable to his return.

The reversal of fortunes is part of the sad seesaw of Pakistani democracy, forever tilting through crises and interruptions. The current election is supposed to punctuate a prolonged period of political limbo that followed the collapse of Khan's government in 2022. It's believed Khan's ouster came after a falling-out with the army top brass, which had first nurtured the charismatic populist before turning against him amid mounting criticism of Khan's perceived poor governance.

In the months since, Khan and allies in his party, the Movement for Justice, known by its Urdu acronym PTI, have been subdued by an onslaught of lawfare. Some prominent PTI officials have left the party to avoid the dragnet of the deep state. Others are locked away in jail like Khan, who has now been convicted four times by authorities on charges ranging from corruption to the "illegal" nature of his marriage to his current wife, who supposedly didn't wait long enough after her previous divorce to marry Khan.

To many, the end goal is obvious: the total evisceration of Khan's political career and the hollowing out of the political movement he began. "It sends a very clear message," Hasan Askari Rizvi, a political analyst, told my colleagues. "The PTI won't be allowed to come into power again."

Yet Khan remains remarkably popular — a former cricket national team captain beloved by the masses who is seen as standing against a class of entrenched, feckless elites. And his party, despite myriad legal hurdles obstructing its full participation in the election, is desperately fighting to secure what votes it can.

"The PTI is deploying a two-pronged campaign strategy of secretive campaigning, often led by female teacher volunteers, and generative AI technology," explained Reuters. "The party has used generative AI to create footage of Khan, its founder, reading speeches he conveyed to lawyers from his prison cell, urging supporters to turn out on election day."

The military's apparent crackdown on Khan and PTI appears to have possibly increased his support. "While his popularity had plummeted as the economy declined in his last months in office, he now has a cultlike following," noted the New York Times. "Supporters see him — and by extension themselves — as wronged by the military leaders who they believe orchestrated his ouster."

The public mood in Pakistan is not optimistic. According to a new Gallup survey, 7 in 10 Pakistanis "lack confidence in the honesty of their elections." It also found that a similar proportion of Pakistanis believe economic conditions are worsening where they live and close to 90 percent of Pakistanis see corruption as rife in their government.

A caretaker administration has struggled to cope with the country's economic dysfunction, as public debt and inflation bite. It's also grappling with a spiraling security crisis, as an ethnic insurgency rages in Pakistan's vast Baluchistan province and the Pakistani Taliban continue to launch terrorist attacks across the country.

In this context, it's hard to see how much of a difference Sharif, a stalwart of the political scene, may be able to make should he come to power. It's also possible that he may once more find himself sidelined by the real powers-that-be — Pakistan's longest-serving prime minister has never been able to complete any of his three stints in office. "Given that Nawaz's three terms in power ended with a fall out with the military, we can expect the same will happen this time around," Madiha Afzal, a foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, told Time magazine.

But Sharif is part and parcel of a political system strung around Pakistan's military, a sprawling entity that maintains significant economic interests and exerts influence across Pakistani society.

"Politicians are incentivized to side with the generals to attain power," wrote Muneeb Yousuf and Mohammad Usman Bhatti in Foreign Policy. "This dynamic has weakened the constitution, compromised the judiciary, and undermined democratic elections. The military no longer intervenes in

politics via coup, but its leaders have invested in the political system. Pakistan has developed into a hybrid regime where elements of electoral democracy and military influence mingle.”

The country’s main political parties don’t offer a pathway to break this status quo. They “lack the strong links to or mandate from the masses to challenge elites and make fundamental changes in our elite-dominated political and economic order,” wrote political economist Niaz Murtaza in Pakistani newspaper Dawn. “So, we may go from one weak and rigged hybrid regime to another that adds to our mounting problems and kicks the can further into the future.”

In Senegal - Elections have been postponed “indefinitely”

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/4/eu-postponed-senegal-election-opens-period-of-uncertainty>

Police and protesters clash after Senegal election postponed

International community calls for new date and transparent polls after president announces indefinite delay.



An opposition supporter kneels in front of a burning barricade during demonstrations called by the opposition parties in Dakar, Senegal [Seyllou/ AFP]

Al Jazeera 4 Feb 2024

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Police in Senegal cracked down on protests in the capital Dakar and at least one senior opposition figure was arrested a day after President Macky Sall [announced the indefinite postponement](#) of the presidential election scheduled for February 25.

The European Union on Sunday said the postponement opens a “period of uncertainty”, and the United States called for a swift new date for free polls.

In a televised address to the nation, Sall announced on Saturday that he had cancelled the relevant electoral law, citing a dispute over the candidate list.

He said he signed a decree abolishing a November 2023 measure that had set the original election date, but did not give a new date. Last month, Senegal’s Constitutional Council [excluded some prominent opposition members](#) from the list of candidates.

Tear gas fired at protesters

Hundreds of men and women of all ages took to the streets on Sunday, heeding the call of some opposition candidates. Former Prime Minister Aminata Toure, now a leading opposition figure, was arrested while arriving at one protest, she posted on X. She served as premier under Sall before joining the opposition and becoming one of his most outspoken critics.

Denouncing Sall's decision to postpone the election, Toure described it as an "unprecedented democratic regression" and called on people to mobilise to defend their rights.

Police fired tear gas to disperse opposition supporters in Dakar, in the first clashes after Sall's announcement, the AFP news agency reported.

Men and women who were waving Senegalese flags or wearing the jersey of the national football team had converged at a roundabout on one of the capital's main roads.

Reporting from the outskirts of Dakar, Al Jazeera's Nicolas Haque said all 19 opposition candidates had asked their supporters to gather in the area.

"There's a sense that the security forces do not want any gathering. But for the members of the opposition, until the decree [cancelling the elections] is published ... then [it] is not in place," Haque said.

"Some of the opposition figures that I spoke to said it's a ploy for him to cling onto power, others describe it as a constitutional coup.

"A motorcyclist ... shouted: 'We're going to burn everything down'. From every protester that we spoke to, they feel angry at that decision; they feel robbed of their ability to express themselves in this election cancelled by Sall."

The signal of Walf TV, a private television channel, was suspended for "incitement to violence" over its coverage of the street protests, an official in the communications ministry told AFP.

Further protests are planned outside parliament on Monday. Lawmakers are expected to debate a bill on Monday that would schedule the postponed election for August 25 and extend Sall's mandate until his successor takes over, the Reuters news agency reported.

'Inclusive and credible elections'

France, the former colonial power in the country, called for a vote "as soon as possible", saying that Senegal should end "uncertainty".

"The European Union ... calls on all actors to work ... for the staging of a transparent, inclusive and credible election as soon as possible," EU spokesperson Nabila Massrali said in a statement on Sunday.

Senegal has traditionally been seen as a rare example of democratic stability in West Africa, which has been hit by a series of coups in recent years including in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

The US Department of State noted Senegal's "strong tradition of democracy and peaceful transitions of power" and urged "all participants in [the] electoral process to engage peacefully to swiftly set a new date and the conditions for a timely, free and fair election".

Senegalese politicians must "prioritise dialogue and collaboration for transparent, inclusive and credible elections", the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) bloc said in a statement that called on authorities to "expedite the various processes to set a new date for the elections".

Opponents suspect that the president's camp fear the defeat of his anointed successor, Prime Minister Amadou Ba.

Senegal cannot "indulge in a fresh crisis" after deadly political violence in March 2021 and June 2023, Sall said on Saturday as he announced a "national dialogue" to organise "a free, transparent and inclusive election".

The country's electoral code states that at least 80 days must pass between the announcement of a new presidential vote and polling day – theoretically putting the soonest possible new date in late April at the earliest.

Sall's presidential term is supposed to end on April 2.

Analysts say the crisis is putting one of Africa's most stable democracies to the test at a time when the region is struggling with the recent surge in coups.

Senegal has been embroiled in political tensions as a result of deadly clashes involving opposition supporters and the disqualification of two opposition leaders ahead of the crucial vote.

See also https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/02/03/au-senegal-le-president-macky-sall-annonce-le-report-sine-die-de-l-election-presidentielle_6214594_3212.html

Podcast of the week

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-cours-de-l-histoire/ursula-hirschmann-et-altiero-spinelli-penser-le-federalisme-europeen-2657073>

Militants antifascistes et pionniers du fédéralisme européen, Altiero Spinelli et Ursula Hirschmann ont marqué l'histoire de la construction européenne et de ses institutions. Du "Manifeste de Ventotene" à l'association "Femmes pour l'Europe", ils ont porté l'idée d'une Europe unie et démocratique.

Avec

- Andrew Glencross Directeur de l'École Européenne de Sciences Politiques et Sociales, et professeur en science politique à l'Institut Catholique de Lille
- Araceli Turmo Maîtresse de conférences en droit à Nantes Université, spécialisée en droit de l'Union européenne

Arts and Culture

■ A series on Arte TV

"This is England", sur Arte.tv : une fresque saisissante sur l'Angleterre des années 1980

Dans son film de 2006, Shane Meadows racontait l'Angleterre de 1983 et les ravages du mouvement skinhead. Avant de poursuivre le récit en trois saisons d'une série, d'abord assez lourde avant de trouver le ton juste. (Telerama)

Not great, but worth watching if you're interested in the Thatcher Years

<https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/RC-024379/this-is-england/>

There's also a film, This is England (I can lend the DVD, yes, you know, that thing in a plastic box...)

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/apr/27/drama2>