KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG 1|2026

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

The Centre-Right

A Look at Conservative and Christian Democratic Parties Worldwide

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

1 | 2026

Dear readers,

Democracy needs the centre-right. That is a straightforward statement that may seem self-evident to some, and yet it is not quite as obvious as it appears. In recent years in Germany, the deliberately vague slogan of the "fight against the right" – *Kampf gegen rechts* – has often been used to cast political positions and actors beyond the left as broadly illegitimate, excluding them from what is considered the democratic mainstream. According to this worldview, any clearer distancing by a centre-right party from the centre-left is interpreted as a move towards the political fringes. The assumption is that such positioning ultimately benefits extremists, with the familiar argument being that voters will then simply choose "the original" instead.

In this issue of *International Reports*, we aim to put the German debate about the role of centre-right parties and the challenge posed by right-wing populism into the broader European and international context. What situation do Christian democratic and conservative parties face in other countries? Who is challenging them – and how are these parties responding to the challenge? Which strategies have worked, and which have not?

The panorama that emerges from the insights in this issue is a diverse one. However, one general statement can be made: Across most European countries – as in Germany – the challenge to the political centre is coming primarily from right-wing populist parties. In Latin America, as well, there has been a noticeable shift to the right in recent years, though Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are still governed by left-authoritarian regimes. In sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, Holger Dix and Henri Bohnet note in their article that left-wing parties often dominate despite an ideological environment that might appear favourable to centre-right politics. As the authors put it: "conservative values, left-wing politics". The situation is different again in hybrid systems shaped by a powerful monarchical influence, such as in Morocco. Steven Höfner illustrates how the role of the centre-right has developed in this specific configuration.

One thing is clear: Lumping together all parties and political figures on the right of the spectrum is overly simplistic. In his article on

Europe, Sebastian Enskat reveals that there are not only obvious differences between the continent's centre-right parties – grouped within the European People's Party (EPP) – and their right-wing populist challengers, but also some significant differences both within and between the parliamentary groups to the right of the EPP in the European Parliament. Whether in their stance towards Russia and Ukraine, in their approach to the rule of law, or in their position on European integration, there are substantial distinctions between today's Fratelli d'Italia under Giorgia Meloni and parties such as the German AfD.

Henning Suhr paints a similarly nuanced picture of the Latin American right, which cannot simply be divided into traditional conservative parties and a so-called new right. Even within these newer forces, there are considerable differences. Tempting though it might be to place figures such as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Javier Milei in Argentina into the same right-wing populist category, that would not reflect reality. While the Central American leader seeks to concentrate the power of the state in his own hands, the South American leader aims to roll back state control – and he does not employ the anti-immigration rhetoric often associated with right-wing populists.

Intellectual honesty alone requires that we acknowledge such distinctions rather than gloss over them. At the same time, such insights have practical political implications for centre-right parties, which must decide when clear distancing is necessary or when some form of cooperation might be conceivable in order to advance their own policy goals, be they within individual countries or – in the European context – in the European Parliament.

However, the belief that the question of cooperation or exclusion alone determines how strong right-wing populist parties can become or how effectively centre-right forces can hold their ground against them is likely mistaken. One striking example here is the comparison between Germany and Austria. In Germany, the AfD has been consistently excluded from cooperation, while in Austria, the FPÖ has long been integrated into the political system. However, the result is the same: Both far-right parties are "more radical

and more successful than ever", as Sebastian Enskat notes. The situation is particularly complicated when established centre-right parties find themselves in the position of a potential junior partner – a dilemma currently facing many moderately conservative parties in Latin America, for example. Early experiences in Argentina, for instance, have been sobering for the PRO party that once brought Mauricio Macri to the presidency. Thus far, cooperation has tended to strengthen Javier Milei's party rather than the PRO itself.

The most effective strategy for centre-right parties is also the most obvious one: namely to focus on their own ideas and on their own solutions to the problems that matter to potential voters. Despite all the difficulties, parties such as Spain's Partido Popular and Greece's Nea Dimokratia have recently seen the positive results that such an approach can have. Developments in East Asia likewise indicate that a broad platform covering large parts of the political space to the right of centre does not automatically boost parties on the far right. South Korea's political system may be highly polarised, as Henrik Braun explains in his article, yet no significant political force has emerged to the right of the People Power Party thus far. In Japan, by contrast, the Liberal Democratic Party has lost voters to newly founded far-right parties in recent years under centrist prime ministers, as Paul Linnarz notes. However, under Prime Minister Takaichi, the party achieved a historic victory in the recent lower-house elections with a clearly conservative platform.

Conversely, centre-right parties lose their strong position – or fail to ever come close to a majority in the first place – when their programmes and policies do not address the key social realities and pressing challenges facing their countries. In Europe, these challenges include economic developments and migration, while in Latin America, they often concern crime and domestic security. In South Africa, they include the structural inequalities rooted in apartheid, as highlighted by Gregor Jaecke and Christoph Wiedenroth in their article. If the centre-right fails to provide credible answers, right-wing populists gain ground, as in parts of Europe and Latin America, or the left remains dominant despite a weak record in government, as in South Africa.

It is not solely the task of centre-right parties to respond to the rise of populism on the far right, of course. The case of Romania – analysed by Stefan Hofmann and Mihai Marc – indicates that the social-democratic PSD is likewise losing large numbers of voters to right-wing populists. Nevertheless, Christian democratic and conservative parties bear a particular responsibility here both in dealing with the question of cooperation or distance towards actors on the right and – above all – in defining their own political positions. The international perspectives gathered in this issue suggest that these parties serve both themselves and democracy better not by dissolving into a vague, shapeless political centre, but by confidently presenting themselves as what democracy requires alongside parties of the left: strong centre-right parties.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Caroline Kanter is Editor of International Reports and Head of the Division European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (caroline.kanter@kas.de).

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Who is calling the tune? In Argentina, following Javier Milei's (with megaphone) election as president in late 2023, the liberal-conservative PRO party decided to collaborate with the political outsider. So far, however, it is the president and his party, La Libertad Avanza, who have benefited most from this alliance. A number of PRO members even defected to the president's party, including Security Minister Patricia Bullrich (to the left of Milei), who had run as the PRO's top candidate in the presidential campaign.
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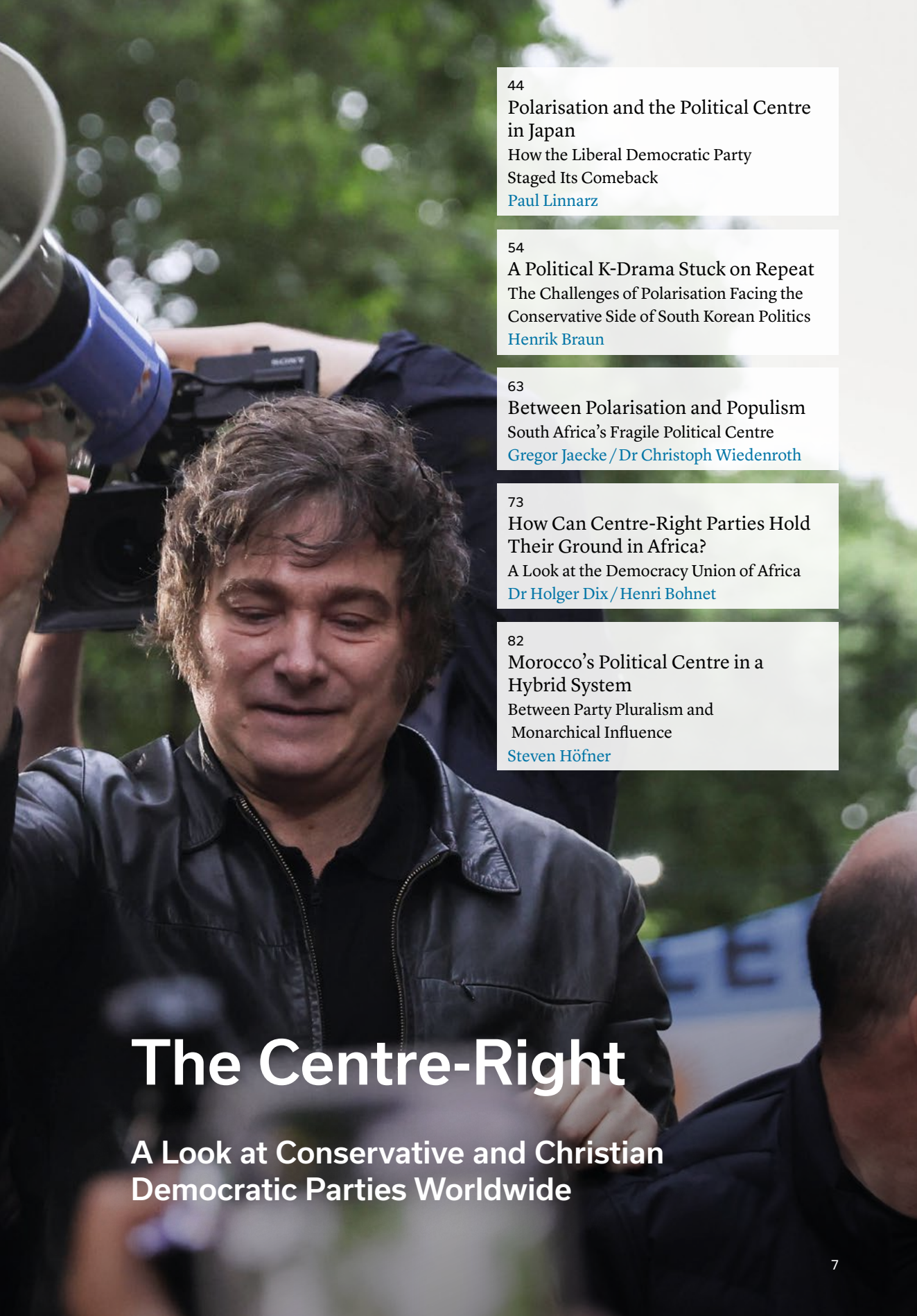

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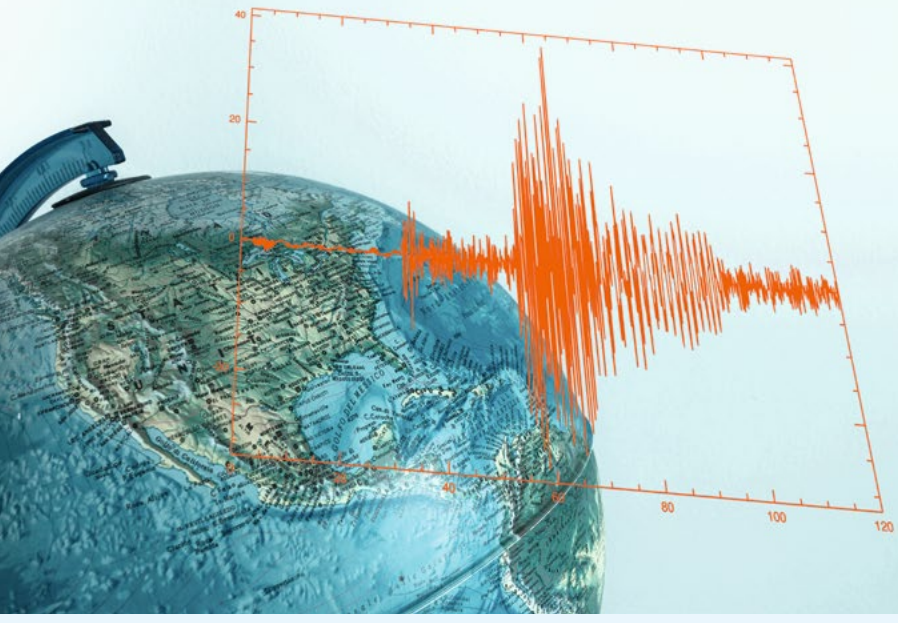
The Centre-Right

A Look at Conservative and Christian Democratic Parties Worldwide

under discussion

“We have our seismographs all around the world.”

An Interview with Caroline Kanter



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For this edition of *International Reports*, we spoke with Caroline Kanter about transatlantic challenges, European homework, and the international work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. We look into why we should not break off dialogue with the US, the significance of the issue of EU enlargement, and why the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung can help to identify global developments that will ultimately affect us in Germany at an early stage.

Caroline Kanter has been Head of the European and International Cooperation Division since February 2026, after holding the position of Deputy Head of this division since 2023. Previously, she headed the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung country offices in Paris and Rome.

International Reports (IR): *Ms Kanter, you became Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's European and International Cooperation Division in February, so you are now also the new editor of International Reports. What do you see as the defining quality of our magazine, and what matters most to you in your new role?*

Caroline Kanter: *International Reports* is a brand in its own right. If a publication endures for more than 42 years, that's not a coincidence. For me, one key reason is the high professional and qualitative standards the magazine sets for itself – and consistently meets. It has also repeatedly evolved in terms of formats in order to reach new audiences. I'm thinking of the English-language edition, the podcast in German and English, and the magazine's presence on social media, for example. That's certainly an area where we'll need to keep asking how we can present the high-quality content we have in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. I believe it is also important for us to continue to reflect carefully on the niche we want *International Reports* to occupy in the foreign policy debate. What sets us apart from other actors and products that are contributing to that debate?

IR: *What do you have in mind?*

Kanter: There are several points to consider. First of all, what sets us apart from other institutions is that we don't view the world neutrally. We have a standpoint – a European, German, and Christian democratic one. And we don't simply collect facts – because artificial intelligence is faster at that, anyway. What we do is analyse and provide context.

No one picks up *International Reports* to find out who won the presidential election in Argentina. But when it comes to assessing what a president such as Javier Milei means for the country and what conclusions we in Europe should draw, that's where the analysis provided by our staff on the ground comes into play.

And like in Buenos Aires, we have a presence at around 100 locations across the globe. That's an invaluable resource – for *International Reports*, too. Being able to report from so many countries on what the situation is actually like on the ground can add real value to the German foreign policy debate – a debate that is sometimes accused (not entirely unfairly) of wishful thinking. This geographical breadth also enables us not only to cover issues that are already high on the political agenda, but additionally to focus deliberately on countries and topics that are still under the radar. I'm thinking about our issue on the Arctic, for example, which appeared almost exactly three years ago.

IR: *We published our issue on current US foreign policy roughly three months ago. Since then, a great deal has happened. Not least, the debates around Greenland and the American–Israeli attack on Iran have prompted observers in Europe to seriously question the transatlantic partnership. What do these developments mean for us in Europe and for the foundation's international work?*

Kanter: If the issue you mentioned shows us anything, it's that the perception and assessment of the foreign policy being pursued by the US and its president differ considerably in other parts of the world from how they are viewed here. There are some countries that see opportunities for themselves in Donald Trump's policies: Israel and the Gulf states, for example. At the same time, one common denominator in how almost all countries describe their experience with Trump is the unpredictability and the pace – that is, the sheer speed – with which the Trump administration confronts other states. For us here in Europe in particular, we have to acknowledge that transatlantic relations have reached a turning point. In many respects, the US administration – among others – is calling into question the rules-based order that the United States itself helped shape after 1945. That runs counter not only to our interests, but also to our principles.

Regarding the situation in the Middle East and the Israeli–American attack on Iran, I believe there are two points to consider. First, it must be stated that containing

Keeping the dialogue open: Even though the number of disagreements between the United States and Europe has increased significantly in recent times, the United States will remain an indispensable partner in the short and medium term, not least in the field of security policy. Photo: © Zuma Press Wire, Imago.

or eliminating the Iranian threat to Israel – which has been built up over decades – through political and diplomatic means would have been desirable, but proved impossible to realise. Israel's threat perception, in turn, appears more understandable than ever, particularly against the backdrop of the devastating Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. These dynamics and developments illustrate the high priority of the Middle East for German and European policy, as well as for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's international work in the region. Our commitment to Israel's right to exist and our support for the Israeli people, especially in times of war, serve as our guiding principles here; our close partnerships with numerous actors in the Middle East are more important than ever. In this context, we are closely monitoring the geostrategic repercussions of the substantial loss of Iran's military potential and the resulting weakening of the autocratic China–Russia–Iran–North Korea alliance.

***IR:** Faced with this geopolitical panorama, how should Germany and Europe respond?*

Kanter: First, we in Europe must live up to our ambition as a global actor and actively shape the changing international order, its institutions, and its regulatory framework. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen underscored her commitment to this task during the EU Ambassadors' Conference, demanding that Europe become more independent, resilient, and stronger.

With regard to transatlantic relations, there are two different ways to respond. Some say, "Our counterpart in Washington is uncomfortable, unpredictable, and difficult, so we should now retreat and disengage". But that approach overlooks a fundamental reality: As Europeans, we're still dependent on the United States – particularly when it comes to our security. We're consequently trying to boost our strength significantly in defence matters and investing heavily in rebuilding and expanding our armed forces and capabilities. But in the short to medium term, that reality will remain. So, for the foreseeable future, we have no better option than the kind of partnership currently offered to us by the United States. Alongside expressing criticism where it is warranted, this also means continuing to make constructive offers – ideally coordinated at the European level and backed up by greater capabilities of our own – for renewed cooperation in NATO and in other areas where we share interests.

And in so doing, we should not lose sight of the fact that the United States remains a democratic polity in which diverse views exist, not least on the foreign policy questions shaping the transatlantic debate. This became clear again at the Munich Security Conference in February – at least in tone, and in some cases also substantively. Our foundation maintains channels of communication with this diverse range of actors – within the administration, the opposition, Congress, and at the state level. Incidentally, this is by no means a new development or merely a reaction to Trump. We've been operating like this for decades.

One final point on this: We should not allow current political tensions to cause the human and societal bridges across the Atlantic – built over more than half a century – to collapse. In my view, the growing anti-Americanism that can be seen in the German debate is worrying.

IR: *If our relationship with the United States is indeed no longer as reliable as in the past, we require new partnerships alongside a renewed transatlantic alliance. Where should Germany and Europe look for these?*

Kanter: Broadly speaking, I would distinguish between two categories: partners we share values with, and partners we share interests with. This is not a black-and-white distinction: In practice, the boundaries are fluid. For me, values-based partners are countries with which – despite differences in detail – we share a fundamentally liberal democratic understanding and ideas about the rule of law and human rights. Outside the EU, I'm thinking of countries such as the United Kingdom and Norway, and beyond Europe, of Canada, Australia, and Japan. There are numerous countries in Latin America that fall into this category, as well.

IR: *But globally speaking, it's a rather small club, isn't it?*

Kanter: Indeed. If we limited our partnerships to countries that can be considered "like-minded" in a narrower sense, we'd quickly find ourselves quite isolated. That's why we also need partners with whom we may not share liberal democratic values but with whom we do share certain interests – possibly economic diversification and our supply of raw materials, but also the question of the rules-based international order. There are a number of small and medium-sized states – including countries that are not democracies – that, like us, have a fundamental interest in ensuring that the law of the strongest does not prevail globally. If we want to leverage such shared interests, we also need to maintain dialogue with countries whose domestic systems do not reflect our principles. This category includes countries such as Egypt, Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, and also a number of Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

IR: *That all sounds very logical. And yet it took the EU more than a quarter of a century to conclude an agreement with Mercosur.*

Kanter: The European Commission is right to seek a provisional application of the agreement. But the European Parliament's decision in January to refer the agreement to the ECJ was a major error, albeit only the most visible expression of a broader problem: For a long time, we have invested too little in our partners – not only financially, but also in terms of diplomatic acknowledgement and appreciation. As a result, those partners – including values-based partners – are naturally beginning to look elsewhere because they now have alternatives. If we don't step up, others will. The pandemic is a case in point: It was not Europe that first supplied vaccines to Latin America, but Russia and China. In some cases, there was a real loss of trust. I don't think it's too late to repair these partnerships, but we must act now.

IR: *All the more so given that trust and predictability should be especially valued at a time when the United States has become less predictable.*

Kanter: Exactly. And despite the reservations I've just mentioned, I believe we Europeans are still comparatively well placed in this respect. We may not always be the fastest, but our partners generally know where they stand with us – and that what we say today will still hold tomorrow. Reliability and predictability are qualities that others value in Europeans.

IR: *So, in a harsher international environment, the EU needs partners. But it also needs to gain geopolitical weight itself. Should we view the question of EU enlargement as an instrument that serves this purpose, as well?*

Kanter: It is precisely the geopolitical environment that has reopened a window for enlargement. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only pushed the accession processes of the Western Balkan states back up the agenda, but also triggered applications from Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia – though in Georgia's case, we would now have to add a large question mark. It seems to me we have tended to focus mainly on the challenges associated with this process. And there's no doubt that these challenges exist and that we have to discuss them openly.

IR: *But …*

Kanter: But we must equally discuss the cost of inaction. For example: What will happen if we permanently close the door to the European Union for these states? What I said earlier applies in this context again: These countries have alternatives and in some cases are already making use of them. Actors such as Turkey, Russia, and China have already created facts on the ground in the Western Balkans, particularly with regard to resource extraction. It cannot be in our interest to end up with countries at the heart of Europe that are growing frustrated with the EU and are turning towards other powers instead.

IR: *But when we speak of enlargement, we also need to consider the EU's internal condition: It is already struggling with conflicts between existing members and may now have to take on new members, as well.*

Kanter: Enlargement must go hand in hand with internal reforms. Nonetheless, we should get used to the idea that this will not be a grand leap, not a sweeping change of the treaties. Instead, we must work to advance the European Union, which has brought us decades of economic prosperity and helped secure peace, below that threshold. As Christian democrats in particular, we should insist on the principle of subsidiarity. And again, I would point to the factor of time and the pace at which conditions and realities are changing. Waiting is a luxury we simply can't afford. We need to move more quickly from problem analysis to action. Beyond that, the internal condition of many member states is also a cause for concern since it weakens Europe globally.

IR: *Alongside procedural reforms, would economic competitiveness be another starting point?*

Kanter: Yes – and an important one. Without economic competitiveness, we lack weight on the international stage. Even with all the rearmament efforts underway, overwhelming military power alone is not going to turn us into a player that is able to sit at the table in major decisions in the foreseeable future. Germany and the European Union have been sought-after partners worldwide because we are economically strong and attractive, and this continues to be the case. But we're losing ground. It helps to bear the following in mind: In 2007, before the financial crisis, both the United States and the EU accounted for roughly one-quarter of global economic output in nominal terms. China stood at just 6 per cent at the time. Since then, the US has actually slightly increased its share, while we've dropped to 18 per cent, with China now almost level at 17 per cent.

IR: *How can this trend be halted?*

Kanter: On the one hand, we need a political strategy that sets the framework and clearly defines the areas in which Germany and Europe want to become drivers of innovation again – and one that additionally sets out how the state can support this. On the other hand, we should not abandon our market-oriented approach: Within that framework, we should rely on the innovative strength of our companies. After all, it's also true that in Europe, we've overshot the mark in terms of regulation in recent decades. In my view, this has now been recognised as a problem in a number of governments and within the European Commission itself. This realisation was reflected in the informal competitiveness summit in Belgium in February. Practical consequences must now follow. Again, time will be a key factor.

IR: *As we draw this conversation to a close, let's go back to the international work undertaken by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Promoting democracy will surely remain a core element of that work. Where do you see our role?*

Kanter: Democracy promotion is a very broad concept. Moreover, as a political foundation, we should look closely at where we set our priorities. For me, it's the parliaments and political parties – supplemented by our rule-of-law and media programmes. Cooperation in this field is our core brand and should remain so. This type of cooperation is not a one-way street, either. It's important to me that our global partnerships keep us in touch with developments on the ground: How are parties in other countries evolving in terms of organisation, communication, and the use of AI, for example? The ability to feed these insights back into our work so that we can learn from them in Germany is a real strength.

At the same time, we're seeing democratic space shrinking in many countries. This is something we experience in our own work and in our relationships with local partners. In some of these countries, we've been present for six decades, and we stand

by our partners, even in difficult times. Exactly what form this support takes has to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, it can be public, but often, it is more effective to act in the background.

***IR:** And beyond democracy promotion, what else should our international work seek to achieve?*

Kanter: I could list a lot of things, but allow me to focus on a few key points. Let me return to the topic of global partnerships we discussed earlier. As the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, we can rightly say that we invest in partnerships around the world – even counter-cyclically, if I may put it that way. We have always maintained ties in Latin America, even in phases during which the region was not a priority for German policy. For many decades, we've also paid close attention to developments in Southeast Asia, and we currently run offices in eight of the eleven ASEAN states. We view this as an asset for German foreign policy as a whole, too.

In the European Union's waiting room: The accession process of many Western Balkan states has already been dragging on for many years. Alongside the necessary discussion about the challenges of enlargement, we should also ask what might happen if these countries were to eventually turn away from the EU out of disappointment, says Caroline Kanter. Photo: © dts Nachrichtenagentur, Imago.

Our country offices additionally enable us to identify developments in different regions at an early stage, to combine these observations into an overall picture in Berlin, and to derive conclusions and recommendations for action. Bringing together different theatres and learning from conflicts across regions is crucial in my view. We shouldn't look at crises, developments, and trends in isolation, but rather consider what conclusions can be drawn from one scenario to help confront another.

IR: *Can you give us an example?*

Kanter: On the subject of maritime security, for instance, it makes sense to take a combined look at China's grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea, at Russian activities in the Black Sea and the Baltic, and at the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, in the area of development cooperation, we've been observing for years how other actors use this instrument to achieve geopolitical gains in different regions of the world. Just think of the Chinese infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Then, there is the soft power that Turkey is using to gain influence. By contrast, Germany and Europe have not yet deployed these instruments strategically enough. We compiled these observations last year, developed recommendations, and fed them into the political process.

In short, we have our seismographs all around the world. When one of them registers a tremor, it gives us the chance to prepare for developments. If several seismographs register tremors simultaneously, we know that something larger may be coming our way. This is an asset we will continue to make use of.

This interview was conducted by Magdalena Falkner and Sören Soika.
– translated from German –

Door Open or Door Closed?

Reflections on How to Deal with Far-Right Parties in Europe

Interjection

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In a Nutshell

Parties that are positioned to the right of the European People's Party (EPP) do not form a homogeneous bloc; rather, they differ significantly in both programme and political style.

To make an assessment on a case-by-case basis, it is helpful to be guided by clear criteria. A party's stance on Russia, the EU, and the rule of law should be taken into account, as should its degree of radicalisation.

A comparison between Germany and Austria reveals that there is no clear correlation between inclusion or exclusion on the one hand and the success of right-wing populist parties on the other hand. The exclusion of the AfD in Germany and the integration of the FPÖ in Austria have led to the same outcome: Both parties have become more radical and more successful than ever.

Centre-right parties should focus on developing independent responses to the concerns that resonate with their potential voters. Greece's Nea Dimokratia and Spain's Partido Popular have been successful with this approach in recent years.

The Author

Sebastian Enskat is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Vienna Office.

If a state election were to be held in Saxony-Anhalt next Sunday, the result might look something like this: Christian Democrats (CDU), 26 %; Social Democrats (SPD), 8 %; Greens (Bündnis90/Die Grünen), 3 %; Liberals (FDP), 2 %; The Left (Die Linke), 11 %; BSW (social-conservative Left), 5 %; AfD (right-wing populists), 39 %.[1] At least in eastern Germany, this reflects a development that has long been common in other parts of Europe and the world: Right-wing populist and far-right parties are achieving record results and putting increasing pressure on established competitors within the party system.

Christian democratic and conservative parties in particular have a key role to play in responding to this challenge: They are the ones who largely determine how to deal with competition from the far right. It is they who make the strategic choices that range from strict exclusion or tolerance models to attempts at constructive engagement, cooperation, and even inclusion in government. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the analysis more closely.

There's right-wing, and then there's right-wing

Whether in the rhetoric of the much-publicised *Omas gegen rechts* ("Grandmas Against the Right") or in the frequently invoked "fight against the right" heard in parts of the centre-left, actors from the Christian democratic and conservative spectrum are still routinely lumped together with right-wing populist and far-right actors, at least rhetorically. However, even a cursory glance at the party-political landscape to the right of centre indicates that differentiation is urgently needed. This applies not only to the crucial distinction between parties of the centre-right and those on the far right, but also within the wide range of parties commonly labelled right-wing populist, far-right, radical right, and extremist. In Europe, this concerns parties in the European Parliament that sit to the right of the European People's Party and that are organised in the groups of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Patriots for Europe (PfE), and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN).

What is often overlooked is that these groups not only differ from one another, but also contain significant ideological differences within their own ranks. In order to navigate the classification of individual parties along the spectrum from right-conservative to right-wing populist and far-right, it is helpful to refer to three criteria introduced to the debate by EPP party and group leader Manfred Weber[2]:

1. *Attitudes towards the European Union:* This concerns loyalty to EU institutions, positions on weakening or dismantling these institutions, calls for national withdrawal, and the overall tone adopted towards the EU.

2. *Attitudes towards Russia:* This includes support for Ukraine, such as arms deliveries, backing sanctions against Russia as the aggressor, and a clear commitment to defending Europe against Russia's hybrid warfare.

3. *Attitudes towards the rule of law:* This relates to potential actions against judicial and media systems at the national level if the party is in government as well as to the actual implementation of rule-of-law mechanisms and to adherence to legal norms at the EU level.

Examining the ECR through the lens of these three core questions quickly reveals that it is far from a homogeneous grouping. Fratelli d'Italia

and the Sweden Democrats now present themselves as being significantly less Eurosceptic and more rule-of-law-oriented than in the past, while Poland's PiS pursues a strong pro-Ukraine line but systematically undermined the rule of law while in government. Meanwhile, the Czech ODS combines occasional Euroscepticism with a clearly pro-Ukraine stance and a commitment to rule-of-law principles. There are no reports of comparable rule-of-law backsliding either in Italy under Fratelli's leadership or in Sweden, where the government is supported by the Sweden Democrats.

Even the PfE – who are typically positioned further to the right – show neither clear differentiation from other actors nor strong internal cohesion. The AfD originally belonged to the PfE but was considered too radical – particularly by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National – and was forced to leave the group. Now part of the newly formed ESN Group, it aligns on most issues with the FPÖ and Fidesz, both of which remain within the PfE. Despite its Euroscepticism and strong criticism of migration, VOX emphasises the overall usefulness of the EU, supports sanctions against Russia, and adopts at least an ambivalent position on the rule of law.

Some far-right parties promote an alternative, more authoritarian model of the state.

As such, initial analyses of voting behaviour in the 10th European Parliament confirm that cohesion within the PfE, ECR, and ESN is significantly lower than within the EPP. There is no question regarding the existence of any uniform ideological orientation across the right-wing populist and at-times-far-right camp in the European Parliament.[3]

Another distinguishing feature among parties to the right of the EPP is their degree of radicalisation. While some far-right parties view themselves as part of the democratic system and are willing to cooperate with parties of the political centre, others deliberately position themselves as anti-system actors and promote an alternative, more authoritarian model of the state. The spectrum here ranges from comparatively moderate actors such as the Czech ODS to extremist Greek micro-parties and Poland's Konfederacja, which presents itself as an anti-system alternative to the PiS.

For this reason, decisions on how to deal with parties to the right of the EPP depend largely on whether the parties in question are radical, authoritarian-populist anti-system actors at the extreme end of the far-right spectrum or partly populist but otherwise more moderate parties at the other end of the spectrum. Anyone who lumps together all parties to the right of the political centre fails to recognise the political realities. Differences in ideological orientation, degrees of radicalisation, and varying levels of willingness to cooperate with the political centre should be the starting point for any strategic decision.

The German–Austrian paradox

One of the peculiarities of political debate is that even in the face of global challenges, cause-and-effect relationships are often treated as if it were possible to reduce them to the national context. For years, it was possible to argue that the rise of the AfD in Germany was primarily the consequence of what was seen as an overly liberal course pursued by CDU leader and Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, only for the subsequent shift in power to Friedrich Merz to be blamed for the very same phenomenon, this time attributed to a conservative change of course and an alleged convergence with "AfD positions". Whether intentional or not, such blame-shifting overlooks both the fact that the growing success of right-wing and in some cases also left-wing populist parties and movements has long become a pan-European and indeed global phenomenon and the fact that Germany is merely catching up with developments that are further advanced in many other countries within and beyond Europe.

A look at individual European countries reveals the limited effectiveness of national strategies in dealing with far-right parties: However different the strategies adopted towards these parties may be, the outcomes are remarkably similar. This is nowhere more evident than in a comparison between Germany and Austria. While the success of the AfD is a relatively recent phenomenon in Germany, modern right-wing populism was – in a sense – pioneered in Austria and therefore has a much longer track record of success. As early as in the first years of the 2000s, the first federal government formed by the ÖVP and FPÖ caused considerable controversy, particularly in Germany, and Austria found itself largely isolated in Europe for a time.

Coalitions to the right of centre are now commonplace in many European countries.

Today, almost a quarter of a century later, the German perspective on developments in Austria has shifted. Where a coalition between a centre-right and a right-wing populist party was still the exception 25 years ago, coalitions to the right of centre are now commonplace in many European countries. Germany remains different in this regard. While the metaphorical firewalls have gradually been dismantled across most of Europe, the CDU and CSU have thus far successfully resisted entering into cooperation with right-wing populists and have in so doing become the exception in Europe.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the differences between Germany's approach to the AfD and Austria's approach to the FPÖ can primarily be explained by differences between the parties themselves. Indeed, this is not the case. A comparative study commissioned by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Vienna concluded that the similarities between the AfD and the FPÖ far outweigh the differences: *Nicht gleich, aber sehr ähnlich* ("Not identical, but very similar") – such is the study's self-explanatory title.[4]

In all internal party conflicts in recent years, the more radical factions have prevailed in both the AfD and the FPÖ. Both are radical, anti-European far-right parties with an affinity for authoritarian governments and with personal links to far-right milieus. Where differences in programme or voter base do emerge, these differences are generally minor and can largely be explained by the fact that unlike the comparatively young AfD, the FPÖ has succeeded in establishing itself over the decades as a largely "normal" actor within Austria's party system.

This is where the truly significant difference between Austria's FPÖ and Germany's AfD lies: namely in the way each party is treated in society. While the AfD in Germany continues to be treated as a political pariah, the FPÖ in Austria has long become socially and politically acceptable. Despite rising support at the ballot box, particularly in eastern Germany, the AfD remains excluded from any participation in government. By contrast, the FPÖ is able to look back on several decades of participation in both regional and federal governments. Much of what still causes intense alarm in the German discourse surrounding the AfD has long since become normalised in Austria.

Nevertheless, however different Austria's approach to the FPÖ may be compared with Germany's approach to the AfD, the outcome is paradoxically similar and indeed sobering. In Austria, the normalisation of the FPÖ has ultimately been just as ineffective at achieving the desired outcome as has the exclusion of the AfD in Germany. On the contrary, despite diametrically opposed strategies in dealing with far-right competitors, the result in both cases is virtually identical: The AfD and the FPÖ are today more radical and more successful than ever.

Those who instead pin their hopes on hybrid approaches such as selective cooperation, the toleration of minority governments, or conditional inclusion are likely to be disappointed, as well. Thus far, none of these strategies has succeeded anywhere in Europe in producing a lasting and effective remedy against the success of right-wing populist and far-right parties.

What can be done?

As if the rise of far-right parties across Europe were not already cause for concern, there is much to suggest that it is a trend that will not easily be reversed. This is primarily because in many cases, voters of far-right parties are no longer protest voters. On the contrary, compared with parties of the political centre, voter volatility among AfD supporters, for example, is particularly low: Only 30 per cent state in surveys that they could imagine voting for a party other than the AfD. This means that among all parties represented in the Bundestag, the AfD has the largest core electorate.[5]

How difficult it may be to win back this potential for the political centre is suggested by two sociological bestsellers that examine the deeper causes behind the success of right-wing populist movements. In *Zerstörungslust*,[6] Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey analyse a development that they view as crucial to the success of right-wing populist movements worldwide: The authors argue that people socialised in democratic systems develop a desire to tear down liberal and democratic institutions when the promises of liberal modernity – namely social mobility, self-determination, and future prospects – are no longer fulfilled. Instead, frustration, fear of status loss, and nihilism come to dominate. This destructive attitude leads sections of the population to support actors and parties that seek to attack and undermine the existing democratic order.

A similar line of argument can be found in the book *Misstrauensgemeinschaften*[7] by Aladin El-Mafalaani, in which the author reveals that modern societies are increasingly held together not by shared values, but by shared distrust. Different groups – such as social milieus, generations, and cultural communities – develop strong internal cohesion but define themselves primarily through demarcation and suspicion

Far right, yet broadly acceptable: Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has so far presented herself as a constructive actor at the European and international level. Photo: © Frank Ossenbrink, Imago.

Eyes straight ahead: Spain's Partido Popular has demonstrated how a centre-right party can confidently put forward policy proposals on the issues that concern potential voters – without constantly looking over its shoulder to the right. Pictured: party leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo. Photo: © Europa Press, Imago.

towards others as well as towards state institutions. Distrust becomes the social glue of these communities, which grow increasingly entrenched and drift ever further away from the state and the majority society.

Across almost all of Europe, the political centre remains significantly stronger than the political fringes.

The situation is serious. But is it hopeless? Certainly not. Across almost all of Europe, the political centre remains significantly stronger than the political fringes – and in Germany, almost twice as strong. Moreover, even if the holy grail for successfully countering right-wing (and left-wing) populist movements has yet to be found, it is still possible to identify some promising approaches.

Striking similarities emerge upon examining Greece and Spain, for example – two European countries in which centre-right parties have recently been relatively successful in elections and have clearly outpaced competitors on the far right. Both Greece's Nea Dimokratia and Spain's Partido Popular seek to shape politics confidently from the centre. Neither party defines itself primarily through differentiation from or alignment with the far right; rather, both make a conscious effort to engage as little as possible with far-right competitors and to focus instead on their own programmatic identity and problem-solving capacity. At times, this can mean deliberately ignoring populists on the far right without ceding key issues such as illegal migration.

Another approach that urgently deserves a central place in the political debate is the regulation of social media. Alongside the printing press, the advent of radio and television, and the invention of the World Wide Web, the rise of social media is one of the great transformations that have not only

radically expanded access to the public sphere and accelerated the spread of knowledge and opinion, but also destabilised established structures of power and authority. Such transformations cannot occur without profound consequences, particularly in liberal democracies, where public discourse forms the nervous system of society. Regulatory measures such as the Digital Services Act adopted at the European level and restrictions to social media access for children and young people are therefore steps in the right direction, but they still fall far short of what is needed.

To get a sense of how algorithms increasingly dictate political discourse, it is worth looking at a recent Bertelsmann Foundation study on power dynamics in social media.[8] The study reveals significant distortions that cause almost two-thirds of all political content seen by young people on social media to originate from the political fringes, with almost 40 per cent coming from the AfD. One of the problematic aspects of social media is that it is almost impossible for outsiders to determine how these distortions come into being. All the more reason to push for greater transparency and regulation in this area. Otherwise, one might ask why different rules – or none at all – should apply on social media while political advertising elsewhere is strictly regulated and every second of airtime on television is counted in order to ensure a level playing field, for example.

Ultimately, however, what is needed more than anything else are political solutions that address the challenges that drive voters towards populists on the right (and left). This begins with solutions to the migration issue – something that lies at the heart of many debates. But it does not end there. Indeed, it is a recurring fallacy to claim that centre-right parties are playing the populists' game when they take up "their issues". In fact, the opposite is true: If parties of the centre leave those issues that concern the public to right-wing populists, this itself contributes significantly to the outcomes we are witnessing across Europe and beyond.

This situation does not mean that centre-right parties should model themselves on right-wing populists or adopt their framing and language. Instead, centre-right parties only have a chance of being successful in the future if they address the concerns of potential supporters while preserving a clear line of distinction from the populists to the right.

– translated from German –

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Crisis of Confidence and a Disoriented Centre

The Growing Success of Right-Wing Populists Is Exposing Democratic Deficits in Romania

Photo: © Vlad Bereholschi, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Romania is undergoing a profound political shift. The established parties of the PSD, the PNL, and the USR are losing trust on a massive scale, while the right-wing populist AUR is emerging as the dominant force. The success of the AUR is based on nationalist narratives, anti-system rhetoric, and skilful use of social media that breaks with traditional campaign patterns.

Polarisation has a strong sociological dimension. The AUR achieves its highest scores in rural regions and among less educated voters, while urban and academic milieus tend to support the PNL and USR. Age and gender differences further reinforce fragmentation, with the PSD performing particularly well among older voters.

A growing factor is the diaspora, which is becoming increasingly politically mobilised and often responds strongly to populist candidates in elections. The AUR's online campaigns reach this target group particularly effectively and underscore the strategic importance of digital platforms.

The political centre is facing a crisis of confidence. In order to curb the rise of radical forces, Romania needs transparent governance, visible reforms, and communication that conveys security, dignity, and credible prospects for the future. Without convincing answers, democratic erosion looms.

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For almost two decades, Europe has been living in crisis mode: a financial crisis, the pandemic, a war in the neighbourhood, energy and inflation shocks, as well as fears related to migration and technological acceleration. These ongoing crises have reshaped the political landscape: Traditional centrist parties are losing ground, while populist and radical forces are growing. Romania is following this pattern with some delay, but with similar dynamics.

Romania's austerity course in response to the 2008 financial crisis damaged trust in political elites because many people felt that the burdens were not distributed fairly across society. After 2020, the pandemic, inflation, and the war in Ukraine intensified social fatigue as well as the already-latent distrust of the "system" – a diffuse term referring to opaque power networks that are perceived as undermining a democratic order based on the separation of powers. The consequence: The Social Democrats (PSD)[1], the National Liberals (PNL; a member of the European People's Party), and the reform-oriented USR have lost substantial credibility, while the right-wing populist Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (Alliance for the Union of Romanians; AUR) and other radical parties have gained strength. In the parliamentary elections of 1 December 2024, the AUR became the dominant far-right force, winning 91 of 464 seats. Today, at the beginning of 2026, a grand centrist coalition governs under President Nicușor Dan and PNL Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan – theoretically an "expanded centre". However, polls have for some time placed the AUR clearly ahead, at around 40 per cent. Further, smaller far-right parties are adding to this trend.

Who are the right-wing populist players in Romania, and what is their strategy?

The largest party with a right-wing populist profile is the AUR. In 2025 polling, it hovered at around 40 per cent. Its candidate and party leader, George Simion, received 46.4 per cent in the second round of the presidential election in spring 2025 – after having received just under 41 per cent in the first round. Although Nicușor Dan ultimately clearly won, with 53.6 per cent, having secured only around 21 per cent in the first round,[2] Simion's strong lead in the initial vote illustrates the fragility of Romania's political situation. The presidential elections had to be completely re-run after the Constitutional Court annulled the election following the first round of voting in November 2024 due to allegations of electoral manipulation and distortion of equal opportunities of candidates, including through social networks and undeclared sources of funding.

The AUR presents itself as the party of the dissatisfied and disadvantaged, as an opponent of the established parties, and as a defender of traditional values. It describes itself as follows: "The party is new, but the struggle is old! The Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) was founded on 1 December 2019. We value family, fatherland, faith, and freedom. Are you tired of watching Romania's resources being plundered without restraint? Are you tired of seeing Romanians forced to seek work abroad? Are you tired of seeing everything we value about our country and our people trampled underfoot? Are you tired of choosing between 'bad' and 'very bad'? So are we. That is why we founded this party."[3]

Political scientists Sorina Soare and Claudiu Tufiș classify the party as follows: "The [AUR's] programme combines key elements of nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Without fundamentally questioning the legitimacy of the democratic constitutional order, the party directs its criticism at specific manifestations of liberal democracy. It defines 'the people' in populist-nativist terms and portrays foreign individuals and cultures as threats to the homogeneity of an organically conceived community."[4]

An independent "anti-system candidate", the previously little-known and initially underestimated Călin Georgescu also ran in the subsequently annulled first round of the presidential election in 2024.[5] His campaign combined anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives with elements inspired by the fascist Romanian Legionary movement[6] that were presented in spiritually mystical language, emphasising Romania's uniqueness due to its location in the Carpathians.

The AUR deploys similar narratives – albeit with a different tone. One element is the emphasis on the national dimension. On the most recent national holiday, 1 December 2025, party leader George Simion had his leadership confirmed at a party congress in Alba Iulia in northwestern Romania. He had travelled in a "March of Unity" to the city, where Transylvania had united with Romania on 1 December 1918 – an act that marked the founding of the modern Romanian state. Through this symbolism, Simion presented himself as a champion of the "true Romania" – a claim that Călin Georgescu also sought to appropriate with his own march in Alba Iulia on the same day.

Simion's appeal to national themes does not contradict narratives that glorify the communist past. As Stefan Baghiu writes, "[i]f you step out of the established middle-class spaces and socialize with the 45+ population in Romania's towns and villages, including factory workers, old ladies selling in the market, pensioners, and Roma on the outskirts of post-industrial cities, you encounter the same significant social reality: for them, the communist period meant a significantly better life than today".[7]

Many in the Romanian diaspora are receptive to messages emphasising its members' value and distinctiveness.

Particularly noteworthy is the AUR's attempt to address everything "Romanian" beyond the country's borders. The party advocates unification with the Republic of Moldova, where Romanian is also spoken. Above all, it targets the votes of the large Romanian diaspora, which – as the electoral support for Călin Georgescu illustrates – is in parts highly receptive to messages emphasising its members' value and distinctiveness as Romanians.

The AUR is not the only actor in the populist party landscape: Other parties with similar themes but with a much smaller role include S.O.S România, which attracted attention by showcasing itself theatrically in the European Parliament, where it has been represented since 2024. On 18 July 2024, MEP Diana Șoșoacă was expelled from the chamber during a plenary session after having disrupted the proceedings. Wearing a mock muzzle, she shouted phrases such as "You have killed people" and "I was elected by Romanians". Romania's Constitutional Court barred the MEP – classified as far-right and pro-Russian – from the presidential election scheduled for late November 2024 in a controversial ruling from October 2024. According to the Court, Șoșoacă's public statements demonstrated that she was incapable of upholding the oath of office to respect the constitution and protect democracy.[8]

A sociological map of party preferences

Opinion polls show that approval ratings for the right-wing populist AUR – as well as for other

parties – vary significantly depending on sociological background, as illustrated in Figure 1. A survey conducted by the Romanian research institute INSCOP in late October / early November 2025, for example, produced the following ranking across all respondents among Romania's major parties: AUR 38 per cent, PSD 19.5 per cent, PNL 14.6 per cent, and USR 12.3 per cent.

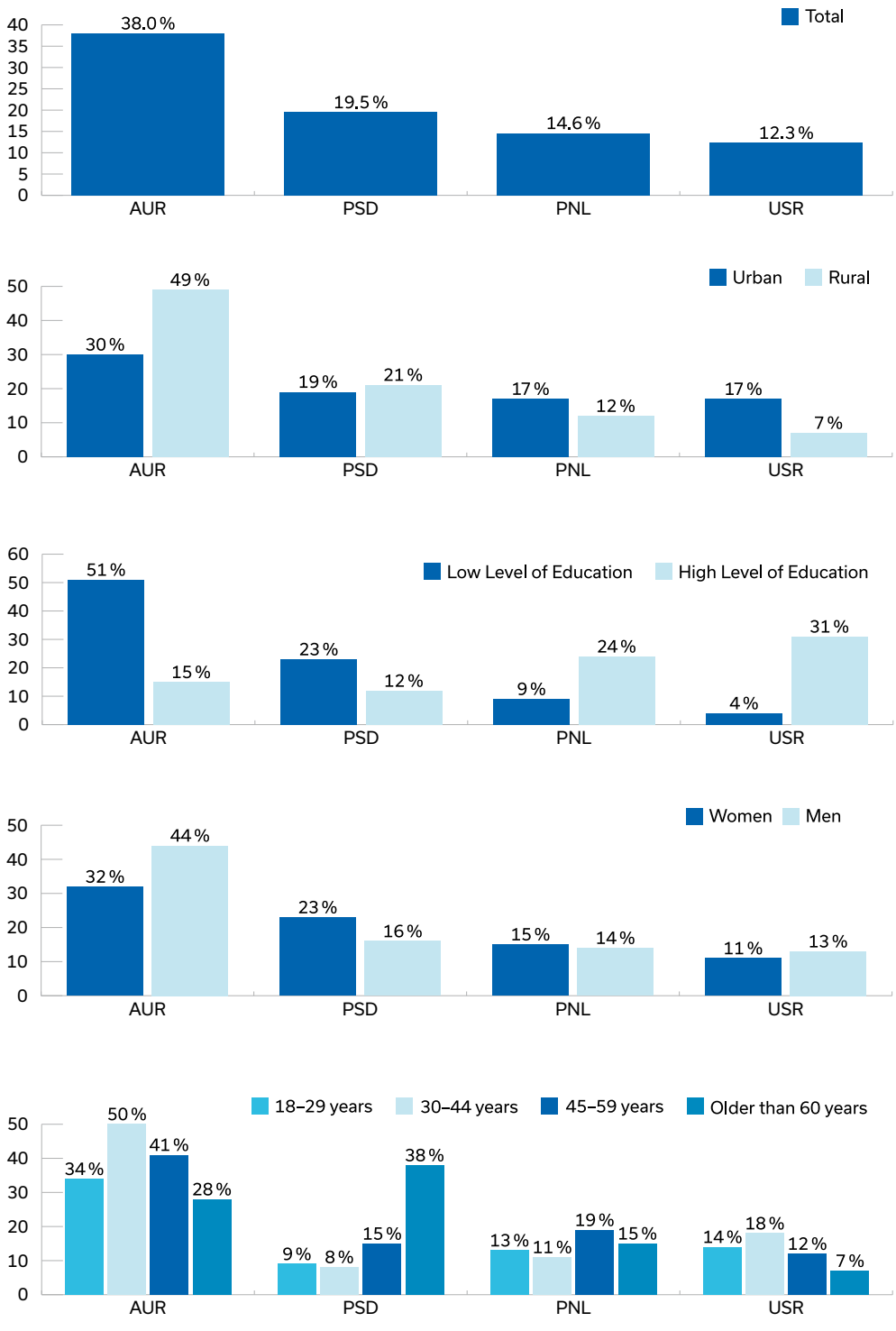
In rural areas, however, the AUR dominates, with 49 per cent, while in urban areas, it achieves 30 per cent.[9] The lower the level of education, the greater the inclination towards the AUR and the Social Democratic PSD. With rising levels of education, the national-liberal PNL and the reform-oriented USR gain support.[10] The AUR's strident rhetoric resonates most strongly with men. The PSD, by contrast, is chosen disproportionately often by women.[11] Age differences are also pronounced. Young people aged 18 to 29 are comparatively sceptical of the AUR, with a theoretical support level of "only" 34 per cent. The PSD reaches just nine per cent in this group. Among those aged 30 to 44, the AUR leads, with 50 per cent. The PSD scores eight per cent in this cohort – more than ten points below its overall result. This is a clear indication that the AUR is drawing heavily on the PSD electorate. Voters aged 45 to 59 roughly mirror the overall average. Among those aged 60 and above, the PSD clearly leads, with 38 per cent, while the AUR reaches only 28 per cent. Traditional conservative voters remain anchored in familiar positions. At the same time, the PSD faces a demographic outlook problem.[12]

The diaspora as an emerging democratic challenge

The Romanian diaspora poses a challenge of its own. In the subsequently annulled presidential election in autumn 2024, 821,135 voters from

Worst-case scenario avoided: In the runoff election for the Romanian presidency in May 2025, the moderate mayor of Bucharest, Nicușor Dan (left), prevailed against the right-wing populist George Simion (right), who had been ahead in the first round. Photo: © Alex Nicodim, Imago.

Fig. 1: Party preferences in Romania, autumn 2025



Source: own illustration based on INSCOP Research 2025, n. 9–12.
Note: Shown are all the parties that reached at least 10 per cent in the overall assessment.

abroad were registered,[13] with a majority supporting far-right politician Călin Georgescu. Six months later, interest in Romania's elections had increased markedly. The diaspora was mobilised in particular in the second round – that is, in the run-off between the initially leading George Simion (41 per cent) and the now-incumbent Nicușor Dan (21 per cent in the first round). Almost twice as many voters went to the polls.[14] Romanians in Hungary, Moldova, and other Central and Eastern European countries – as well as in Denmark, Portugal, and the Netherlands – voted for Dan, in some cases by a significant majority. Simion won the round in most countries of "old Europe" and in Norway.[15] In Germany, around 278,000 voters (68 per cent) with Romanian citizenship backed Simion – an even greater proportion than in the United Kingdom, where slightly fewer Romanians voted. Spain also ranks among the diaspora countries with a strong tilt towards Simion, albeit with lower overall numbers.

The strong diaspora swing towards Georgescu in 2024 appears to mark the beginning of a political "awakening", particularly among Romanians living elsewhere in Europe. Of roughly 11.64 million voters, around 1.64 million ballots cast in 2025 – that is, approximately 14.3 per cent – were based outside Romania.[16] Democratic parties would therefore be well advised to keep the diaspora firmly in view, especially in online campaigns. Romanian government delegations now regularly engage with diaspora representatives. It is also important to analyse which narratives resonate in which countries – and whether stereotypes about Romanians in host societies may potentially influence protest voting behaviour.[17] Here, the AUR has recognised its potential and is exploiting it skilfully. Social media transcends geographical boundaries and operates free from the physical limits of analogue campaigning.

The Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe[18] published an analysis of right-wing populist online campaigning in April 2025. In this analysis, the authors trace the effective intertwining of viral campaigns, membership recruitment, and campaign financing through the monetisation of online success: Politics is becoming a "social media spectacle", they write. "The traditional parties? They look lost, unable to adapt to a world where the rules of the game are being rewritten in real time."[19]

Political environment and the strategies of traditional parties

The protest tapped by the AUR and, for example, S.O.S. România, has not arisen in a vacuum. The financial and economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme income disparities, a deeply rooted sense of injustice, low levels of education and living standards – especially in rural areas – and – despite successful digital initiatives – comparatively weak digital literacy all form part of the breeding ground for uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Added to this is the persistent fear that Russia's war against Ukraine could spill over, fuelled by repeated drone incursions into Romanian airspace.

Democracy only began to gather momentum slowly after 1989.

The AUR also exploits another vulnerability in Romanian society: Like all intelligence services in totalitarian and authoritarian systems, the Securitate relied on control through the systematic cultivation of mistrust. The scars were not borne only by the dead, the imprisoned, and the tortured and their families; rather, surveillance and betrayal penetrated deeply into the most intimate spheres of family life.[20] This decades-long experience did not come to an abrupt and definitive end – as it did in eastern Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example. Well into the years after 1989/90 and even into the present, credible reports persist of state-backed actors entering private spaces simply to leave subtle signs – a chair placed on a table, an object appearing in a private car – all signalling: "We were here".

At the same time, trust in democratic institutions remains under considerable pressure – regardless

of educational background. Democracy only began to gather momentum slowly after 1989. The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, CNSAS) was not established until around 25 years ago – that is, more than one decade after the fall of the communist dictatorship. The old elites of the repressive Securitate apparatus – which had secured Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule until the 1989 revolution – thus had more than ten years to keep their dossiers hidden. To this day, the CNSAS continues to demand the transfer of files that have still not been fully handed over. In this sense, the early post-1989 phase of Romanian democracy might be described as a form of "managed democracy".

The current conflict over pensions – coupled with major dysfunctions and corruption in the justice system – is compounded by paralysis within parts of the governing coalition and by the rivalry between the president and prime minister – popularly described as a "war of the palaces".

Under Sorin Grindeanu, who was confirmed as party leader on 7 November 2025, the PSD appears to have opted to mimic the AUR's criticism of the government and the "system parties". Grindeanu has repeatedly flirted publicly with the idea of breaking up the current moderate coalition of which the PSD is a part. The motive is clear: It is primarily PSD voters who are defecting to the AUR. The "independent" candidate for mayor of Bucharest backed by the AUR – talk show host Anca Alexandrescu, who ran for the "Justice for Bucharest" alliance – also has a long track record of working with the PSD at multiple levels. The AUR is therefore the most direct threat to the PSD – and might even replace it. There is little evidence that the Social Democrats have developed an effective, self-defined strategy to counter this challenge. At the same time, the AUR has made clear that it is not available for a coalition with the PSD.

After having been co-founded by today's President Nicușor Dan, the USR set out to tackle what it views as Romania's core governance problems: corruption, over-bureaucratisation, and excessive state interference, often associated with the entrenched networks of the PSD and PNL. At the European level, the USR belongs to the Renew group. It has established itself primarily among the well-educated urban middle classes but has struggled to reach broader voter segments, whether through its fact-based messaging or via its overall political style. Depending on the poll, the USR currently stands at just over ten per cent – with a tendency to shrink rather than grow. It is part of the governing coalition. The fact that the Romanian defence minister whom the party nominated – Ionuț Moșteanu – was forced to resign in late November 2025 after false information about his university degree was found in his CV was a bitter blow to a party that claims to be "without criminals". This blend of a technocratic approach and the loss of personal trust is weighing heavily on the USR.

Under its leader, Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, the PNL currently presents itself as a "clean-up party". In order to keep the budget deficit under control, it is imposing austerity measures on the public. Lower pay is looming over public-sector employees, and VAT was raised from 19 to 21 per cent on 1 August 2025.[21] Property tax and vehicle tax have risen by up to 70 per cent since January 2026. The cap on electricity prices was lifted in mid-2025, and the cap on gas prices was due to expire at the end of March 2026, thereby relieving the state budget by several billion lei. The current dispute over pensions for members of the judiciary is less about economics than about symbolism. It is not only lower-income groups who are expected to contribute to saving. What is missing is a narrative of solidarity and a positive promise for the future. Ilie Bolojan thus comes across more as a decisive manager than as an empathetic communicator.

President Dan is also not providing a better "packaging" of government policy. His personal credibility is suffering due to his need to repeatedly negotiate compromises with coalition partners who pull in different directions.[22] Without a determined and cohesive government, the AUR

Decisive manager rather than empathetic communicator: Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan is seen in Parliament, in September 2025. Photo: © Lucian Alecu, Imago.

has ample opportunities to exploit public unease for its own political purposes.

The quality of governance determines credibility.

Outlook and need for action

The political centre in Romania is under pressure, as is a democracy that appears vulnerable. The core question is no longer whether the centre is losing support, but whether it can regain it at all. A look at other European countries such as the Netherlands indicates that the centre can recover when it becomes clear that it is not merely concerned with holding on to power. A number of conditions are key here.

First, the quality of governance determines credibility. Transparency, reliability, and visible results matter: tangible progress on infrastructure projects, investment in the energy sector, serious education reforms, and an end to budgetary waste. A sound development plan through to the 2028 election year that is both clearly communicated and well structured could build trust if priorities are bundled, goals are realistic and measurable, and commitments are stated in verifiable terms.

Second, the centre should take people's fears and emotions seriously and address them proactively. Populist success cannot be explained solely by disinformation or manipulation; rather, it is rooted in real-life experience: material insecurity, social inequality, emigration, questions of identity, and the feeling of not being heard politically. By contrast, the

political centre rarely communicates openly in Romania, sometimes ignoring issues that are painful for the population, and frequently resorting to technocratic clichés and lacking empathy: about resilience funds, the number of new motorway kilometres, percentages of the budget deficit, and tax rates. These issues are important, but they only indirectly impact on people's day-to-day lives. Anyone who wants to regain trust must speak about dignity, security, and the future: secure jobs, affordable energy, functioning schools, and the prospect that effort will pay off. Politics is not only about administration: Indeed, it is also about meaning, fostering a sense of belonging, and working together for a "better Romania".

Ultimately, the country needs renewal rather than cartel politics. Grand coalitions can guarantee stability, but they bear an inherent risk: If they look like a power pact among established parties, which has been Romania's experience in recent years, they feed precisely the anti-establishment narratives from which radical forces benefit. In Romania, this risk is particularly pronounced because the current coalition – and each of its member parties – has thus far made little effort to bring forward new faces, independent experts, or visible actors from civil society, business, or the diaspora. In so doing, these actors reinforce the narrative of a closed political system that simply administers itself. For parties such as the AUR, which portrays itself as the voice of the "excluded", this is a strategic gift.

Romania therefore stands at a crossroads. Either the grand coalition can harden into a "club of the old parties", thereby accelerating the further rise of the AUR and other protest forces, or it can use its current position of power to bring about a credible restart. In order to do so, democratic parties must renew themselves in terms of personnel and practise internal party democracy rather than relying on informal power structures. Government representatives should address emotions and communicate with empathy. They need to name concerns, hardships, and shortcomings while offering a credible perspective on security, respect, and national dignity. This should be embedded in a narrative that is both patriotic and pro-European – that is, one that does not stop at "Brussels" but that instead shows that Romania is transforming itself and helping to shape Europe.

Pressure in Romania is further intensified by the deftly exploited manipulative mechanisms of the major online communication platforms. As a strategically vital country on NATO's eastern flank with a long border with Ukraine and access to the Black Sea, Romania is very much in the sights of those who oppose European freedom.

Alongside domestic political answers, the country additionally needs a broader public debate about how the terror of the Securitate has shaped people's basic outlook and the pervasive mistrust that runs through all areas of society. This makes it essential to establish – or improve – the transparency of state action. All democratic parties should initiate processes that may be uncomfortable even for themselves. The press and civil society must insist on this. In Germany, it was the Federal Constitutional Court that repeatedly admonished the parties and helped make Germany one of the most transparent countries in terms of party financing. However, Romania's judicial bodies are currently in a deep crisis themselves and cannot provide such an impetus.

In short, Romania is experiencing a multiple crisis of confidence. Yet mistrust is the invisible enemy of freedom and democracy. Elections are the granting of trust for a limited period. Institutionalised checks and balances create deliberate tensions that are resolved not least through transparent procedures, thereby building trust in institutions. Without trust, democracy does not stand a chance.

– translated from German –

1 PSD: Partidul Social Democrat, a member of the European socialist party family; PNL: Partidul Național Liberal, a member of the EPP; USR: Uniunea Salvați România (Save Romania Union), part of Renew Europe; AUR: Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), affiliated at the European level with the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR).
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6 The Legionary Movement (also known as the Iron Guard) was an ultranationalist, fascist, and strongly antisemitic organisation active in Romania between the 1920s and early 1940s. It combined Orthodox mysticism with paramilitary violence and at times played a significant political role.
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19 Ibid.
20 Mix, Pia 2024: Wie rumäniendeutsche Schriftsteller und Wissenschaftler von der Securitate bespitzelt wurden, Siebenbürgische Zeitung, 18 May 2024, in: https://ogy.de/mfgy [11 Feb 2026].
21 EY 2025: Romanian tax changes introduced by new fiscal and budgetary measures, 30 Jul 2025, in: https://ogy.de/dmyn [5 Feb 2026].
22 Although the president is constitutionally responsible primarily for foreign policy and performs the role of commander-in-chief of the armed forces in addition to being required to maintain party-political neutrality, the public associate his directly legitimised mandate with the expectation of active, visible leadership. As a directly elected head of state, he is seen not only as the guardian of institutional balance, but also as an operational actor who engages in key political processes and assumes responsibility beyond ceremonial functions.

Polarisation, Populism, Pragmatism

Latin America's Party Landscape Shifts to the Right

Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Latin America is currently undergoing a political shift to the right. Following the defeat of several left-wing governments, conservative and right-wing populist forces have dominated the region since 2025. This development follows the "pink tide" of the 2000s and is fuelled by growing dissatisfaction with left-wing incumbents as well as by a new US policy approach.

Of the 15 democracies examined here, nine have changed political direction since 2022, mostly from left to right. Figures such as Javier Milei in Argentina and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador embody the new political mood with their populist strategies, while moderate conservatives such as Luis Abinader in the Dominican Republic prioritise stability and pragmatism.

What these new governments share is a focus on security, economic reform, and the rejection of left-wing networks. Political polarisation and personalisation are increasing, while traditional centrist parties are losing influence and facing strategic dilemmas.

Young voters and social media are further accelerating the shift to the right. Whether this turn will bring lasting improvements or is merely another swing of the pendulum will depend on the new leaders' governing capacity and respect for democratic principles.

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On 3 January 2026, the US government ended the rule of dictator Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela with a military strike. This marked the symbolic beginning of the end of the decades-long "socialism of the 21st century", which had been supported by parts of the international left, though the dictatorship itself – now without Maduro – continues to exist. However, the end of the dominance of left-leaning governments in Latin America has been emerging for some time and is now gaining additional momentum as a result of the Trump administration's new Latin America policy. In numerous countries, right-wing populist, libertarian, conservative, or centre-right candidates have replaced previously governing left-wing presidents or secured re-election. This development follows the so-called "pink tide" of the 2000s and 2010s, during which moderate left and left-populist governments and left-wing dictatorships set the tone, leaving a lasting mark on the continent. Their networks still exist and continue to hold power in Mexico and Brazil, which are by far the most important countries in Latin America. However, new political leaders from a variety of ideological backgrounds are increasingly stepping onto the stage and are not only resonating with many voters – especially younger ones – but also making traditional political elites look outdated. Consequently, the defeat of left-wing governments does not necessarily benefit moderate parties on the centre-right. Indeed, these parties are struggling with how to position themselves between long-established socialist rivals and new political competitors on the right without diluting their own political identities.

Election results since 2022: The right is en vogue

Of the 15 Latin American democracies under consideration here, nine countries have changed political direction since 2022 – in six cases, from left to right (i.e. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama), and in three cases, from right to left (i.e. Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay). Elections in these latter three countries were closely contested, however. In the case of Brazil and Colombia, a structural voter majority to the right of centre can even be assumed. The remaining countries recorded no shift in direction: Mexico and the Dominican Republic maintained a left-wing and a moderately right-wing government, respectively. In Paraguay, the long-standing dominance of the conservative Colorado Party continued. In Ecuador, business-friendly Daniel Noboa received a clear mandate for another term, while El Salvador confirmed its authoritarian incumbent, Nayib Bukele. Overall, conservative and right-wing forces have numerically dominated Latin America's political leadership since 2025 for the first time in many years.

According to the Chilean pollsters at Latinobarómetro, the proportion of Latin Americans who identify as belonging to the (centre-)right has been higher since 2024 than at any point in more than two decades. Political scientists speak of a possible "conservative turn" of historic proportions that could shape a new generation – comparable with earlier regional shifts such as the military dictatorships of the 1970s, the wave of democratisation in the 1980s, the market-oriented reforms of the 1990s, and the left-leaning "pink tide" that began just over 20 years ago.[1] Conservative and right-wing populist candidates are considered strong contenders in the 2026 elections in Peru, Colombia, and Brazil, while in Costa Rica, a candidate of this type has already prevailed. If current patterns continue, a majority of right-leaning governments could emerge in the coming years.

Fig. 1: Elections (since 2022) in Latin America and the Caribbean (population > 1 million)

Country	Year	Elected president (party)	Orientation	Political shift?
Argentina	2023	Javier Milei (La Libertad Avanza)	Right-libertarian populist	**Yes** (from centre-left to right; Peronists voted out)
Bolivia	2025	Rodrigo Paz (PDC)	Centre-right – Christian democratic, market-friendly	**Yes** (end of ~ 20 years of MAS left-wing rule)
Brazil	2022	Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (PT)	Left-wing – social democratic	**Yes** (from right (Bolsonaro) to left)
Chile	2025	José Antonio Kast (Partido Republicano)	Right – national conservative	**Yes** (from centre-left (Boric) to right)
Colombia	2022	Gustavo Petro (Pacto Histórico)	Left – progressive left	**Yes** (from right (Duque) to left)
Costa Rica	2022	Rodrigo Chaves (PPSD)	Right – populist outsider	**Yes** (from centre-left to right); successor Laura Fernández elected in 2026, also right-wing populist
Dominican Republic	2024	Luis Abinader (PRM)	Centre-right – moderate	**No** (continuity; right-wing government since 2020)
Ecuador	2023	Daniel Noboa (ADN)	Centre-right – conservative market-liberal	**No** (continuity of right-wing government; rejection of left-wing Correa camp)
El Salvador	2024	Nayib Bukele (Nuevas Ideas)	Right-authoritarian populist	**No** (continuity; Bukele president since 2019, confirmed in 2024 with ~ 85 %)
Guatemala	2023	Bernardo Arévalo (Semilla)	Centre-left – reformist	**Yes** (from right (Giammattei) to centre-left)
Honduras	2025	Nasry Asfura (PNH)	Right – conservative, traditional	**Yes** (from left (Xiomara Castro) to right)
Mexico	2024	Claudia Sheinbaum (Morena)	Left – left-national, populist	**No** (continuity after AMLO, took office Dec 2024)
Panama	2024	José Raúl Mulino (RM)	Right – conservative	**Yes** (from centre-left (PRD) to right)
Paraguay	2023	Santiago Peña (Colorado)	Right – traditional, conservative	**No** (continuity: Colorado Party remains in power)
Peru	–	José María Balcázar (transitional government since Dec 2022)	–	(Election postponed to 2026; left-wing president elected in 2021, removed in 2022)
Uruguay	2024	Yamandú Orsi (Frente Amplio)	Centre-left – moderate, social democratic	**Yes** (from centre-right to centre-left)

Note: Not included in this overview are Haiti (due to ongoing instability) as well as the authoritarian states (left-wing dictatorial, no free elections) Venezuela (de facto Delcy Rodríguez), Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega) and Cuba (Miguel Díaz-Canel).

However, Latin America remains a "pendulum continent". Voters frequently punish incumbent governments if they are perceived to have failed, regardless as to their ideological orientation. In a sense, the protest voter is the strongest political force in the region. As Chilean analyst Jorge Sahd puts it, "The desire for change remains Latin America's largest party".[2] Many of the shifts in power cited above are the result not necessarily only of proactive support for the right, but also of protest votes against disappointing left-wing incumbents.

The choice of the individual candidate is particularly important in Latin America.

The spectrum of the new right: From moderate conservatives to radical populists

In Latin America, politics is heavily focused on individual leaders; thus, the choice of an individual candidate is particularly important. Current presidents to the right of centre represent a broad range of ideologies and styles, from moderate to radical.

One of the best-known figures among the new generation of Latin American leaders is Javier Milei, a libertarian economist without a traditional party base. With striking slogans and eccentric appearances – wielding a chainsaw, for example – he has channelled the anger of many Argentines. Milei stabilised an economy weakened by years of left-wing rule and subsequently also won parliamentary elections. Despite his unconventional and sometimes-abrasive style, he avoids nationalist and anti-migration rhetoric and instead calls for a radical reduction in state intervention, which impedes his categorisation as a classical right-wing populist.

By contrast, Nayib Bukele – El Salvador's self-styled "coolest dictator in the world"[3] – seeks to consolidate as much power as possible in his own hands. He is widely known across the region for his hard stance against criminal gangs and is extremely popular among many Latin Americans, skilfully cultivating the image of a self-made popular hero – primarily through social media, where his following is larger than El Salvador's population. Evidence of Bukele's own contacts with criminal gangs and his disregard for human rights has not diminished his support. Indeed, for many followers, results matter above all – specifically improved public security, even at the expense of democratic freedoms.

Costa Rica's outgoing president, Rodrigo Chaves, belongs to the same group of new populists, and his like-minded successor, Laura Fernández, is expected to continue Chaves's political legacy following a landslide victory. A highly educated former World Bank manager, Chaves disrupted the country's party landscape in 2022 by injecting populist rhetoric into an otherwise-restrained campaign and winning as an outsider. His economic policy is conservative, while rhetorically, he seeks proximity to "ordinary people", for example, by deliberately adopting a provincial accent. At the same time, he has repeatedly attacked democratic institutions during his presidency despite their solid reputation. With his political protégé Fernández soon to take office, right-wing populist Chaves is likely to retain significant influence over Costa Rican government policy.

Chile's recently elected President José Antonio Kast is not a political newcomer, but as a hardliner on internal security and migration, he was able to overtake traditional right-wing parties with the new Republican Party. Unlike moderate centre-right parties, he did not distance himself from the Chilean dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet; on the contrary, he provocatively expressed sympathy with it, dominating the headlines with this taboo-breaking stance.

What these figures share is a people-focused rhetoric, sharp attacks on established parties, and media-savvy provocations – preferably via social media. While their substantive positions vary, they are commonly described as populists. Their success indicates that a significant share

of the electorate are not afraid of radical alternatives and that these politicians have found ways of mobilising this potential.

The success of moderate conservatives reveals that the shift to the right is not solely an expression of anger and protest.

Alongside them, moderate conservatives have also achieved electoral success, emphasising continuity and professionalism, with the Dominican Republic's President Luis Abinader being a prime example. The businessman and moderate reformer replaced a corruption-plagued left-wing government in 2020 and was confirmed in office in 2024 based on an economically liberal yet socially balanced record. Similarly, Ecuador's economically liberal President Daniel Noboa was confirmed in office in 2025 after having previously served as interim president. Seen as pragmatic rather than ideological, he has pursued a technocratic course in addressing the security crisis. After losing a referendum in autumn 2025, he moved away from his populist refusal to cooperate with traditional elites and has since worked more closely with other centre-right forces. Paraguay's President Santiago Peña also belongs to the group of conservative politicians associated with market economics, stability, and continuity, thereby continuing the longstanding policies of the dominant Colorado Party. However, Peña has faced criticism beyond Paraguay due to weak anti-corruption efforts and his political dependence on his controversial predecessor Horacio Cartes. Bolivia's newly elected President Rodrigo Paz likewise fits the pattern of moderate conservative leadership: Although he ran on the ticket of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in 2025, Paz is not a traditional party insider and primarily benefited from public desire for historic change after nearly twenty years of socialist MAS governments.

Moderate in both substance and style, these conservatives differ clearly from the more strident populists by emphasising institutional solutions, seeking broad social consensus, and standing for economic expertise with a free-market approach. Their success reveals that the shift to the right is not solely an expression of anger and protest; rather, it is also driven by a desire for pragmatic leadership and predictability.

Shared features of right-leaning presidents: Security, economic growth, and a rejection of socialism

Despite their differences, whether moderate or radical, conservative and right-wing populist presidents are perceived by voters as being highly competent in similar policy areas. First and foremost, they stand for law and order. Tough measures against crime, corruption, and chaos have been promised by the winning candidates in almost every campaign. These presidents are also united by a market-oriented outlook that undoubtedly resonates particularly with the private sector but that can additionally offer hope of a better life through economic prosperity to voters who are not themselves entrepreneurs. Finally, the new right present themselves as defenders of conservative social values (family, religion, and national identity) against progressive cultural agendas of which many voters are tired. Kast, for example, waged a culture war against abortion and "gender ideology", while even an unideological pragmatist such as Bukele positions himself as an anti-woke role model in the regional debate.

Beyond these policy areas, another shared characteristic is evident: Pragmatism outweighs dogmatism. After decades in which right-wing politics was often equated with a neoliberal, elite-driven agenda and with cuts to social provision, many representatives of the new right now present themselves as being deliberately people-oriented and flexible, thereby showing that they have learned from mistakes made by conservatives in the past. One example is that these representatives seek to avoid being perceived as being cold-hearted towards the poor. "The right

After almost 20 years: With the election of the moderate conservative Rodrigo Paz, the long rule of the Movimiento al Socialismo came to an end in Bolivia in 2025. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

used to be seen as heartless – that's no longer the case", comments Brian Winter, editor-in-chief of Americas Quarterly. "The left may still enjoy a credibility advantage on social justice, but it is not what it once was".[4]

Right-wing parties have found their lowest common denominator in their uncompromising stance towards the traditional left. In their respective countries, they agree on the goal of breaking the dominance of the parties of the "Pink Galaxy"[5] – that is, networks of parties on the subcontinent ranging from social democratic to left-authoritarian that were organised and coordinated through the Foro de São Paulo and the Grupo de Puebla. In addition to the left-wing dictatorships in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, the only prominent representative of the moderate left still in office is Brazil's 80-year-old Lula da Silva. Other current left-wing presidents who might be associated with this network – such as Yamandú Orsi in Uruguay and Gustavo Petro in Colombia – are nowhere near as politically influential. As such, the real political and social momentum for change in Latin America no longer comes from the left as it once did, but from the right.

The dilemma facing centrist parties: Distance or rapprochement?

The stark polarisation between left and right in recent years has pushed above all the moderate, traditional parties of the centre and centre-right onto the defensive. Many of these parties – such as long-established Christian democratic and conservative parties that were once able to appeal to large segments of society – have lost visibility in election campaigns and performed poorly as a result because they have been unable to offer either radical change or an appealing vision capable of matching that of the noisier populists. These moderate forces face the challenge of how to deal with populist outsiders without losing their own profile. Latin America's centre-right parties are pursuing a range of different strategies in order to adapt to the new political realities.

One prominent example is Brazil, where the party landscape has become increasingly polarised into two camps. Caught between a strong left-wing bloc led by President Lula da Silva and a right-nationalist camp centred on Jair Bolsonaro, moderate parties have for years been struggling

internally and with one another to find the right course and are constantly testing how best to position themselves between the two poles. The 2026 election year promises to be highly competitive. Despite his advanced age, the left's figurehead, Lula da Silva, is running again in 2026, while Jair Bolsonaro's son Flávio has also thrown his hat into the ring. While Flávio does not command the same following as his father, a run-off place as the strongest representative of a divided right remains possible. This means that Brazil could once again face an electoral scenario in which a structural voter majority exists to the right of centre – as local[6] and regional[7] results suggest – while the national government is led by the left.

In Argentina and Chile, moderate conservative parties have chosen a path of cooperation with their radical competitors. There are differences in tone and style, but also a substantial policy overlap along with the common goal of bringing the left-wing bloc to an end at the ballot box. Mainstream parties such as Propuesta Republicana (PRO) in Argentina along with Renovación Nacional and Unión Demócrata Independiente in Chile have paid a high price for the success of this cooperation. They have lost votes and a clear-cut profile, while in the case of PRO, more and more leading figures have drifted towards Milei's party, La Libertad Avanza. Tactically, they now find themselves in an awkward position: If the government performs well, they will continue to lose voters to the president's party, whereas if the president fails, voters will punish them along with the president.

In the 2025 elections in Honduras, Bolivia, and Ecuador, moderate conservatives emerged as winners. In all three cases, voters delivered a clear rejection of left-wing political projects in the mould of "socialism of the 21st century". Nevertheless, there were differences compared

Ambassadors against socialist experiments: The millions of exiles from Venezuela currently living in other countries of Latin America often act there as a powerful voice against left-wing policy approaches.
Photo: © ZUMA Press Wire, Imago.

with traditional mainstream parties and election campaigns in other countries. It was not until 2021 that Daniel Noboa founded the Acción Democrática Nacional party in Ecuador: With a massive online campaign that often pushed the boundaries of democratic decency, the ADN responded to the populist attacks of socialist challenger Luisa González. In Bolivia, Rodrigo Paz unexpectedly prevailed in the run-off. He campaigned for a "capitalism for all" with social safeguards, but a deciding factor in his victory was his campaign partner, Edman "Capitán" Lara[8]: A former police captain, Lara promised to tackle crime using tough rhetoric and a well-orchestrated social media campaign.

Mexican voters viewed the "grand centre" alliance as an act of desperation.

Mexico does not fit the common pattern, for the left-populist Movimiento de Renovación Nacional (Morena) not only won the 2018 elections with presidential candidate López Obrador, but also further consolidated itself as a strong left-wing force with Claudia Sheinbaum's victory in 2024. Unlike in the rest of Latin America, the centre-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) entered an electoral alliance in 2024 with its social democratic rival, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). They fielded a businesswoman of indigenous background, Xóchitl Gálvez, in the hope that a female candidate who is closely connected to ordinary citizens would bring fresh momentum to the campaign. It was a resounding failure. Voters' distrust in the established "old parties" was too great: They viewed the "grand centre" alliance of the former rivals PRI and PAN not as a solution, but rather as an act of desperation. Since the rise of Morena, numerous party defections have followed, with the PRI losing far more than the PAN.

As in Europe, the central problem for mainstream parties lies in the strategic question of rapprochement or distancing – both in forming electoral alliances and in political communication, particularly when adopting populist elements. Rapprochement can secure power in the short term but carries the risk of a loss of one's own profile and an erosion of one's identity. Cooperation with radical forces may have brought down the left, as in Argentina and Chile, but it has marginalised the moderate partners. By contrast, distancing preserves credibility but carries the risk of political irrelevance. Alliances with political adversaries – as in Mexico – are not a viable solution, either. Adopting populist styles of mobilisation – such as aggressive rhetoric and social media campaigns – may increase visibility but undermines the normative foundations of moderate parties. The challenge is to develop an attractive, independent vision of reform and stability grounded in democratic principles that is perceived neither as outdated or ineffective nor as a copy of populist extremes. If traditional parties reduce themselves to the role of mere majority-makers for radical forces, they will ultimately make themselves redundant. The same applies if they fail to adapt to the new spirit of the times – particularly in candidate selection and political communication. In this context, it will be worth watching the performance of right-wing populist outsider and self-styled "celebrity lawyer" Abelardo de la Espriella in Colombia. In the upcoming campaign, he is positioning himself against both the traditional right and the unsuccessful incumbent left, seeking to draw votes from both camps.

The prevailing mood is shifting rightwards – Politically volatile and unburdened by taboos

One striking feature of the recent political shift is the role of first-time and younger voters. In many Latin American countries, the younger generation has shown no hesitation in supporting right-wing or anti-establishment candidates. On the contrary: In some cases, young voters even form the largest support base for these politicians. This situation points to a shift in the political mood: The progressive-left ideal of renewal that prevailed ten or 15 years ago has lost its appeal to many young people; instead, they are now more open to previously untested, sometimes-taboo-breaking solutions. This trend

was confirmed by a survey conducted in November 2025 by AtlasIntel and Bloomberg in Brazil, Latin America's most populous country. According to the survey, more than half of those under 40 place themselves politically on the right or centre-right, while older cohorts lean slightly to the left.[9] Many do not define themselves primarily by ideology but want tangible improvements in everyday issues such as employment, security, and the cost of living. A key background factor here is that young Latin Americans have no direct memory of right-wing military dictatorships, including the emotionally charged democratic transition of the 1980s. Instead, they have witnessed numerous corruption scandals, economic collapse, and often also social stagnation, all of which have largely occurred under established, mostly left-wing governing parties. This situation has led to a different political socialisation of the younger generation. Trust in traditional institutions and parties has been deeply shaken, thereby making anti-establishment rhetoric by political outsiders more persuasive. Social media plays a key role in mobilising volatile voter groups, especially young people. Traditional campaign methods are receding, while political success now increasingly depends on mastering digital platforms: namely emotionally charged, easily digestible messages that capture the quickly evolving *zeitgeist* and that are amplified by algorithms. Regardless of their political orientation, the winners of recent elections have all understood and applied this dynamic better than their more sluggish opponents.

The new right-leaning governments calculate that proximity to the US president offers more opportunities than risks.

The right-leaning mood is also being reinforced by a new US policy towards Latin America. All Latin American governments to the right of centre share a desire for a positive relationship with the current US administration. This is hardly surprising given that Washington recently announced its intent to actively support like-minded political forces in the Western Hemisphere, to expand trade relations, and to stabilise Latin American countries in line with its own interests. This intent has already become clear in two cases: During recent parliamentary elections in Argentina and the presidential elections in Honduras, Donald Trump publicly expressed a preferred outcome and threatened consequences if voters failed to follow his call. Despite concerns about the confrontational style of the US president, the new right-leaning governments are reacting pragmatically: They have determined that proximity offers more opportunities than risks. Fears of a possible end to the multilateral order are giving way both to a results-oriented approach and to shared market-oriented goals. This situation is also reflected in surveys: According to the Mexican polling institute Áltica, a majority of people in the nine surveyed Latin American countries support the US military strike in Venezuela and the arrest of dictator Maduro.[10] This is not without reason: Indeed, millions of Venezuelans who have been forced to flee hunger, repression, and a lack of prospects have recounted in host countries across the region the disastrous consequences of socialist experiments. Their dramatic fate has repeatedly been cited by right-of-centre politicians as clear evidence warning against left-wing policies. At the same time, even moderate figures on the left have hesitated to condemn the regime in Caracas, thereby undermining their own credibility when speaking about democracy, human rights, and the achievements of left-wing policies.

Latin America has recently experienced a noticeable shift to the right. In any case, the political discourse has shifted: Conservative buzzwords such as freedom, security, and order are once again dominant, whereas progressive terms such as justice, inclusion, and participation previously prevailed. Fuelled by disappointment with the left, whose policies have often contributed to crises themselves, space is opening up for new actors – from radical libertarians and conservatives focused on traditional values to moderate

technocrats. They now have the opportunity to bring about a lasting political shift in Latin America and to overcome the dominance of an ideologically exhausted left. Whether this rightward shift will bring lasting improvements in governance or remain just another episode in the subcontinent's historical pendulum will depend on how effectively the new governments deliver – and on how strongly they uphold democratic principles. Against this backdrop, traditional centre-right parties should proactively defend the democratic constitutional order not only out of conviction, but also in order to remain politically relevant.

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Polarisation and the Political Centre in Japan

How the Liberal Democratic Party Staged Its Comeback

Photo: © Zuma Press Wire, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Long regarded by many Japanese as the country's "natural party of government", the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suffered significant losses in the 2024/2025 elections, primarily losing ground to parties on the right of the political spectrum.

In the snap lower house election of February 2026, however, the LDP achieved the best result in its 70-year history: With a two-thirds majority, it will now fill over half of the seats on all parliamentary committees.

The election of right-conservative Sanae Takaichi as LDP leader and prime minister in autumn 2025 was controversial and not without risk, as was the formation of a centre-right coalition with the Japan Innovation Party. However, the election victory vindicated both the party and Takaichi.

The state of the economy was the central issue in the most recent elections. With reform pledges and a massive stimulus package, Takaichi appealed to the preferences of a majority of voters, as did her restrictive positions on immigration.

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If Japan's best-known parties were arranged from far left to far right and a line were drawn through the middle of the party landscape, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), Reiwa Shinsengumi ("Beautiful Harmony"), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) would fall to the left of this line, while Kōmeitō ("Justice Party") would mark the centre-left and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) the centre-right. Further to the right would follow the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai; JIP), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and Sanseitō ("Party of Political Participation"). On the far right of this scale would be the Conservative Party of Japan (CPJ). However, the CDP and Kōmeitō are now only represented as independent parties in the upper house (*Sangiin*, or House of Councillors); in the lower house (*Shūgiin*, or House of Representatives), they merged in January to form the Centrist Reform Alliance (CRA).

The party-landscape in Japan (Excerpt)

Left-wing

- JCP (Japanese Communist Party)
- Reiwa Shinsengumi ("Beautiful Harmony")
- SDP (Social Democratic Party)
- CDP (Constitutional Democratic Party) — CRA
- Kōmeitō ("Justice Party") — CRA

Centre

- DPP (Democratic Party for the People)
- JIP (Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai))
- LDP (Liberal Democratic Party)
- Sanseitō ("Party of Political Participation")
- CPJ (Conservative Party of Japan)

Right-wing

While Edo Naito argues in the Japan Times that terms such as "liberal", "conservative", and "populist" have a "completely different meaning" in Japan than elsewhere,[1] the left–right spectrum proposed by Edelman will suffice for the purposes of the present analysis.[2] Moreover, this article does not examine all the parties mentioned above, instead focusing on selected parties to the right of centre, in particular the LDP.

On 8 February 2026, the LDP achieved what hardly anyone had expected. In the snap lower house election, it secured the best result in its 70-year history: The governing party won 316 of the 465 seats, increasing its representation in the powerful parliamentary chamber by 125 seats. Even without its coalition partner, the JIP, it thus commands a two-thirds majority and fills over half the seats on all 17 standing committees in the lower house. How was this possible given that the LDP had been mired in a deep crisis for two years?

A major party-funding scandal shook the Liberal Democrats at the end of 2023, and in summer 2024, highly unpopular Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced that he would not seek re-election. Under his successor, Shigeru Ishiba, the LDP and its then–coalition partner Kōmeitō lost their majority in the subsequent lower house election in October. By the middle of last year, the ruling coalition had also failed to secure a majority in the upper house election. Meanwhile, to both the left and right of the LDP, the DPP and Sanseitō recorded significant gains, with Ishiba subsequently being forced to step down. Kōmeitō then ended its alliance with the LDP, which had been in place since 1999 – a worst-case scenario for the party. The new LDP

leader, Sanae Takaichi, had to find a new coalition partner at speed. After intensive negotiations, the JIP stepped in. However, even together with the JIP, the Liberal Democrats still lacked a majority in both chambers of parliament. For her election as prime minister, Takaichi therefore additionally relied in the lower house on the votes of several independents. Since late October last year, she has been the first woman at the head of Japan's government.

A battle on several fronts

After three independent MPs had switched to the LDP in November, the governing coalition regained a razor-thin majority, at least in the lower house. However, public approval ratings for the LDP remained well below 30 per cent after Takaichi had taken office. Her decision to dissolve the lower house as early as in January and to call a snap election after just three months in office – in the middle of a snowy winter – was therefore highly risky. To offset its losses, the LDP had to win back both moderate conservatives and voters on the far right in an election campaign shortened to just twelve days. The party additionally needed to regain appeal among independents and younger voters. But how could such a balancing act succeed? As in many countries, fewer and fewer people in Japan feel bound to established parties. Since the early 1990s, the Liberal Democrats have lost four-fifths of their members, with around 60,000 people leaving the party in 2024 alone.[3]

Voters are primarily concerned about their economic well-being.

In October, the party selected Sanae Takaichi as its new leader from among five candidates. Takaichi was not only the sole woman, but also the "most conservative and furthest to the right".[4] Citing its inability to support a partner that was abandoning moderate conservative principles, Kōmeitō ended its long-standing cooperation with the LDP – and Takaichi was by no means the uncontested favourite among LDP MPs in the race for party leadership.[5] The alliance with the JIP also ruled out a possible coalition with the centre-left CDP, even though this would have produced comfortable parliamentary majorities. Together with the largest opposition party, the LDP could theoretically have dispensed with snap lower house elections altogether.

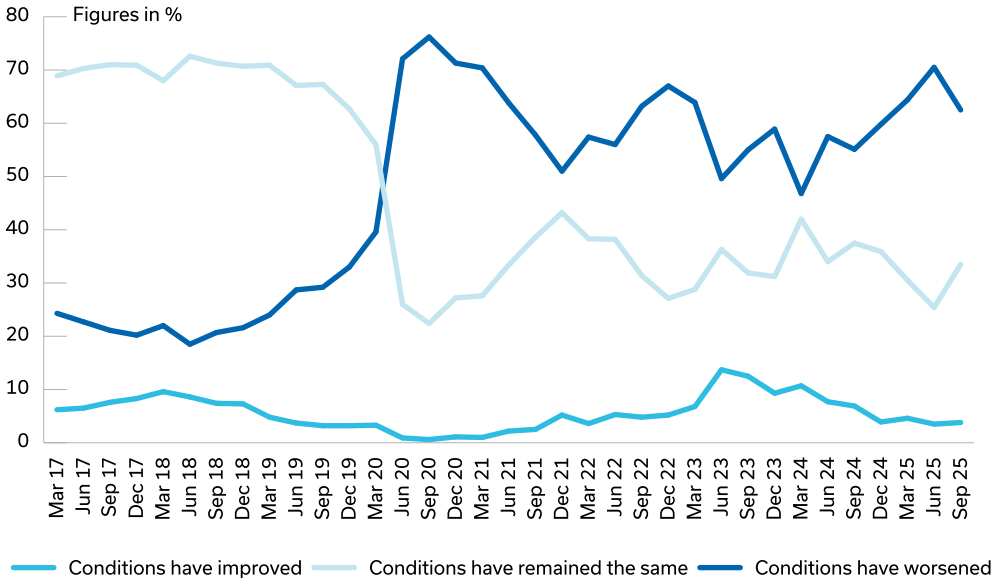
Atmospherics, negotiation dynamics, political timing, and unexpected offers likely played just as great a role in these decisions as did strategic considerations, of course. With the benefit of some hindsight, the present analysis seeks to examine how polarisation within Japanese society has shaped voter preferences, how forces on the political right have influenced the LDP, and how the party – under Takaichi and in coalition with the JIP – ultimately succeeded in asserting itself. The discussion focuses on four elements: willingness to reform, conservatism, governing capacity, and participation.

Willingness to reform: "It's the economy, stupid"

Japanese parties hold divergent positions on issues such as how Japan should position itself vis-à-vis China and the United States; how gender equality should be advanced; whether nuclear power is too risky; which taxes should be raised or lowered; and whether the country should revise its pacifist constitution, recognise the Self-Defence Forces as a full military, and increase defence spending. However, in Japan's rapidly ageing and shrinking society, voters are primarily concerned with their economic well-being.

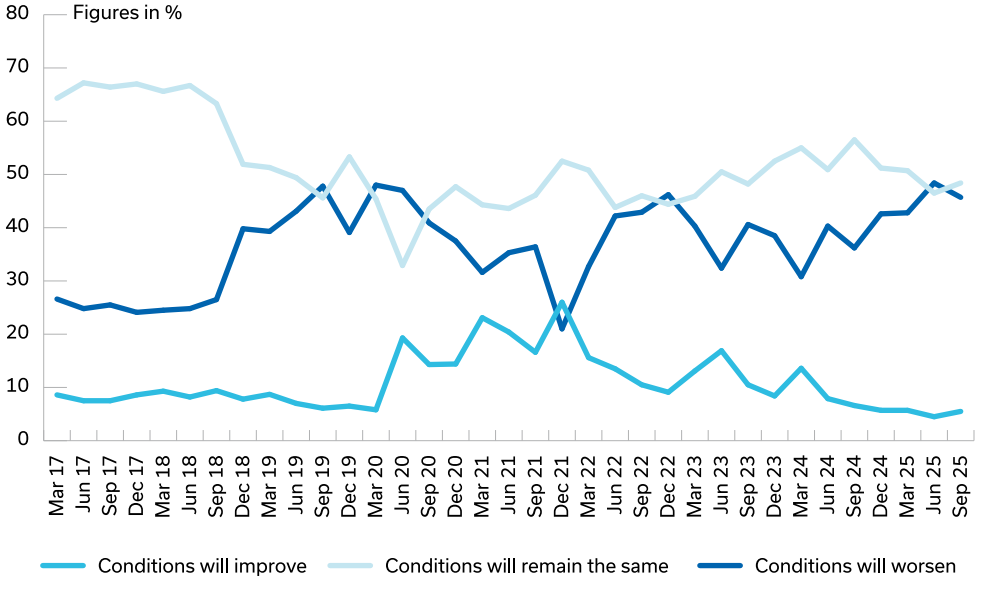
According to regular surveys conducted by the Bank of Japan (BoJ), more than half of all Japanese have consistently believed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that the economic situation has worsened compared with in the previous year (Fig. 1). By mid-2025, the share of dissatisfied respondents – at around 70 per cent – was as high as in March 2021, when the state of emergency had to be extended in several prefectures due to rising infection rates.[6]

Fig. 1: Subjective assessment of overall economic conditions compared to the previous year



Source: own illustration based on Bank of Japan 2026: Opinion Survey, in: https://ogy.de/zf9c [16 Nov 2025].

Fig. 2: Expectations for economic conditions for the following year



Source: own illustration based on Bank of Japan 2026: Opinion Survey, in: https://ogy.de/zf9c [16 Nov 2025].

According to BoJ surveys (Fig. 2), during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Japanese still expected the economic situation to improve within the following twelve months. By autumn of last year, however, almost half of respondents expressed pessimism about future economic developments.

According to post-election surveys conducted by the world's highest-circulation newspaper,

Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the most important political issues in the February lower house election were inflation and economic policy (81 per cent), followed by foreign policy and security (65 per cent). Tax reform – including the at-least-temporary abolition of the consumption tax on food – and social security – including pensions – followed close behind, at 64 per cent each.[7] But how does this explain the gains made by the populist Sanseitō in both the 2025 upper house election and again in the recent lower house election? With its conspiracy theories, nationalist slogans, and criticism of tourists and foreign workers, the far-right party is hardly associated with economic competence. Part of the answer has its roots in the early 1990s.

At the time, Germany, Japan, and the United States were all facing major socio-economic challenges, albeit for different reasons. With the slogan "It's the economy, stupid", Bill Clinton's campaign strategist James Carville urged Democrats in 1992 to centre their presidential campaign entirely on the economy amid recession.[8] Germany was grappling with the consequences of reunification, with many people in eastern Germany having lost their jobs. In Japan, the property bubble had burst, and the long-booming "Japan Inc." had collapsed. What followed was the "Japan crisis" and three lost decades. Those entering the labour market in the 1990s often struggled to secure permanent full-time employment with adequate pay. Japan's so-called "ice-age generation" continues to suffer in the labour market to this day.[9] A post-election survey by *Asahi Shimbun* found that Sanseitō performed significantly better among men (60 per cent) than among women in the upper house election. Among voters aged 40 to 59, 42 per cent of those who cast their second vote for the far-right party in July 2025 belonged to this "ice-age generation".[10]

Competition from the far right: The Sanseitō party, founded in 2020, appeals in particular to the generation that entered the labour market during Japan's crisis in the early 1990s and, in some cases, has still not advanced professionally to this day. Pictured is party leader Sohei Kamiya during the 2025 campaign for the House of Councillors election. Photo: © Kazuki Oishi, Imago.

Just as the Republicans in crisis-stricken early-1990s America were replaced by the Democrats, Japan's Liberal Democrats were voted out of government in 1993 for the first time in 38 years. Although the new seven-party coalition quickly fell apart and the LDP returned to power in 1994, political scientist Toru Yoshida regards the change in government as an often-overlooked turning point: He states that it led to the setting up of "opposing camps of 'modernizers' and 'conservatives', [...] [thereby] replacing the old left-right cleavage. On an electoral level, it was clearly from this time onwards that constituencies began to exercise choice between reformist and anti-reformist preferences."[11] One outcome of this development was the premiership of Jun'ichirō Koizumi (2001 to 2006). The LDP prime minister pushed through sweeping reforms in Japan despite strong resistance, including from within his own party. Koizumi enjoyed a high level of approval among the public at large. His successor, Shinzō Abe – prime minister from 2006 to 2007 and again from 2012 to 2020 – was also among the reformers of recent decades. This explains why Prime Minister Takaichi now views herself as standing in Abe's political tradition.

Less than one month after taking office, Takaichi's government launched a comprehensive stimulus package that – according to a *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey – was rated positively by 63 per cent of respondents, with approval rising to 72 per cent among supporters of the LDP and JIP. The package also received majority backing among independents (59 per cent) and even among opposition supporters (56 per cent).[12] Takaichi's mantra of "work, work, work, work, work" was named buzzword of the year in early December.[13]

Conservatism: "Imperial family, cultural heritage, memory of the nation"

The 64-year-old is guided more than only by her mentor's reformist zeal in efforts to revitalise the economy and domestic consumption. Abe – who was assassinated in 2022 – was – like Koizumi – a member of the strongly conservative Seiwakai faction within the LDP, which was dissolved in 2024 after a major party-funding scandal. This was also the faction in which Takaichi had found her political home. By contrast, her predecessors Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba were associated with – or at least supported by – the far more moderate Kōchikai faction.[14] Abe had been able to hold together the nationalist wing of his party. Until the end of his tenure, the LDP was not a "centrist party" in the German sense, but rather a broad conservative catch-all party positioned at the centre of the conservative spectrum that aimed to appeal from the centre-right to the far right. Sanseitō was founded in 2020 to the right of the LDP, followed in 2023 by the CPJ. Both have sparked debate in the media over what the Liberal Democrats stand for today.[15]

With her more conservative agenda, the new prime minister has been well received, particularly on the right of centre.

From the perspective of Tomohiko Taniguchi, chairman of the influential lobby organisation Nippon Kaigi, Japanese conservatism revolves around three elements: "We are here to preserve what has been handed down through generations – the imperial family, cultural heritage, the memory of the nation". Taniguchi believes that "borderless liberalism" threatens Japanese identity: "Think of Mount Fuji. A mountain, yes – but above all a sacred presence. Now, people climb it waving flags for social media 'likes'. That symbolic desecration causes pain." Taniguchi advocates quota limits for workers from China. Nippon Kaigi also supports enshrining male-only succession to the imperial throne and adding a third clause to Article 9 of the constitution that explicitly recognises the Self-Defence Forces.

According to Taniguchi, the LDP followed this line during Abe's tenure. "With Abe gone and Fumio Kishida dismantling what held it up, we no longer blindly support the LDP".[16] In this respect, too, Takaichi faced considerable pressure to

reposition the party. She needed to close ranks. With her more conservative agenda, the new prime minister was well received in the first weeks after taking office, particularly – though not exclusively – on the right of centre.

According to a mid-November *Asahi Shimbun* poll, the LDP–JIP governing coalition was backed by nearly 70 per cent of respondents, with only 17 per cent opposed. 66 per cent considered Takaichi's proposed tougher immigration policy "promising", while 56 per cent – including many younger Japanese – believed the island nation needed fewer visitors and immigrants.[17] Any new scandal, internal disputes, or "missteps" by the prime minister might well have eroded this political momentum, particularly among younger voters; instead, approval ratings held steady into January. This paved the way for the snap lower house election.

Governing capacity: "LDP-style politics, competently delivered"

In 2009, the Liberal Democrats were voted out of office for the second time in their 70-year history. On that occasion, the now-defunct Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) prevailed largely because it did not promise clientelist benefits for support groups and instead underscored its governing credibility with pledges of fundamental reforms to approval procedures and decision-making processes between executive and legislature.[18] Then, the Fukushima disaster struck in 2011. In the eyes of many voters, the DPJ mishandled the crisis. A year later, Shinzō Abe returned to power with the LDP and its junior coalition partner, Kōmeitō. For many Japanese, a left-led cabinet had failed for the second time. Political disillusionment grew, and turnout declined in subsequent years.

From 2012 onwards, the LDP effectively faced only one serious challenger: its current coalition partner, the JIP. In terms of their political programme, the two parties were closely aligned. The Innovation Party had split from the LDP in 2010 as a local movement, seeking to continue the reform agenda of former Prime Minister Koizumi. It had succeeded in breaking the LDP's dominance in the Osaka region.[19] The party had received good ratings at the local and regional level for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] Given its regional roots, the JIP is to the LDP roughly what the CSU is to the CDU in Germany, although candidates of both parties compete in constituencies within and outside the Osaka region. The JIP did not claim ministerial posts in the new government, however, leaving day-to-day governance to the Liberal Democrats – a pattern that might change in the next cabinet reshuffle planned for autumn.

For decades, the LDP has been regarded by many Japanese as the country's "natural party of government". It has enjoyed the backing of powerful business associations as well as of agricultural and fisheries lobbies. Local support groups (*kōenkai*) have organised campaigns for "their" LDP candidates.[21] Religious organisations have also been part of this system of "organised votes" (*soshikihyō*). Before electoral reform in the mid-1990s, only the personalised first vote counted; thus, multiple LDP candidates often competed against one another in the same constituency. They were unable to differentiate themselves in terms of their policy platform, being forced to do so only through their respective support networks. Among LDP candidates without local political backgrounds, many are graduates of Japan's top universities. Before entering politics, they typically gain professional and leadership experience in ministerial bureaucracies, public agencies, corporations, and associations.[22] Traditionally, this group has supplied many of the leading figures in the party and in government.

With a planned record budget of 122.3 trillion yen, the aim is to bring about a sustained economic recovery in 2026.

The LDP benefited for decades from a strong reservoir of public trust in its governing competence. For example, surveys conducted around the 2012, 2017, and 2024 elections revealed

that 22 per cent of respondents who actually favoured the JCP's policies still intended to vote for the Liberal Democrats. Only seven per cent preferred the LDP's policy platform outright, yet 38 per cent planned to vote for it.[23] This credibility suffered significantly after the party-funding scandal had come to light at the end of 2023, however, thereby contributing to the losses in the 2024 lower house election. In his commentary for the *Japan Times*, Michael MacArthur Bosack also argues that the 2025 upper house election did not signal a "rise of conservative populism in Japan, and with it, xenophobic and regressive policies". Rather, he says, the dominant issue was the financial strain on households, with voters punishing the LDP for its "continued inability" to address this core concern. The desire for "LDP-like politics" persists, he suggests – but only if it is delivered competently.[24] Since the lower house election, the Japanese government has therefore been working intensively to pass the budget for fiscal year 2026. With a planned record volume of 122.3 trillion yen (currently around 670 billion euros), the aim is to lay the groundwork for a sustained economic recovery from April onwards.

Participation: "Offering a clear vision of the future"

For decades, the *soshikihyō* system of votes – mobilised via support networks and associations – functioned reliably. Since the electoral reform in

A trillion-yen budget under debate: Yuichiro Tamaki, leader of the opposition Democratic Party for the People (DPP), questions Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on 10 December 2025 in the Lower House Budget Committee about the planned record budget of 122.3 trillion yen, which is intended to provide the long-awaited stimulus to economic growth in Japan. Photo: © AFLO, Imago.

the mid-1990s, however, its importance has gradually declined, with traditional media coverage increasingly coming to replace it as a driver of voter preferences, while online campaigns have since emerged alongside it.

After its founding in 2020, Sanseitō largely bypassed traditional media, focusing heavily on YouTube.[25] The party produces a daily online news podcast for its roughly 70,000 members (as of July 2025). It has set up local and regional chat groups and invites supporters to training courses run by its in-house DIY School.[26] Sanseitō charges relatively high monthly membership fees that are tiered. Those who pay more enjoy greater influence.[27]

Most supporters of the far-right party belong to the urban and suburban middle class. The party has established local chapters in almost all of the 289 single-member constituencies in the lower house – even where victory on the first vote was unrealistic. Because voters can also enter a candidate's name on the second ballot, however, proportional representation still offered a path to parliament. Even in constituencies where candidates had virtually no chance under the majority system, local branches acted as grassroots "ground troops" campaigning energetically for the party and its leader, Sohei Kamiya.[28] As a result, Sanseitō was able to increase its number of lower house seats from three to 15.

As recently as during the upper house election in the middle of last year, supporters of Sanseitō, Reiwa Shinsengumi, and the DPP identified much more strongly both with their respective parties and with their leaders than did LDP supporters.[29] In the lower house election, the Liberal Democrats seized the opportunity to field Sanae Takaichi as a highly popular figurehead. With nearly 2.4 million followers on X, the prime minister was able to mobilise younger and undecided voters.[30] The strategy worked: Around 35,000 new followers joined her account during the 12-day campaign alone. From the second half of January up until election day, LDP videos and campaign ads on YouTube were viewed more than 200 million times.[31] Despite wintry temperatures and heavy snowfall, turnout reached just over 56 per cent – higher than in the 2024 lower house election.

With Sanae Takaichi as party leader and prime minister, the Liberal Democrats staged a remarkable comeback after the funding scandal and electoral setbacks of the past two years. Upon taking office in October, Takaichi was well advised to appoint her four rivals in the leadership contest to ministerial posts in the new government, thereby placating internal critics. Having now secured a two-thirds majority in the lower house, she is unlikely to face major internal power struggles in the near future. Takaichi was not elected solely because of her popularity, however, but also because she promised far-reaching reforms and effective crisis management. Under her leadership, the Liberal Democrats still have to prove they can deliver. Seventy years after its founding, *Yomiuri Shimbun* wrote in a leading editorial last year that the party must "offer a clear vision for the future".[32] Ultimately, it may not be the left or right fringes of the political spectrum – or the polarisation of Japanese society – but rather the cohesion of the Liberal Democrats in tackling the Herculean tasks ahead that will determine whether Sanae Takaichi will one day be compared with Shinzō Abe.

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A Political K-Drama Stuck on Repeat

The Challenges of Polarisation Facing the Conservative Side of South Korean Politics

Photo: © NurPhoto, Imago

In a Nutshell

Social polarisation in South Korea is profoundly shaping both politics and everyday life. Historical experiences, Confucian traditions, and current conflicts such as the brief imposition of martial law in 2024 are exacerbating tensions between the progressive and conservative camps. Economic uncertainty, rising living costs, and a strong dependence on international markets are increasing societal pressure.

Demographic change, extreme educational demands, and housing shortages are placing a particular burden on younger generations. At the same time, changing role models and structural disadvantages faced by women are reshaping social dynamics, while conscription and competition in the labour market are fuelling a new form of antifeminism among some young men.

The conservative People Power Party is deeply divided internally. The conflict over how to address the legacy of martial law is paralysing the party, weakening its ability to act as an opposition force, and fuelling a struggle over direction between moderate forces and more radical supporters of former president Yoon Suk Yeol.

Despite these tensions, democratic institutions remain stable. Courts, the media, and the public continue to defend democratic principles, and political polarisation is not threatening the country's fundamental stability.

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For centuries, Korea could be understood as a kingdom that had sealed itself off in order to preserve political stability and protect itself against external threats. The country isolated itself from the outside world out of fear of a Japanese invasion. There are potential consequences here: Some traditions display remarkable longevity, and on closer inspection, at least traces of them can still be discerned today. Whether this is the root cause of the comparatively pronounced polarisation of Korean society and its party system is a matter of debate, but it is certainly conceivable. The legacy of Korean Confucianism is also likely to be a factor to some extent since many people still feel bound by its rules and are guided by them, be it consciously or unconsciously.

Triggered by the unexpected declaration of martial law by then-President Yoon Suk Yeol in December 2024, recent events in South Korea have given further momentum to the already-palpable polarisation. Issues affecting prosperity and economic growth in particular harbour considerable potential for further social tensions.

Foreign economic dependence and protectionism: Despite a provisional settlement in the tariff dispute that has been secured through investment commitments totalling 350 billion US dollars over several years, the protectionist ambitions of the United States remain a real threat, including tariffs of 25 per cent on passenger cars and of 50 per cent on steel. The unpredictability of the US administration also means that further demands remain possible at any time, such as in the area of burden sharing for security guarantees.

Security policy escalation involving North Korea: The deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine in April 2024 caused deep concern in South Korea: There are fears that North Korea could apply insights gained in modern warfare in Ukraine against the "hostile state" south of the 38th parallel and obtain access to modern military technology.

Economic stagnation and the housing crisis: Rising pressure resulting from an economic slowdown is another key factor. The won has lost around 26 per cent of its value since 2015. Developments in the property markets are of particular importance, especially in major cities. This applies above all to the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area, which is known as Sudogwon – one of the most populous and densely populated metropolitan regions in the world. Housing prices rose by 16.1 per cent between January 2023 and April 2025 alone,[1] with a continuing upward trend. No other metropolitan area in the major industrialised countries (aside from city-states) has such a high proportion of the national population, which lies at 50.7 per cent.[2]

Demographic crisis: With increasing momentum, demographic developments will also continue to shape both politics and social cohesion in South Korea. In 2025, the country recorded the world's lowest birth rate, at 0.75 children per woman.[3] Contributing factors include extreme performance pressure and intense competition in the labour market, the prohibitive costs of education and housing, and rigid role models in childcare.

Structural imbalances

Polarisation in South Korean society is driven by a combination of historical, political, and social factors. It has resulted from the interplay between the period of authoritarian rule (until 1987), rapid democratisation, impressive

economic and technological development over recent decades, and sharply divergent views on how to deal with North Korea. This divide is reinforced by differing generational lifestyles, conflicting political ideologies, and changing patterns of media consumption, with the latter item being a particularly extreme phenomenon among younger people. Older generations tend towards more conservative views and attach value to stable social status, while younger generations are more acutely affected by economic uncertainty and anxieties about the future, face high expectations, and adopt a more critical outlook.

Politically, polarisation is evident in the marked ideological separation of social groups, usually along the fault lines between the right-conservative and left-liberal blocs, which are currently represented by the People Power Party (PPP) on one side and the Democratic Party (Minju) on the other. A key role is played by opposing approaches and fundamentally divergent views regarding relations with North Korea. On one side are those who primarily view North Korea as a military threat that must be deterred in partnership with the United States, with the goal being the complete denuclearisation of the North. Reunification is sometimes equated with a form of "takeover". On the other side is the desire to reduce tensions through rapprochement, economic cooperation, and humanitarian assistance; to recognise the North's security concerns; and to establish peaceful coexistence.

The political landscape is marked by intense conflict, with parties focusing less on social dialogue and more on mobilising their respective bases. This has resulted in highly ideologised electoral choices, thereby leaving little room for consensus, compromise, or mutual understanding between the camps.

The media have a key role to play here: Since older generations naturally rely more on traditional sources of information while younger people primarily use social media, filter bubbles and social fragmentation are reinforced. Additional pressure comes from economic fears, rising living costs, and generational conflicts, which further divide society. The atmosphere is further

Decisive moment: A mother prays for her child's success in the national university entrance examination. The test determines the trajectory of future academic and career opportunities. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

inflamed by populist politicians. Taken together, these factors culminate in a level of social polarisation that makes South Korea appear more deeply divided today than ever before.[4]

Education – A major issue

It seems that in South Korea, hardly anything is of such outstanding importance as education. School pupils are subjected to the highest level of performance pressure, and vast sums are spent on private tutoring. The result of the university entrance examination (Suneung) is the sole determining factor when it comes to admission to a university. The aim is to gain admission to the prestigious SKY universities (i.e. Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University), whose graduates make up the elites in politics, major conglomerates (chaebols), and other top positions. Thus, when the nine-hour university entrance examination takes place in November each year, the public makes allowances: Shops, stock exchanges, and banks open later or not at all, and construction work is halted. The 2022 PISA test clearly shows the results of these efforts: South Korea ranks third, behind only Singapore and Japan.[5]

South Korea had the world's second-highest suicide rate in 2021.

The pressure to perform well – which permeates society – has its consequences: Competition is to be kept at arm's length in order to be able to cope with the pressure of one's own ambitions and the expectations imposed by others. South Korea additionally had the world's second-highest suicide rate in 2021.[6]

Women defy tradition

Another core issue also carries conflict potential: namely the traditional expectations placed on women – and the rejection of these expectations. The role of women in South Korea has changed significantly over time. Traditionally, women were largely confined to their role within the family. As daughters, wives, or mothers, women were legally and socially dependent on male family members and were confined to the private sphere (i.e. household, care, child-rearing). Indeed, there was scarcely any room for any independent life outside this collective. However, South Korea's rapid economic rise since the 1980s has enabled women to access academic education on equal footing with men. Higher education has provided access to qualified professions, thereby resulting in improved life prospects and career opportunities. Nevertheless, structural disadvantages at the workplace remain: Women are often discriminated against despite having the same qualifications as men, and they are additionally subject to career constraints. This situation is underscored by the fact that South Korea has the largest gender pay gap in the world: In 2023, the gap stood at 29.3 per cent.[7] Against this background, it is hardly surprising that comparatively few women are found in top positions. Indeed, their share among the 100 largest Korean companies is only 6.5 per cent.[8] Regardless, women continue to face long-established traditional expectations in society and families, where they tend to be seen in the role of housewife and mother. These expectations clearly run counter to reconciling work and family life. One reflection of this situation is the average age at marriage, which is continuing to rise in South Korea.

Fig. 1: Average age at marriage in South Korea

Year Age	1994	2004	2014	2024
Men	28,2	30,6	32,4	33,9
Women	25,1	27,6	29,8	31,6

Source: own illustration based on Textor, C. 2025: Median age at first marriage in South Korea from 1990 to 2024, by gender, Statista, 29 Nov 2025, in: https://ogy.de/nex3 [5 Jan 2026].

As a consequence, women's age at the birth of their first child has also risen significantly, from 26.23 years in 1993 to 33.08 years in 2024.[9] This

development has resulted from more prolonged periods of education, career ambitions, and many women's desire to not focus exclusively on family life and to instead also participate in paid employment and to not lose sight of self-realisation entirely.

Young men tend to vote more conservatively.

As in Germany, having a small number of children also goes hand in hand with societal challenges in South Korea, such as population ageing and a growing shortage of young talent in the labour market. In addition, a great deal of resentment arises from the fact that many young men feel disadvantaged compared with women due to the country's compulsory military service. Currently lasting 18 to 21 months, compulsory military service applies to men from the age of 18, thereby delaying their education, their entry into working life, and thus also their career opportunities. Men argue that women can study or work without disruption during this time, while they themselves have to complete a demanding period of service. The result is a sense of frustration in a highly competitive labour market with only a limited number of good jobs. These young men see "reverse discrimination", particularly in the context of quotas for women and equal opportunity measures. The resulting mood has fuelled a trend of antifeminism that has meant that young men tend to vote more conservatively. They criticise support for women as unfair and in some cases blame it for the current low birth rates.

The party landscape

Political disarray is a paralysing and defining element of Korean politics. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "South–South division" in analogy to the "North–South division" of the Korean peninsula following the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945.[10] The term describes the irreconcilable split between political camps in South Korea, which severely restricts the country's capacity for political action. This was particularly evident when, in the wake of the parliamentary elections in 2024, the opposition's blockade prevented then-President Yoon Suk Yeol – who was later removed from office – from implementing domestic policy objectives. The obvious irreconcilability is not accidental: Indeed, it has its roots in the consequences of the Korean War, which promoted rigid, militant anti-communism and produced a pronounced "friend–enemy" differentiation.[11] Given this starkly polarised mindset, it was not possible for any broad party-political spectrum to develop that was differentiated by substantive policy positions. There are certainly numerous parties, but they can generally be clearly assigned to one of the two camps. The small parties are mostly "one-hit wonders", while the larger parties (or more accurately, political currents) have appeared under changing names in almost every election.

What matters for a party's clout in the National Assembly is its ability to form a negotiating bloc consisting of at least 20 members of parliament. Smaller parties that do not reach this number of members also have the option to form an alliance in order to meet this minimum quorum. Having a negotiating bloc – or being part of one – is essential because it goes hand in hand with various rights and advantages that are denied to individual members and to very small numbers of members, including better financial resources and parliamentary speaking rights as well as participation in decision-making processes and in matters of rules of procedure. Without the required critical size in the National Assembly, political influence and relevance are close to zero. This explains why it is so important to belong to one of the two dominant currents in the National Assembly.

Regardless as to whether very small parties have succeeded in forming negotiating blocs in past legislative periods, they have had little significance in light of the dominant position of the progressive party (i.e. Minju or DPK) and the conservative party (now PPP). The National Assembly consists of members of parliament from several parties; thus, it formally follows the

Fig. 2: Distribution of seats held by parties in South Korea's National Assembly

Mandates after the election	22nd Assembly since 2024	21st Assembly 2020–2024	20th Assembly 2016–2020	19th Assembly 2012–2016
People Power Party	90			
People Future Party	18			
Democratic Alliance	14			
Rebuilding Korea Party	12			
New Reform Party	3			
New Future Party	1			
Progressive Party	1			
Minjoo Party of Korea		163		
United Future Party		84		
Future Korea Party		19		
Citizen Party		17		
Parti Minjoo ouvert		3		
Democratic Party of Korea	161		123	
People's Party		3	38	
Justice Party		6	6	
Saenuri Party			122	152
Democratic United Party				127
Unified Progressive Party				13
Liberty Forward Party				5
Independents		5	11	3
Total seats	**300**	**300**	**300**	**300**

Progressive	187	180	123	127
Conservative	111	103	122	157
Progressive + Conservative	298	283	245	284
Share of total mandates	**99 %**	**94 %**	**82 %**	**95 %**

Source: own illustration after IPU Parline: Republic of Korea. National Assembly, in: https://ogy.de/gbar [4 Feb 2026].

principles of a multi-party system. However, the clear dominance of the two political camps has resulted in a system revolving around only two parties that can be regarded as a de facto two-party system – a reasonable assessment given that over recent legislative periods (see table above), the two political currents have accounted for up to 99 per cent of seats (2024) (2020: 94 per cent; 2016: 82 per cent; 2012: 95 per cent).

On the conservative, right-leaning side, there are essentially no parties competing with one another. The differences in opinion that of course exist are fought out between party wings under

the umbrella of the PPP itself. The irreconcilable and confrontational opposition[12] between the left and right political blocs in the country is mirrored in a similar way within the conservative camp itself. The spectrum ranges from more liberal, forward-looking, conciliatory positions on the moderate side to the so-called Asphalt Right – a term that describes a regressive, hardline conservative voter group that remains loyal to former president Yoon Suk Yeol within the PPP, often in the context of protests on the streets. Out of fear of marginalisation alone – meaning the loss of current political influence in parliament and also after future elections – both sides know that they depend on each other. At present, following the defection of one member, the PPP has 107 members of parliament. If, for example, the members of parliament who are still loyal to Yoon Suk Yeol were to split off, the remaining larger bloc could possibly fall below the threshold of 100 members (i.e. one-third of the total 300 members of parliament) – which is more than merely a psychologically significant figure – and could thereby lose the strategically important qualified minority in the context of constitutionally relevant legislation.

A majority within the conservative party view the declaration of martial law as a mistake.

The party is paralysed by its internal divisions. At the centre of the internal party dispute is how to deal with the events of the recent past, particularly, what position the party should take regarding the briefly imposed martial law that was in effect on 3 December 2024. On the one side are those who continue to support former president Yoon Suk Yeol, who was removed from office: They defend the declaration of martial law, were opposed to the impeachment proceedings, and naturally reject an apology. On the other side are those who have broken with Yoon and who have also been able to bring themselves to issue an apology. A majority within the party view the declaration of martial law as a mistake. Equally, a majority also cast legal doubt on the subsequent impeachment proceedings against the former president. A first apology was issued by Kwon Young-se, who was appointed interim party leader at the end of 2024. A renewed apology – demanded in particular by the governing party – was issued by only a few members of parliament on the anniversary of martial law, which again drew criticism within their own camp. Ultimately, every new apology prolongs stigmatisation and makes it more difficult to regain political initiative. In this respect, the governing Minju Party of current president Lee Jae-myung has every reason to keep this backward-looking issue simmering in order to keep the opposition paralysed. As if that were not enough, public speculation about the constitutionality of the PPP – including considerations of initiating proceedings to ban the party – is increasing pressure, distracting from key challenges (e.g. the housing crisis, demography), and leading to unwanted publicity for the PPP. The current government's plans to reorganise the public prosecution offices can also be seen as an attempt to use these offices as instruments against the opposition PPP, particularly in connection with the review of martial law. Interested in nothing more than focusing on its role in opposition and keeping this issue out of the public eye, this divided party therefore remains on the defensive.

Between the camps within the PPP, there is ongoing, deep-seated animosity, with no prospect of it being overcome. Here too, it becomes apparent that mutual dislike activates each side's supporters far better and more sustainably than any problem-solving engagement with complex issues.[13] What is lost is the necessary insight on both sides that their own convictions cannot be implemented 100 per cent. If compromise is not even possible within one's own camp, how is it supposed to be achieved across camps given an even broader political spectrum? There is currently no answer to this question.

There also appears to be a real danger that the conservative camp will enter – or has long since entered – a self-accelerating cycle that frustrates moderate party members and encourages them

Left or right: Voters in South Korea – as seen here during the presidential election in June 2025 – generally face clear-cut choices. A political centre hardly exists. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

to leave politics, thereby strengthening the extremes and causing them to drift even further apart. As a result, the image that the party inevitably projects to voters is a sobering one. Any sense of wanting – or indeed, of being able – to govern the country responsibly can hardly be conveyed credibly given the party's powerlessness in the face of internal centrifugal forces.[14] Unsurprisingly, expectations of the party's performance in the local elections in early June 2026 are pessimistic.

Outlook

The conservative camp currently lacks the tools and leadership figures needed to break free from the shackles of internal party conflict, to present a united front, and to set new priorities in a way that would allow it to become attractive to a broad electorate once more. The unifying dislike of progressive president Lee Jae-myung alone – who continues to face legal problems – will not be sufficient to make meaningful progress. In the short term, there appears to be no improvement in sight. Precisely because the election campaign for the local elections on 3 June 2026 began at the start of the year, there will be little room for nuance or for the acknowledgement of complexity. After all, the campaign – and especially the period shortly before the elections – is the phase during which polarisation traditionally reaches a peak. This is also likely due to the fact that it is ultimately more promising to mobilise one's own base and to get them to the polls than to offer swing voters a political alternative. The fact that this approach comes at a price – at least in the

long term – should be clear to all involved. While short-term self-preservation may seem expedient, it cannot replace the need for a coherent set of political convictions. However, those responsible may come to consider a paradigm shift: After a predictably painful defeat in the local elections, rather than conveying the impression of wanting to rid themselves of an unaddressed past by merely renaming the party, those responsible should instead face up to the facts, initiate a renewal process, and then go on to offer voters credible, forward-looking policy proposals.

Pronounced polarisation in parties and society is not unique to South Korea: Indeed, it can be observed in many countries. A comparison of the party systems in South Korea and Germany shows that the two bear little similarity. In South Korea, political currents have a long tradition, whereas parties do not. Korean political parties fail to foster the kind of intergenerational loyalty that parties in Germany can command.[15] In Germany, political parties are also brands, and few would think lightly of changing a brand name, let alone of replacing it completely.

However, despite the polarisation that can be seen in society and politics, the stability of the country is not under threat. It is worth remembering that a certain degree of polarisation is not only inherent to democratic competition between parties, but also a necessity. After the developments of recent years, particularly since the brief period during which martial law was declared, South Korea can be said to have impressively fended off a massive attack on democracy.[16] The value of democracy – and of political parties – appears to be very clearly understood by the population. The courts have fulfilled the role assigned to them. Their judgements have not been welcomed by all sides, but – and this is crucial – they have been accepted in principle. The public has taken a stand, both for democracy and for the country. It is an encouraging sign.

– translated from German –

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Between Polarisation and Populism

South Africa's Fragile Political Centre

Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa's young democracy is currently facing profound challenges. Persistent social inequality and the legacy of racial segregation continue to intensify political polarisation. Following the loss of votes by the African National Congress (ANC) in 2024 and the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) with the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and other parties, it seems that – at least for the time being – an era of fragmentation and coalition-building has begun.

The fragmentation of the party system is deepening, driven in part by the rise of populist forces such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), and the Patriotic Alliance (PA). Polarising platforms and ethnic identity politics are making the formation of consensus-based majorities more difficult.

The political centre is weakened and struggling to build stable, reform-oriented coalitions. This situation has complicated reliable governance and exacerbated social tensions.

Although the DA is regarded as a party of integrity and has a largely positive record in government, it reaches key sections of the population only to a limited extent as it has thus far failed to adequately address social inequality. Its future depends on credibly linking economically liberal approaches with social justice.

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The rise and fall of the ANC

The release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 marked the beginning of the end of apartheid and led to South Africa's first free elections in 1994, which were won by the African National Congress (ANC) under Mandela's leadership.[1] Until 2024, the party had consistently secured an absolute majority at the national level and played a key role in the country's transformation in terms of both politics and civil society. South Africa is now regarded as a consolidated democracy with an active network of civic organisations. However, the ANC failed to translate political transformation into sustainable economic development. Although a more diverse middle class emerged, particularly in the decade following the end of apartheid, social inequality continued to rise: Today, South Africa ranks among the most unequal countries in the world, and this inequality impacts on all areas of life. Low growth, high unemployment, crime, and unequal access to both quality education and healthcare are widely seen as major governance failures and are primarily attributed to the ANC. Since the end of 2007, the former liberation movement has also increasingly been associated with both corruption and patronage networks reaching into the highest levels of government. However, in recognition of its role in the struggle for freedom, the ANC remained popular for a long time.

The national elections of 29 May 2024 marked a historic turning point in South Africa's party system. For the first time, the ANC lost its absolute majority, securing only around 40 per cent of the vote.[2] The election signalled the end of the dominant-party system and the beginning of a coalition era. Opinion polls suggesting further losses for the ANC indicate that this trend towards coalition politics is likely to intensify in the long term, though it remains to be seen whether this will become a lasting structural feature of the South African party system or remain a transitional phase. At the end of June 2024, the ANC formed a Government of National Unity (GNU) with ten parties, including the economically liberal DA, the socially conservative IFP, and several smaller groupings. The GNU marks a profound transformation: Decades of single-party dominance have given way to a fragmented multi-party system. Although the ANC and DA together secured more than 50 per cent of the vote in 2024 and thus also a parliamentary majority, a broader GNU was nevertheless formed. Strategic considerations were the key factor here: Externally, the aim was to signal unity and broaden the government's base, while internally, the ANC sought to demonstrate to its supporters that it was not entering into a bilateral coalition solely with its long-standing rival, the DA, but was instead including additional parties that were less critical of the ANC. Eighteen parties are now represented in the 400-seat National Assembly, 13 of which have fewer than ten seats. Observers therefore describe South Africa as a "coalition country".[3] This fragmentation reflects not only the decline of a dominant party, but also intensified political competition and a higher degree of pluralism.

The increasingly differentiated party landscape is shaped in particular by the rise of populist forces on both the left and the right, thereby placing growing pressure on the political centre.

Overview of the South African party landscape (Excerpt)

- ACDP (African Christian Democratic Party)
- ActionSA
- ANC (African National Congress, part of the GNU)
- BOSA (Build One South Africa)
- DA (Democratic Alliance, part of the GNU)
- EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters)
- FF Plus (Freedom Front Plus, part of the GNU)
- IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party, part of the GNU)
- MK-Partei (uMkhonto weSizwe)
- PA (Patriotic Alliance, part of the GNU)

Cleavages and ideologies in the party system

The South African party spectrum can initially be organised along a classic left–right axis. On the left, several breakaway movements from the ANC have emerged, most notably the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which was founded in 2013. Under the leadership of Julius Malema, the former head of the ANC Youth League, the EFF quickly established itself as a radical-left Marxist-populist force. With demands for nationalisation and expropriation without compensation, it appealed particularly to young and disadvantaged voters.[4] In the 2024 elections, the EFF secured just under 10 per cent of the vote but lost support compared with in 2019 because its increasingly radical positions and refusal to join a GNU had attracted broad criticism from voters.

The establishment of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) at the end of 2023 under former President and ANC chair Jacob Zuma marked a further significant shift on the left. From a standing start, the party won almost 15 per cent of the vote in the 2024 national elections.[5] It combines a left-wing economic programme with a populist, identity-driven style of politics that is rooted in traditional authority structures and that is accompanied by a socially conservative view of women and family. Despite its recent electoral success, internal conflicts and organisational weaknesses have thus far prevented MK from establishing itself as an effective opposition force at the national level. Like other ANC breakaways, MK's focus is less on cooperation than on weakening the former liberation movement, thereby further intensifying polarisation within the party system.

Although the centre-left camp remains clearly dominant, the opposing camp is gradually gaining stability and political significance.

On the right, the Democratic Alliance clearly stands out as the most powerful force within its camp. At the same time, numerous smaller parties have been established in the centre to centre-right segment of the political spectrum. Between 2004 and 2014, the DA nearly doubled its share of the national vote, reaching a peak of 22.2 per cent in 2014.[6] It is economically liberal and regarded as particularly credible on issues of good governance. In the 2024 elections, the DA secured 21.8 per cent of the vote – again the second-highest share nationwide – and has long governed the economically successful Western Cape province.[7] Although the centre-left camp remains clearly dominant,[8] the opposing camp is gradually gaining stability and political significance. This trend is reinforced by rising support for the Inkatha Freedom Party – a socially conservative, federalist, economically liberal party. Under its leader, Velenkosini Hlabisa, the IFP has returned to national government responsibility for the first time since 2004 and leads the provincial government in the key province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The centre-right spectrum has been expanded by DA breakaways Build One South Africa (BOSA) and ActionSA. Both of these small parties pursue economically liberal policies, emphasise the rule of law, and present themselves as pragmatic,

inclusive – i.e., non-ethnically defined – alternatives in political competition. The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) positions itself within the Christian democratic spectrum but exhibits strong elements of fundamentalist religious programming. Since religious-denominational issues have not played a key role in South African elections to date, the ACDP's impact at the national level remains limited. Its vote share is marginal, and its role in party politics largely symbolic. The right-wing spectrum is further complemented by the Patriotic Alliance (PA) – a nationalist-populist force. This party increasingly focuses on South Africa's Coloured community[9] and deliberately employs xenophobic rhetoric in order to mobilise support. In the most recent elections, it secured two per cent of the vote.[10]

However, South Africa's party landscape cannot be reduced to a classic left–right framework. Indeed, many parties avoid clear ideological self-positioning in order to not exclude particular voter groups within a diverse electorate. Instead, thematic and socio-cultural cleavages shape political competition, often going beyond traditional left–right categories. For example, the above-described MK Party combines economically left-wing demands – that is, redistribution, state intervention, and social redress – with a socially conservative value framework centred on tradition, authority, and cultural identity. Such an apparently contradictory profile becomes intelligible only in the context of additional structural features and conflict lines within the South African party system.

1. *Constitutional loyalty:* A key line of division in South Africa's party system runs between forces that consistently emphasise adherence to the constitution – such as the DA and the IFP – and those that seek to weaken the rule of law in favour of traditional leadership structures, as exemplified by the MK Party. This divide is also visible within individual parties. Within the ANC, for instance, the moderate, constitutionally minded wing

Political hybrid: Former President Jacob Zuma's MK party combines left-wing economic policy with a traditionalist view of society. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

around President Cyril Ramaphosa faces a more radical, revolutionary faction that is currently weakened.

2. *Identity politics:* Voting behaviour in South Africa partly follows ethnic lines and historically rooted party loyalties. Parties such as the ANC, the IFP, the MK, and the right-wing conservative minority-oriented Afrikaner party Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus) mobilise specific voter groups, while others seek to transcend such divisions and appeal more broadly. One thing is clear: Social, economic, and regional factors are gaining importance relative to identity politics alone. With a younger population, traditional loyalties – for example, towards the ANC – are gradually eroding. Nevertheless, more than three decades after the end of apartheid, ethnic characteristics such as skin colour remain a central structural and defining factor in South African politics and society, with lasting implications for voting behaviour.[11]

Against the backdrop of a persistently precarious socio-economic situation, populist narratives are gaining increasing traction.

3. *Intra-party decision-making structures:* A large proportion of South African parties are strongly centred on charismatic leaders who dominate strategy and programme, often at the expense of internal party democracy. By contrast, a small number of strongly institutionalised parties – such as the ANC and the DA – determine their course through internal democratic processes and present this course collectively through a broad cadre of officials.

Challenges facing the political centre

Against the backdrop of a persistently precarious socio-economic situation, populist narratives are gaining increasing traction in South Africa. In particular, the MK Party, the EFF on the left, and the PA on the right are pursuing a personalised style of politics that relies heavily on identity-based mobilisation. This style places charismatic leaders at the centre of political communication and reduces complex policy issues to personalised messages. Party institutions and collective decision-making processes recede into the background. Combined with identity-based narratives, this situation produces an emotionalised political style that offers clear points of identification, sharpens social cleavages, and facilitates rapid mobilisation. For example, the EFF primarily appeals to young, urban Black voters affected by both unemployment and a lack of prospects, while the PA draws most of its support from the Coloured community and gains traction with a migration-critical and law-and-order agenda.

All these political forces highlight different lived realities, intensify socio-political cleavages rhetorically, and – like populists worldwide – offer seemingly simple solutions to complex problems. Left-wing and right-wing variants often closely resemble one another in both style and strategy. At the heart of their programme-based mobilisation lies the question of distribution: namely access to employment, education, healthcare, and public services for specific ethnic groups. Populist narratives additionally draw on issues that are particularly emotionally charged in the context of social inequality, including crime prevention, migration, public security, and social provision. The multifaceted and far-reaching effects of populism on South African society should not be underestimated: Indeed, populism sharpens existing cleavages, intensifies social tensions, and contributes significantly to both polarisation and the growing emotionalisation of political discourse.

Lacking a formal threshold, the electoral system further facilitates the entry of very small parties into both the national parliament and provincial legislatures. In the National Assembly, 14 of the 18 parties that are currently represented hold less than five per cent of the vote. This institutional

framework also encourages the formation of new populist parties since they have realistic prospects of entering parliament with comparatively small vote shares.

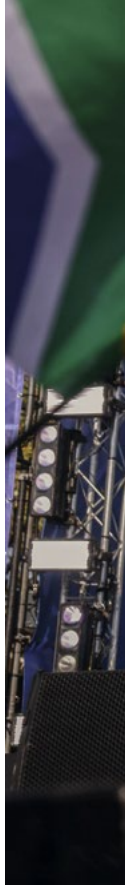
Background situation and strategy for a successful repositioning of the centre-right in South Africa

The increasing fragmentation of the South African party system confronts centre-right forces with a dual challenge: They must counter populist movements effectively but at the same time also secure their own political coherence and capacity for action. Against this background, it is worth more closely examining the position of the DA, which is widely regarded as the classic representative of the centre-right in South Africa. The party benefits from a strong nationwide organisational structure and is generally perceived as being ethically sound – that is, free from corruption, mismanagement, and clientelism. Its long-standing record of governance in the Western Cape – where it has governed with an absolute majority for many years – demonstrates its programme-based and operational capacity to promote long-term economic growth and employment. The central weakness of the DA lies in its limited ability to reach the Black majority population due to its insufficient programme-based and communicative engagement with the enduring social inequalities rooted in the apartheid era. Many South Africans criticise the party for placing too much trust in the regulatory power of the market and for showing too little willingness to address structural inequality through state intervention. As long as the party fails to do more to support redress measures – that is, by addressing structural disadvantages resulting from racial segregation – or to introduce transformative legislation (e.g. by addressing issues such as redistribution, quotas, and targeted support for disadvantaged groups), it will not be perceived as a credible alternative to left-wing forces by the majority of the Black population.

The DA's meritocratic understanding of politics – which links social advancement primarily to merit and competence – collides with South Africa's structural realities. Despite individual capabilities, social progress remains unattainable for many because unequal starting conditions in access to education, land, and economic opportunity mean that merit alone is insufficient. These barriers are deeply rooted in the legacy of apartheid and persist today in the form of unequal wealth distribution, spatial segregation, and limited employment opportunities. Meritocracy thus remains a normative ideal that is promoted as a guiding principle of political modernisation but that is hardly realisable without accompanying state measures that create genuine equality of opportunity. While the ANC and left-wing populist parties advocate radical redress and far-reaching transformation, the DA appears distant in the eyes of many voters and rejects key elements of this agenda. As a result, the centre-right camp remains unable to secure a majority while at the same time providing political opponents with opportunities for attack. Meanwhile, these opponents deliberately promote the narrative that the DA is seeking to restore the apartheid system. Although empirically unfounded, this accusation resonates strongly among key voter segments and limits the party's capacity for mobilisation, particularly among the Black majority. At the same time, the DA's cautious programme-based and communicative engagement with enduring structures of inequality suggests that it fears losing support among its core white voters. It thus finds itself in a dilemma between preserving its traditional base and expanding its broader societal legitimacy.

Seven of the ten senior representatives who were elected at the 2023 DA party congress belong to the white population group.

The DA has prospects of success only if it dares to strike a balance between economically liberal principles on the one hand and the requirements



Ready for the next step? The Democratic Alliance has firmly established itself as the leading force within the centre-right camp. However, if it wants to become a party capable of securing a majority, it will need to become more appealing to the Black majority population. The picture shows outgoing party leader John Steenhuisen. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

of social justice through social transformation and redress on the other hand.[12] While criticising ANC policies may have sufficed in the past, it is now crucial to credibly manage the transition from an opposition party to an effective government party. This situation requires that the DA preserve its political identity while remaining capable of compromise within the GNU – particularly in its relationship with the ANC – in order to contribute to the success of the overall coalition. Managing this dual expectation has emerged as a key task – and one that is anything but straightforward. The tensions to which this situation has given rise are illustrated by the adoption of the 2025 national budget, which nearly led to a breakdown of the coalition due to serious disagreements between the DA and the ANC. Beyond programme-based repositioning, further development of the DA would also need to be reflected in the composition of its leadership. Of the ten senior representatives elected at the 2023 party congress, seven belong to the white population group, which thus hardly reflects South Africa's demographic reality, in which more than 80 per cent of the population is Black.[13] This discrepancy points to a structural deficit in representation that significantly limits the party's integrative capacity. At the same time, the DA's party congress in April 2026 offers an opportunity to set the first substantive and personnel-related course for its future direction.

The remaining centre-right spectrum is characterised by a proliferation of micro-parties, new formations, and pronounced populist tendencies. These new parties – including breakaways from the DA – do not contribute to stabilising the political centre, instead intensifying its fragmentation and limiting its integrative capacity. They compete with one another for the same electorate,

Fig. 1: Success factors for parties in South Africa, differentiated by political camp

Factor	Relevance to the centre-right camp	Relevance to the centre-left camp
Recognition of the legacy of apartheid and an inclusive political style.	The clear acknowledgement of the inequalities that persist from apartheid is essential in order to gain credibility and support beyond traditional voter segments, particularly among the Black majority population.	A central element of the centre-left's programme that shapes political narratives, that is partly linked to redistribution demands, and that simultaneously serves as a primary mobilisation factor.
An ethically sound political style combined with transparency and accountability.	A political style that establishes integrity, transparency, and accountability as key points of distinction from the ANC and left-wing populist forces. A consistent emphasis on these elements remains indispensable to the credibility and appeal of this camp.	Necessary when it comes to regaining legitimacy because corruption and nepotism weigh particularly heavily on left-leaning parties. Demands for social justice, redistribution, and equality must be credibly pursued by linking them to transparency and accountability.
Good governance and a positive track record.	Required in order to demonstrate governing competence through successful work at all political levels, to build on this continuously, and to highlight past achievements.	The dominant camp is expected to significantly improve its hitherto modest record in government across all political levels, to address existing deficits, and thereby also to regain lost trust.
Leadership figures.	The integrity, national visibility, and broad societal appeal of party leaders are key determinants of success in mobilising beyond the party's core base.	Leadership figures strongly shape this camp. Charisma and credibility are essential.

operate with weak organisational structures, are often paralysed by personal rivalries, and lack a coherent nationwide presence. The limited integrative capacity of South Africa's centre-right spectrum is illustrated by the case of ActionSA: Despite occasional mobilisation gains at the regional level, its pronounced competitive stance towards the DA and its rivalry with other small parties prevent any consolidating effect within the centre-right camp. At present, the BOSA party is seeking to establish a consolidated centrist movement through cooperation with smaller parties. Its aim is to combine a market-oriented policy approach with an inclusive, non-ethnically defined model of society. The success of this initiative remains uncertain, but it does underline the fact that the future of the right-of-centre political camp in South Africa does not depend solely on the growth of the DA. The key factor here will be the ability to consolidate democratically oriented forces within this spectrum and to thereby secure institutional stability and programme-based coherence. The following factors are crucial for parties in both the centre-right and centre-left camps when it comes to withstanding populist forces while achieving broad societal resonance in South Africa:

1. *Recognition of the legacy of apartheid and an inclusive political style without ideological narrowing:* Parties must openly acknowledge the enduring impact of racial inequality rooted in apartheid while overcoming ethnic, social, and regional divides. A largely non-ideological approach is required because citizens primarily expect pragmatic solutions to concrete problems.

2. *Integrity, transparency, and accountability:* A consistent rejection of corruption and nepotism combined with credible, values-based leadership. This includes transparency in political decision-making, clear oversight mechanisms, and the strengthening of independent institutions for monitoring state action.

3. *Good governance and a positive track record:* Reliable governance and policies focused on practical outcomes constitute key resources of political credibility. It is also advantageous if parties can demonstrate a proven positive record in government that shows that they are capable of governing successfully.

4. *Leadership figures:* National visibility, broad societal appeal, and the personal integrity of party leaders are decisive in building trust and enabling successful mobilisation.

These four determinants of success constitute general framework conditions for all parties in South Africa. In a further analytical step, these preconditions can be applied to democratic forces in both the centre-left and centre-right camps and can be translated into more specific strategic recommendations, thereby resulting in the overall picture presented in Figure 1.

In order for these determinants to take effect, a robust party organisation is required along with clear decision-making processes, reliable local structures, professional communication, and a realistic prospect of governing. The points outlined above – particularly factors two to four – undoubtedly also apply to other national contexts. By contrast, the first factor is highly specific to South Africa and to the country's particular social and historical trajectory. In this regard, the enduring legacy of apartheid must be taken into account as it continues to shape social inequality and political dynamics.

Conclusion: The perspective of an integrative catch-all party of the political centre

The decline of the ANC as a long-standing governing party has led to profound fragmentation and polarisation within the South African party system while simultaneously encouraging coalition formation. Populist forces are gaining strength, whereas the political centre remains too weak to secure reliable reform majorities. Three decades after the democratic breakthrough, South Africa thus faces the central challenge of ensuring political stability and reform capacity despite declining trust in parties and institutions.[14]

The largest party within the centre-right spectrum – the DA – has the potential to develop into a South African catch-all party, as described by Otto Kirchheimer – that is, a party that is capable of appealing to broad sections of the electorate beyond clear class or social milieu boundaries and thereby also of exerting an integrative effect that transcends traditional loyalties.[15] Both its increasing strategic openness within the GNU – reflected in a growing willingness to contribute actively to overall governmental stability through pragmatic and compromise-oriented action – and its emphasis on integrity and good governance point in this direction. However, without a clear acknowledgement of the enduring social inequalities rooted in apartheid, the DA will remain only partially accessible to the Black majority population. As the strongest force within the centre-left camp, the ANC has largely lost its binding effect due to decades of mismanagement, corruption, and a weak governing record. At the same time, Nelson Mandela's party has thus far proved either unwilling or unable to initiate substantive reforms that would be capable of sustainably restoring confidence in its governing competence. The future of the political centre in South Africa therefore increasingly depends on whether the DA has the courage and determination to formulate a credible offer to a diverse electorate and thereby to establish itself as a durable majority party.

– translated from German –

1 Detailed background information on the 2024 election – including a comprehensive analysis of the historical trajectory, the social and economic crisis prior to the vote, assessments of the election campaigns, and summaries of voter turnout – has been provided by Schulz-Herzenberg and Southall (2024, n. 2). This is the fourth study in a series on South Africa's parliamentary elections that is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung South Africa.
2 Schulz-Herzberg, Collette / Southall, Roger 2024: Election 2024, South Africa Countdown to Coalition, Auckland Park, pp. 232 f.
3 Ibid., pp. 1–270.
4 Bauer, Nickolaus 2024: South Africa's Easy Election Guide: Who to Vote for in 2024?, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, ESI Press, pp. 1–119, 22 Jan 2024, in: https://ogy.de/9uqs [17 Feb 2025].
5 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Voting behaviour in 2024 indicates that the ANC, EFF, and MK together achieved roughly the share of the vote that the ANC alone had secured in 1999 and 2004. Many former ANC voters thus remain within the left-wing camp in that they either support the EFF or MK or join the largest "voter group" in the country: namely that of non-voters. While the ANC is losing direct strength, the political camp that is shaped by its history and ideology remains dominant.
9 The term "Coloured community" in South Africa refers to a historically constructed population group of mixed ancestry that is concentrated primarily in the Western Cape. During apartheid, this community occupied an ambivalent position between discrimination and relative privilege and is still regarded today as a distinct political voter base; Encyclopædia Britannica 2026: Coloured people, 23 Jan 2026, in: https://ogy.de/wr3c [7 Jan 2025].
10 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2.
11 Van Onselen, Gareth 2024: Elections 2024 [15]: Mapping ANC, DA, MK and EFF support by race, Inside Politics, 24 Jun 2024, in: https://ogy.de/4gp1 [7 Jan 2025].
12 Standard Bank 2025: Assessing the state of the DA, Newsletter, 6 Nov 2025.
13 Ibid.
14 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2, pp. 82 f.
15 A "catch-all party" – as conceptualised by Otto Kirchheimer – refers to a party type that emerged after the Second World War and that seeks to attract voters from as many social strata as possible rather than to represent a specific class or worldview. It is characterised by ideological moderation, vote maximisation, leadership hierarchy, and relatively weak membership ties in order to appeal to a broad centre; Krouwel, André 2003: Otto Kirchheimer and the Catch-All Party, Western European Politics 26: 2, Apr 2003, pp. 23–40, in: https://ogy.de/pqky [17 Jan 2026].

How Can Centre-Right Parties Hold Their Ground in Africa?

A Look at the Democracy Union of Africa

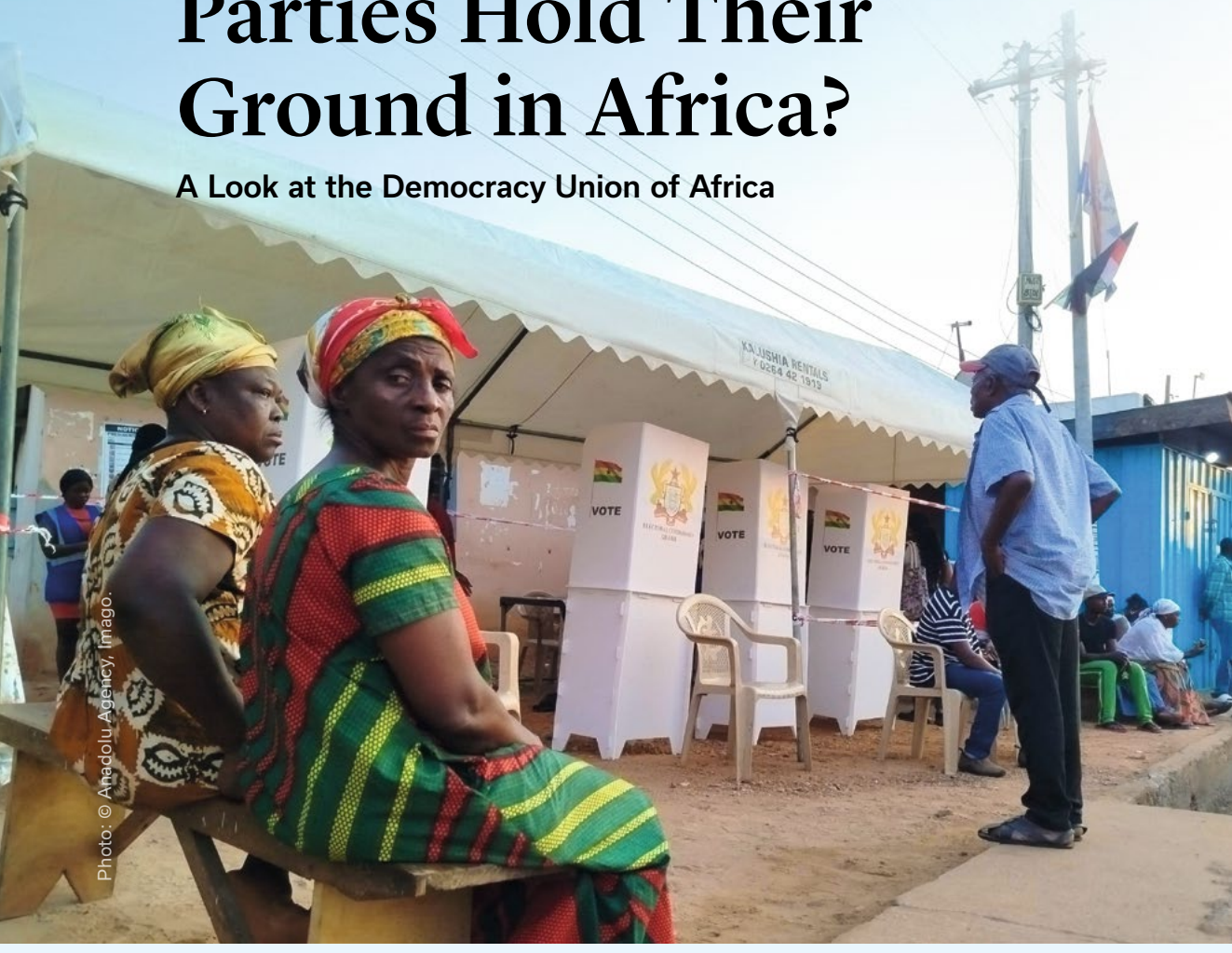


Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Africa's democracies – and with them, the continent's democratic political parties – are facing major challenges. While democracy is still viewed by most as the preferred form of government, trust in the ability of elected governments to deliver solutions is waning. At the same time, Africa's autocrats are on the advance, in some cases emboldened by recent geopolitical developments.

Centre-right parties are also coming under growing pressure. In recent elections, some have lost power or been prevented from taking office through authoritarian practices and unlawful restrictions.

In response, these parties are strengthening regional cooperation in order to share ideas, to amplify the voice of the political centre across the continent, and to bolster the resilience of Africa's often-fragile democracies. The Democracy Union of Africa (DUA) has a key role to play in this regard.

The 2025 DUA Forum in Nairobi offers grounds for hope that the organisation will be able to perform its role more effectively in the future as a platform for exchange and ideas – although financing remains a key challenge.

The Authors

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Africa[1] is undergoing dynamic political change shaped by shifting geopolitical influences and a young, increasingly politically engaged population. Centre-right parties face the challenge of asserting themselves in an environment marked by declining democratic norms and international standards as well as by growing youth dissatisfaction. Despite coups, wars, and numerous crises, a majority of people on our neighbouring continent continue to favour democratic forms of government. Given the economic difficulties facing many countries, high unemployment almost everywhere, and widespread corruption, this is a remarkable finding. In many African states, however, democratic structures are being eroded. Elections are being manipulated and constitutions amended in order to secure the continued rule of entrenched elites. Independent media are being silenced, while democratic opposition politicians are being killed, imprisoned, or otherwise repressed. Whether in East, West, North, or Southern Africa, autocrats are gaining ground – encouraged by a geopolitical environment in which freedom, democracy, and human rights are being increasingly sidelined.

Hegemony instead of democracy

Since Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, Washington has focused primarily on deals and resources rather than on peace, international norms, or democratic governance. Sub-Saharan Africa has been hit particularly hard by the near-total withdrawal of US development assistance, which has been compounded by significant cuts on the part of European donors. This is especially evident in support for civil society initiatives and democratic engagement. Whereas until recently, there were numerous funding programmes for organisations and individuals working to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression, the number of Western institutions providing financial assistance and expertise has shrunk considerably. German political foundations are among the few remaining reliable partners.

At the same time, the political environment for democratic actors in Africa has become significantly more difficult. The influence of traditional Western actors – above all, the EU and the United States – is declining, while China, Russia, Turkey, and other countries are expanding their economic and political footprint. These states are pursuing pragmatic, resource-driven approaches that may in some cases reinforce authoritarian structures while at the same time expanding their own influence on the continent. They are doing so through intensified economic cooperation that spans raw material extraction (China), infrastructure projects (China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates), education initiatives (particularly Turkish school projects in West Africa), military support (Russia and Turkey), and disinformation campaigns (Russia). The latter are demonstrably aimed at reducing Western influence in African societies.

Electoral manipulation and violence – And little criticism

Recent elections in several African countries have cast a harsh light on the erosion of democratic structures, on the disregard for democratic standards, and on the persecution of democratic opposition forces. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Ouattara secured a fourth term through both a controversial constitutional change and

the exclusion of leading opposition candidates, thereby consolidating his hold on power for the next five years.[2] In Tanzania, opposition leader Tundu Lissu has been detained since April of last year and charged with treason.[3] During the elections at the end of October, protests were brutally suppressed and hundreds of demonstrators killed following what appears to have been extensive manipulation of the vote itself. In Mozambique, too, protests against alleged electoral fraud benefiting the long-ruling FRELIMO party were violently dispersed, with serious doubts existing as to the validity of the official results.[4]

The United States has largely abandoned a values-based foreign policy and no longer consistently advocates democracy and human rights worldwide. Other Western actors – not least in light of shifting geopolitical realities – are also increasingly reluctant to publicly demand adherence to democratic and rule-of-law principles. Reactions to the electoral manipulation and violence in the above-mentioned cases have therefore been muted, partly out of a desire not to jeopardise relations with the respective governments.[5]

More and more young people are mobilising against corruption, unemployment, and inadequate public services.

African states themselves also generally refrain from intervening in the electoral processes of neighbouring countries, regardless of the extent to which democratic standards are violated and people are oppressed. On the contrary: Regional organisations that typically deploy election observers have often issued *de facto* endorsements in the past. All the more noteworthy, then, is the election report by the regional organisation SADC on Tanzania, which stated in unusually clear terms that voters had not been presented with a genuinely free choice among candidates.[6] There is, however, little indication that either regional or international actors will hold the Tanzanian government and its president accountable for electoral manipulation and human rights violations. A broader climate of impunity appears to be spreading across Tanzania, Mozambique, and Côte d'Ivoire. The same applies to the military coup in Madagascar, which has thus far led to no major shifts in the island state's relations with Europe or with its neighbouring countries. Is democracy becoming obsolete?

Generation Z demands participation and accountability

Even though recent surveys still show that people across Africa prefer democracy over other forms of government, public dissatisfaction is growing – driven by manipulated elections, restricted freedoms, and above all, weak economic development and limited personal prospects. Protests led by Generation Z – which began in Kenya and have since spread across many parts of the continent – highlight in country-specific ways the notion that political and economic trajectories in many sub-Saharan states are not sustainable. The number of young people who see neither economic opportunities nor meaningful political participation is rising across the continent. Increasingly, these young people are mobilising through digital networks against corruption, unemployment, and inadequate public services. The perception that their interests are insufficiently represented in formal political systems is prompting more extra-parliamentary engagement – through social media activism, street protests, and civil society initiatives.

This dynamic poses a major challenge to political parties, including those of the centre-right: They must develop new political offerings and meaningfully integrate younger generations. The gap between an often-ageing elite and a youthful majority population will be crucial to the future viability of both the political parties and democracy itself. The erosion of democratic structures and processes driven by long-standing incumbents seeking to retain power on the one hand and the other growing demands from younger populations for political and economic participation on the other hand are two opposing trends

that indicate a turning point for political parties across the continent. This situation presents a particular opportunity for predominantly opposition centre-right parties to reclaim their role as key vehicles of democratic will-formation and to help break up entrenched power structures. Rejuvenating party membership and modernising decision-making structures through the meaningful inclusion of Generation Z could help make democracy on our neighbouring continent more future-proof. The opportunity is especially pronounced for centre-right parties as Africa's demographically young societies remain broadly conservative in outlook.

Conservative values – Left-wing policies

When examining the underlying values of African societies, many would typically be described as "conservative", including the particular importance attached to family, widespread religiosity, and the preservation of traditions, to name just a few. However, centre-right parties in Africa have thus far struggled to harness this value orientation for their political work. Public discourse, political rhetoric, and party platforms continue to be dominated by ideas rooted in the left. This worldview tends to hold the state as a welfare provider that intervenes heavily in the economy and creates jobs. It is often accompanied by latent scepticism towards markets, private enterprise, and free competition. By contrast, ideals closer to conservative thinking – such as individual responsibility, self-help, and subsidiarity – play a far smaller role in this paradigm.

This gap between societal values and political ideology is sometimes explained by the historical experiences of many African states, which are shaped by colonialism, exploitation, and unequal resource distribution. When independence was gained, social inequality was high, and large segments of the population lived in poverty. In such contexts, left-leaning approaches that emphasise

Hunger for power overrules democracy: In 2025, Alassane Ouattara first secured his candidacy for a fourth term as president in Côte d'Ivoire through a constitutional amendment – and then also his election victory by excluding the main opposition candidates. Photo: © Zuma Press Wire, Imago.

redistribution, state intervention, and social justice often appear more attractive than conservative or liberal approaches that rely on market mechanisms and individual responsibility. In many African countries, the state remains the primary provider of infrastructure, education, and healthcare because private markets are only weakly developed. Left-wing parties promise public investment, subsidies, and protection for the poorest segments of the population. This resonates with voters living in precarious circumstances who expect immediate improvements in their living conditions.

Political competition often appears to take place primarily between socialist and liberal ideas.

It should also be recalled that many African liberation movements maintained close ties with socialist states of the former Eastern Bloc, thereby contributing to the enduring influence of socialist ideas in their politics.

Less frequently discussed in connection with the dominance of "left-wing" thinking in African politics is the lack of compelling offers from centre-right actors built around the conservative value orientation of large parts of the population. Political competition often appears to take place primarily between socialist and liberal ideas. Exceptions such as Ghana's New Patriotic Party (NPP) and South Africa's Inkatha Freedom Party tend to confirm the rule.

This situation is reflected in the fact that there is still only a limited number of centre-right parties in government. Parties such as the NPP in Ghana and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) have lost power in the wake of recent elections.[7] Other prominent centre-right actors – including Côte d'Ivoire's opposition Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (PDCI-RDA) and Tanzania's CHADEMA – have recently fallen victim to authoritarian governance and been unlawfully prevented from assuming government responsibility, as outlined above. Internal party conflicts – for example, within Mozambique's RENAMO, Uganda's Democratic Party and the – also Ugandan – Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) – have further weakened the African centre-right camp.

Democracy Union of Africa

Almost 30 years ago, centre-right parties across Africa decided to strengthen their cooperation in order to amplify the voice of the political centre on the continent, to share their experiences, and to enhance the resilience of Africa's often-fragile democracies. To that end, the Democracy Union of Africa (DUA; formerly the Democratic Union of Africa) was founded in 1997 The DUA operates as an alliance of African centre-right parties committed to democracy, freedom, and prosperity. The union views itself as a promoter of good governance, personal liberty, and the social market economy, which it regards as being key to sustainable development and stability in Africa. The organisation pursues these goals through annual forums, workshops, and election observation missions. The DUA is a member of the International Democracy Union (IDU), which is the global alliance of centre-right parties that also includes the European People's Party (EPP). From the outset, the IDU played a key role in supporting the DUA's development and was closely involved in its decision-making processes. The most important external supporter for many years was the UK's Westminster Foundation; today, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is the primary partner that supports the DUA through its Regional Programme Political Dialogue Sub-Saharan Africa.

The DUA's development was slow after its founding and at times even stalled, but in 2019, an IDU-backed initiative was launched in order to revitalise the organisation. This effort to resolve the DUA's crisis initially failed, however. Although the newly elected leadership at the time developed a roadmap for the organisation's future – including strengthening institutional

capacity, deepening cooperation among member parties, and positioning the DUA as an advocate for democratic principles in Africa – implementation remained limited. A dual leadership model introduced after the 2022 executive elections proved only partially effective because leadership responsibilities were in practice assumed by just one of the co-chairs. Following the most recent leadership elections in 2024, however, the DUA is now headed by a younger chair: Ghanaian politician Louisa Atta-Agyemang, who has approached her two-year mandate with clear priorities and effective communication. Atta-Agyemang benefits from strong backing from her party, the NPP – one of the DUA's core pillars – and from the support of former Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, a prominent and influential advocate.

At its latest forum, the DUA expressed solidarity with democrats who face repression in their home countries.

New leadership, fresh momentum, and a clear commitment

The DUA Forum held in Nairobi in October 2025 offered a glimpse of this renewed momentum. Under the title "Navigating Africa's Strategic Position in a Multipolar World – Towards Equitable and Mutually Beneficial Partnerships", the event sought both to articulate Africa's place in a changing global order and to further strengthen ties among member parties. One key focus was Africa's future relationship with the Western community of values – undoubtedly one of the continent's central geopolitical questions, but also of major relevance to Europe. At the forum, the DUA positioned itself clearly on the side of democracy, expressing solidarity with democratic actors who face repression or imprisonment for their political engagement, including Tanzanian opposition leader Tundu Lissu and Ugandan opposition figure Kizza Besigye. Another important step for the organisation's future development was the adoption of a new statute designed to clarify institutional procedures and prevent many of the conflicts that had previously hampered the DUA's work. This work included the introduction of a regionally rotating chairmanship, thereby granting parties from less strongly represented regions a realistic opportunity to lead the organisation. Observers at the Nairobi conference – including the Secretary General of the International Democracy Union – assessed the DUA's trajectory as clearly positive.[8] However, the encouraging signals from Nairobi should not obscure the significant challenges that remain. These include expanding membership, deepening cooperation among member parties, and reducing dependence on external support.

The DUA currently has 21 member parties.[9] Compared with other African party families, it is therefore lagging well behind the liberals (Africa Liberal Network; 42 parties) but is ahead of Centrist Democrat International (CDI; 19 parties) and African socialist party networks (15 parties), although the Socialist International itself has more than 37 members in Africa.

Limited electoral success among DUA members

Of the DUA's 21 member parties, only three are currently part of a governing coalition or hold government responsibility (Istiqlal in Morocco, the Unity Party in Liberia, and the Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa). Kenya's KANU is currently preparing to join the governing coalition. The status of Uganda's opposition Democratic Party is unclear as the party chair serves as Minister of Justice in the government. Following the NPP's defeat in Ghana in 2024 and the MCP's loss of power in Malawi in 2025, the DUA now has only a very limited presence in government across Africa. In addition, some DUA members – realistically speaking – have little prospect of gaining power in the short to medium term given their political weight or the situation in their respective countries.

With its statute adopted in 2025, however, the DUA created room to increase its membership.

A few months before his arrest: In January 2025, Tundu Lissu (left) was elected chairman of the Tanzanian DUA member party CHADEMA. In April, the government had him arrested for political reasons. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

Alongside full membership, it introduced an associate membership category for parties in countries where two DUA member parties already exist. Previously, admitting more than two parties per country had not been accepted. The DUA also created an accredited membership category for parties that do not meet all criteria for membership. This category allows also societal organisations to become members. In order to prepare future full members for the organisation, the DUA now also provides observer status for parties that are not yet members. In selecting future members, the DUA relies on rather vague criteria, such as a programmatic orientation towards the ideals of the centre-right and a commitment to democracy. Full members must be able to demonstrate participation in democratic elections in their country.

The necessary consolidation of the DUA's work primarily involves strengthening its programmatic political activity and reinforcing the organisation as a representative voice of the centre-right. Although the DUA is a network of highly diverse parties whose approach to politics is often more pragmatic than programmatic, it could provide important support as a source of ideas for its member parties' political and policy work, thereby helping them strengthen their platforms and embed themselves more firmly in society, which would lead to improvements in their electoral prospects.

What still needs to be done

Deepening and expanding the DUA's work is not possible without a functioning structure, however. The DUA currently has no secretariat. The chair carries the main burden of the work, securing outside support for events and in some cases financing them herself. The current Secretary General is serving as his party's campaign manager, being based several thousand kilometres from the DUA's nominal headquarters in Accra. This lack of infrastructure fails to reflect the DUA's growing political importance. Thus far, the DUA has largely depended on the leadership drive and personal commitment of those at the top.

This lack of structure is primarily a result of insufficient funding. While the DUA's statute provides for membership dues, these dues have not been collected in the past, thereby leaving the organisation with no meaningful resources of

its own. The DUA's flagship activity – the annual DUA Forum – is largely funded by partners and sponsors. Some DUA member parties have sufficient financial resources to support DUA forums hosted in their respective countries, but funding for a DUA secretariat remains unresolved.

The crisis of democracy in Africa requires closer cooperation among democracies and democrats. With the withdrawal of traditional external actors in democracy support and the growing influence of actors promoting authoritarian social models, the conditions for cooperation among democrats in Africa have deteriorated. However, the main reason for the crisis of African democracies does not lie primarily in these external developments; rather, it stems above all from the fact that African democracies have not been able to generate sufficient political stability and prosperity – factors that are essential in fostering citizens' trust in both the state and democracy. Political parties are often part of the problem because they are not sufficiently well positioned in terms of substance and organisation and are not sufficiently rooted in society. What is more, political parties are not attractive enough to the key target group of young voters. As such, it is not surprising that young Africans are increasingly articulating their interests in the streets rather than through the political parties.

In recent years, the DUA has positioned itself clearly alongside democrats and democracies. In public statements, it has highlighted the critical situation in Tanzania, where DUA member CHADEMA faced severe repression around the 2025 elections. The DUA has also issued critical statements on political developments in Côte d'Ivoire – where the presidential candidate of DUA member PDCI-RDA was excluded from the elections – as well as on the unlawful detention of Ugandan opposition politician Kizza Besigye.[10] In so doing, the DUA succeeded in feeding this mobilisation into the international political debate via the International Democracy Union. In the case of CHADEMA, this contributed to the successful introduction by the EPP in the European Parliament of a resolution that is critical of political developments in Tanzania.

The DUA's political weight – especially in comparison with that of other party-family associations in Africa – should be increased by admitting additional members. However, in expanding its membership, the DUA should avoid the mistake made by other international party associations of not sufficiently vetting new members for their commitment to democracy.

As part of this expansion, it is also important to do more to incorporate the continent's francophone countries. At present, only three francophone African countries are represented in the DUA through parties: Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo. Anglophone Africa is far better represented, with ten countries, while two of Africa's five lusophone countries are represented in the DUA. Moreover, with the exception of Equatorial Guinea, the entire Central Africa region is absent from the DUA.

Deepening the DUA's work can make an important contribution to the success of its member parties in their respective countries. This should be achieved by supporting the programmatic work of the member parties and by focusing on areas where existing societal value orientations have not yet been sufficiently taken up by political parties. One option would be to establish a (virtual) DUA policy institute that develops policy concepts that can then be used in member parties' platforms. More intense sharing of campaign experiences and of how to deal with authoritarian regimes would also add value, thereby making membership in the DUA more attractive.

How can centre-right parties hold their ground in Africa?

Given political developments across Africa and the trend towards authoritarian governance, democratic parties are under considerable pressure. This situation calls for greater solidarity among democracies, democrats, and democratic political parties on the continent as well as for more structured cooperation. As international engagement in democracy support declines, solidarity among African democrats is becoming increasingly important. The Democracy Union

of Africa has a mandate from its member parties to play an active role in this process and has done so successfully in recent years. As an African umbrella organisation of centre-right parties and a member of the IDU, the DUA also has the potential to build bridges to other continents and to advocate for solidarity beyond Africa itself. The international networking of DUA member parties with other IDU parties and its strong partnership with Germany are of fundamental importance for all involved, especially in times of geopolitical change and renewed rivalries.

The political success of centre-right parties in Africa will depend above all on whether these parties can offer policies that reflect the interests of their populations. This requires a clear substantive positioning as a political force that represents conservative societal values and – building on that foundation – that develops political programmes that lead to tangible improvements in people's living conditions. It will also become increasingly important for the success of centre-right parties to align these policy offerings with the needs of young people and to win them over to party-political engagement. When politically engaged young people are heard within party structures, when they can contribute to decision-making and programme development, and when they are able to represent their parties publicly, these parties become more representative, and democracy is strengthened as a result.

In terms of sharing ideas regarding political and policy challenges – as well as on important issues, such as party organisation, campaign management, political communication, and dealing with authoritarian governments – the DUA can serve as a platform for its member parties. In so doing, the DUA would make an important contribution to safeguarding and promoting democracy, to strengthening the centre-right in Africa, and to increasing its attractiveness to new members.

– translated from German –

1 For the purposes of the present article, the authors use the term "Africa" as a simplifying shorthand for a continent which consists of 54 states.
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8 Conversation between Holger Dix and IDU Secretary General Tina Mercep, 2 Feb 2026.
9 National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire – African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA); Union of the Centre-Right (UCD), Equatorial Guinea; New Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana; Kenya African National Union (KANU); Democratic Party (DP), Kenya; Unity Party (UP), Liberia; Malawi Congress Party (MCP); Istiqlal Party, Morocco; Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO); Democratic Movement of Mozambique (MDM); Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), Namibia; Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria; People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), Sierra Leone; National Grand Coalition (NGC), Sierra Leone; African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), South Africa; Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), South Africa; Party for Democracy and Progress (CHADEMA), Tanzania; Forces démocratiques pour la République (FDR), Togo; Democratic Party (DP), Uganda; Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Uganda.
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Morocco's Political Centre in a Hybrid System

Between Party Pluralism and Monarchical Influence

Photo: © Zoonar, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Morocco's political parties operate within a hybrid system in which elections and parliaments exist yet key strategic decisions remain closely aligned with the monarchy. Within this framework, the political centre plays a pivotal role, ensuring stability while making use of its limited scope for policymaking within the parameters set by the monarchy.

Istiqlal and the Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI) have been part of a governing coalition since 2021 and – as system-loyal centre-right parties – shape the political agenda. Istiqlal emphasises tradition and moderate reform, whereas the RNI prioritises technocratic modernisation and economic development. Both parties are partners of the European People's Party (EPP) and pursue a pro-Western orientation.

The governing coalition faces the challenge of meeting societal expectations – particularly those of an increasingly frustrated younger generation – without overstepping the structural limits of the system. Protests and declining party engagement point to a growing distance from the political elite.

The parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2026 are set to take place against a backdrop of ongoing fragmentation and likely also low voter turnout. For the political centre, the challenge remains to safeguard stability while simultaneously regaining public trust.

The Author

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Overview of the Moroccan party landscape

- Istiqlal (centre-right)
- Mouvement Populaire (social-liberal)
- PAM (liberal)
- PJD (Islamists)
- PPS (left-wing)
- Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI, centre-right)
- Union Constitutionnelle (liberal-conservative)
- USFP (social democrat)

A hybrid system: Monarchy is dominant, parliament is consulted

In the Kingdom of Morocco, democratic structures coexist with an omnipresent monarchical dominance. The political system is regarded as a hybrid form of governance[1] in which parliaments and elections exist while the King and his entourage (the *Makhzen*) set the guiding principles of policy.[2] Centrist parties – above all, the long-established Istiqlal (Independence Party) and the economically liberal Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI) – play an important role within this framework as reliable partners to the monarchy. Acting from within a joint governing coalition, they will face a further test with the parliamentary elections in 2026, however.

Formally, since the constitutional reform of 2011 – which was enacted in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring – the Kingdom has been a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and an elected government.[3] In practice, however, power remains heavily concentrated in the Palace. Key sovereign portfolios such as foreign affairs, the interior, the military, and religious affairs are formally part of the government cabinet, yet their heads are appointed directly by the monarch; thus, they are regarded as politically non-partisan. Although the 2011 Constitution granted parliament and government additional powers,[4] their room for manoeuvre remains narrowly circumscribed. Strategic direction and key senior appointments continue to be decided at the Royal Palace. This situation has given rise to an inherent tension: Elections are held regularly and are largely free, yet their primary function is to determine which party is best situated to implement the royal agenda most effectively. The overarching guidelines of state policy – from major development plans to foreign affairs – are, however, formulated through the King's speeches and initiatives. Party politics is therefore not the visionary force in the country, but at best a manager of the royal agenda.

Centrist parties – above all, Istiqlal and the RNI – play significant roles within this system. Precisely because radical or anti-monarchical forces remain marginalised in Morocco, the moderate, system-loyal parties effectively form the centre of party politics. Istiqlal and the RNI are regarded as key pillars of the party system and maintain close ties with the European centre-right family. Both parties have been official partners of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2018. But how do Istiqlal and the RNI conduct politics under conditions of limited parliamentary power? And how is the political centre preparing for the parliamentary elections in September 2026?

A unique electoral system as a guarantor of pluralism – and fragmentation

One crucial instrument through which the Moroccan system is steered is electoral law. Over the years, the system has been designed to allow

pluralistic elections while preventing any single party from achieving a dominant majority that could diminish the influence of the Palace. Morocco has a long-established multi-party system, and particularly during the reign of King Hassan II (1961 to 1999), the party landscape became fragmented – partly due to the Palace's deliberate fostering of the creation of new parties. Most recently, the 2021 electoral reform – which was implemented immediately before the latest parliamentary elections – had a decisive impact on the composition of parliament.[5] Among other changes, the threshold of three per cent was abolished, thereby making it easier for small parties to enter parliament. Even more significant was the change in the method used to allocate seats: For the first time, seats were calculated no longer based on the votes actually cast, but rather based on the number of registered voters in each constituency, regardless of how many people had actually voted. This unusual calculation method – which is unique to Morocco – reduces the effective value of each vote and particularly disadvantages large parties with high voter support. The implications of this change are considerable: Since the divisor (i.e. the number of registered voters) is now much larger than the number of votes actually cast, the number of seats that a high-vote party can secure is substantially reduced. Therefore, it is almost impossible for any party to win more than one seat per constituency, no matter how overwhelming its share of the vote there may be. When it comes to distributing parliamentary seats per constituency, it is the sequence of results that is important. If the party with the most votes cannot win more than one seat, the remaining seats are distributed among the next-ranking parties. The largest constituencies in densely populated urban districts have six seats, which are typically shared among as many parties. However, the majority of Morocco's constituencies – particularly in rural areas – have only two or three seats. In order to emerge as the election winner, a party therefore needs strong results nationwide, particularly in regions with a rather traditionalist electorate. In this electoral system, no political force can secure significantly more than 100 of the 395 seats. This effect is further reinforced by low voter turnout (50.35 per cent in 2021[6]).

The 2021 parliamentary election resulted in an even more fragmented legislature. The previously governing Islamist party – the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which had been the strongest force in 2011 and 2016 – fell dramatically, from 125 to just 13 seats. Instead, the winners were the liberal-conservative centre parties: The RNI came first, with 102 of 395 seats, followed by the Palace-aligned Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), with 87 seats, and Istiqlal, with 81 mandates. The fact that the RNI won more than 100 seats despite the electoral system underscores the party's overwhelming nationwide victory.

Doubts as to the impact of one's own vote contribute to low voter turnout and political disengagement.

From the perspective of state power, the electoral system achieves its purpose by ensuring pluralism and preventing a concentration of power, particularly at the extreme ends. The diversity of the party system is most visible in cities, where up to six parties per constituency can realistically hope to secure parliamentary seats. More extreme positions are also represented in cities, however, both on the left and within the Islamic-conservative spectrum. While these groups can expect to win seats in their strongholds, they are no more successful than other parties elsewhere. The fragmentation of the party landscape – which is often criticised as a weakness – is, in fact, an implicit guarantee of stability. By preventing any single party from dominating government action, the King remains indispensable as a non-partisan arbiter. For voters, however, this comes at a cost: Many citizens doubt that their vote can bring about fundamental change, which contributes to low voter turnout and political disaffection.

Against this backdrop, Istiqlal and the RNI must repeatedly assert themselves as actors of the political centre.

The centrist parties: Pillars of political operations

Within Morocco's party spectrum, Istiqlal and the RNI represent the traditional elite – in contrast to more ideologically distinct forces such as the Islamist PJD and the left-wing parties. Istiqlal and the RNI are considered system-loyal, meaning they accept the monarchy as the supreme authority, operate within its framework, and stand ideologically for economically liberal policies with a socially conservative bent. International observers regard these parties as being well-networked and representing a distinctly pro-Western course. As partners of the EPP, they participate in the European debate and advocate greater international engagement for Morocco.

Their true test, however, lies in their domestic role within the state–party relationship. Despite their proximity to the Palace, Istiqlal and the RNI must prove their relevance by mediating between the needs of the population and the directives of the monarchy. In a sense, they function as a buffer within the hybrid system, lending democratic legitimacy to the political arena and giving societal interests at least a partial voice.

The Parti de l'Istiqlal was founded in 1944 during the struggle against the French Protectorate.

Istiqlal – Tradition, loyalty to the monarchy, and a renewed profile

The Parti de l'Istiqlal is Morocco's oldest political party. It is the only Moroccan party to be a member of both the Centrist Democrat International (IDC-CDI) and the International Democracy Union (IDU). Through these memberships,

Elected government under royal supervision: Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch is seen speaking at the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Marrakesh in October 2023, with a portrait of Mohammed VI in the background. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

Istiqlal represents the Moroccan perspective in the international networks of centre-right parties. Founded in 1944 during the struggle against the French Protectorate, the party remains an enduring part of Morocco's national history. Istiqlal led the independence movement and provided the first post-1956 government leaders, thereby becoming a formative force in early state politics. In the 1960s and 1970s, it came into rivalry with King Hassan II, however, who did not tolerate competing centres of power.[7] During this period, left-wing factions split off (e.g. the precursor to today's Social Democratic Socialist Union of Popular Forces, the USFP), while Istiqlal itself remained largely conservative-nationalist.[8] Under King Hassan II, the party experienced phases of opposition and co-optation: at times marginalised, at others included in government coalitions depending on the Palace's calculations. This capacity for political survival and adaptation has allowed Istiqlal to mature into a kind of state-bearing institution – always system-loyal while also maintaining its own distinct profile.

Ideologically, Istiqlal emphasises social justice within a market economy framework and is traditionally deeply rooted both in the urban middle class and in rural communities. During the ten-year rule of the Islamist PJD from 2011, Istiqlal initially participated as a coalition partner but withdrew from the coalition in 2013. From 2017 onwards, Istiqlal underwent a personnel renewal when Nizar Baraka assumed leadership: A moderate technocrat and grandson of the founding father, Allal al-Fassi, Baraka restored the party to the forefront of national politics. Under his leadership, Istiqlal made significant gains in the 2021 elections, rising from 46 to 81 seats, and has since been a key pillar of the government as the third-largest party.

Despite its participation in government, Istiqlal consciously maintains an independent profile. The party presents itself as a values-oriented centre-right force, pursuing both economic development and social equity. In autumn 2025, for example, Istiqlal published a comprehensive economic policy statement calling for a stronger welfare state, for measures to protect household purchasing power, and for greater sovereignty in key sectors such as health, energy, and water.[9] The paper additionally contained indirect criticism of the governing styles of its coalition partners, the RNI and the PAM. In so doing, Istiqlal demonstrated two things: firstly, its technical competence and programmatic substance, and secondly, its determination to distinguish itself from its coalition partners despite being in government. This balancing act – that is, governing while remaining independent – is something Istiqlal has mastered exceptionally well due to its long experience.

Overall, Istiqlal today appears as a modern anchor of tradition: firmly rooted in Morocco's history while also striving to adapt to new challenges. Istiqlal's constructive, moderate stance makes it an indispensable factor within Morocco's power structure. This dual anchoring – that is, both patriotic and tradition-conscious on the one hand while open to moderate reforms on the other hand – makes Istiqlal attractive to many centrist voters. However, even Istiqlal encounters systemic limits: On issues touching the royal agenda, the party strictly follows the line of the Palace. While this aligns with its monarchist orientation, it also demonstrates that even a long-established party in Morocco can never act fully autonomously.

The RNI brings together economic elites, technocrats, and figures from established families.

RNI – Technocratic, business-friendly, and a key power broker

The RNI represents a political centre force created by the establishment. In many respects, it serves as a counterbalance to Istiqlal: Where Istiqlal draws on an 80-year history, the RNI was only founded in 1978 (i.e. one year after the 1977 parliamentary elections) as a coalition of independent MPs and prominent figures in order to

secure a Palace-loyal parliamentary majority. The party's founding in 1978 was spearheaded by then–Prime Minister Ahmed Osman, a brother-in-law of King Hassan II. From the outset, the RNI brought together economic elites, technocrats, and figures from established families. Adopting a centrist-liberal image, it quickly became the largest parliamentary faction (holding 141 of 264 seats in 1978). In this way, the RNI initially served as the Palace's main vehicle for channelling political power.[10] During the 1980s, the party experienced highs and lows: In 1981, a faction split off (later known as the National Democratic Party, PND – a precursor to today's coalition partner, the PAM), and in 1984, the RNI lost many seats to the newly formed Union Constitutionnelle – another Palace-initiated "administrative party".[11] Nevertheless, the RNI remained a constant player in shifting coalitions.

Under King Mohammed VI (reigning since 1999), the RNI's role as a state-supporting party has been further consolidated. It had previously participated in the historic government change of 1998 ("gouvernement de l'alternance") under the first left-leaning Prime Minister, Abderrahman Youssoufi of the USFP,[12] and later formed part of the technocratic cabinets of the early 2000s. The RNI's reputation as a reliable majority-maker in Moroccan politics was further reinforced in 2013, when Istiqlal left the coalition with the Islamist PJD and the RNI stepped in to secure a parliamentary majority for the PJD government.[13] After the 2016 election, the RNI acted shrewdly behind the scenes: It initially blocked the formation of a government by the election-winning PJD (under Abdelilah Benkirane) through maximalist demands, eventually engineering a coalition composition more to its liking under the more conciliatory PJD Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani. This episode of the so-called blockage in 2016 to 2017 highlighted the influence of the RNI, even though it was only the third-largest party at the time.[14]

Aziz Akhannouch – a billionaire entrepreneur in the energy and agribusiness sectors – took over the RNI's leadership ahead of the 2016 elections, investing heavily in the party and its professionalisation, with strategic areas such as communications being significantly expanded. As a result, the RNI positioned itself as a kind of performance-oriented party. In his 2021 campaign, Akhannouch promised comprehensive social reforms alongside major investments. He additionally positioned himself as a symbol of economic competence and closeness to the royal household – a combination that inspired trust among many voters. In fact, the RNI emerged as the clear winner of the 2021 election, displacing the PJD from the head of government.

Sensitive political questions are decided outside parliament.

For the RNI, however, this also meant being fully in the spotlight: The party has since borne primary responsibility for governing and is expected to deliver results. However, the success of the RNI has always depended heavily on its leadership personalities. This makes the party vulnerable because it is currently perceived as a party of the wealthy and powerful and is criticised by the opposition for lacking empathy for ordinary citizens, with Akhannouch – one of Morocco's richest men – embodying the close ties between money and politics. Criticism of Akhannouch and his administration steadily grew, and looking ahead to the 2026 parliamentary elections, he increasingly appeared to be a burden on the party's campaign capacity. In January 2026, Akhannouch announced that he would not run for party chairmanship again, and at a party congress in early February, he was succeeded by Mohamed Chaouki, the previous parliamentary faction leader. Despite his political office, Chaouki remains largely unknown outside RNI networks. Therefore, the move involves a certain degree of risk since he will have to defend the party's top position as the lead candidate in the elections. Thus, the RNI now faces the dual challenge of convincing broad segments of the population of its policy approaches while also mobilising support for a new lead candidate. Rising living

Call for change: With the protest movement "Generation Z 212", Morocco's youth is positioning itself as a driving force for structural reforms in the education and healthcare systems, as well as for the determined fight against corruption, inflation, and unemployment. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

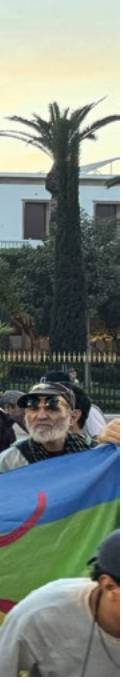
costs, the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake,[15] persistently high youth unemployment levels (over 20 per cent[16]), and stark regional disparities in development all present a serious test for Morocco's currently largest party.

In summary, the RNI today stands for renewal rooted in continuity: As a project supported by the Palace, it has played a key role in shaping the political landscape. Many of its ministers are experienced technocrats and business leaders who advance reforms, albeit always in coordination with the royal cabinet. The limits of power are clearly perceptible even for the RNI's top leadership: On core issues, the King sets the agenda. This has recently been evident in major projects such as preparations for the 2030 FIFA World Cup, the expansion of green hydrogen, and policy on the Sahara,[17] where the government has acted primarily in a supporting capacity. In this way, the party fulfils its principal role within the hybrid system – that is, the reliable administration of the development path defined by the King. Should it fail in managing social tensions or in addressing allegations of corruption, however, it too risks the fate of a governing party punished at the ballot box.

Between influence and constraint: Political centre under pressure in 2026

Although Istiqlal and the RNI play a central role in Morocco's parliament and government, they repeatedly encounter the structural limits of the system. Parliamentary debates do take place, but sensitive political issues are decided outside parliament. The centrist parties have accommodated themselves to this reality; over the longer term, however, this situation carries the risk of gradual erosion. If citizens gain the impression that elected representatives can effect little real change, the legitimacy of the entire political class declines.

This risk is particularly evident in the growing political disaffection among young people. Many young Moroccans feel unrepresented by the established parties and complain of a lack of meaningful participation.[18] In autumn 2025, frustration erupted in the protest movement "Generation Z 212", in which primarily young adults demonstrated against corruption, unemployment, and shortcomings in both education and healthcare.[19] The protests were directed explicitly at the government – including Prime Minister Akhannouch – and at the political parties, but



not at the monarchy. Unlike during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the system itself was not called into question.[20] For Istiqlal and the RNI – as governing parties and part of the political establishment – such developments represent a serious challenge. On the one hand, these parties must respond to citizens' legitimate social concerns and offer solutions; on the other hand, they must also respect the structural limits inherent in the system. This situation illustrates the delicate balancing act of the system: It seeks to involve the population sufficiently in order to safeguard stability but not to open up to such an extent that uncontrollable dynamics might emerge.

Another area of tension concerns internal participation and programme development within the parties themselves. Istiqlal and the RNI are seeking to modernise and to make themselves more attractive to new members. For example, Istiqlal has begun to involve its youth organisations more closely and to develop new formats for participation. The RNI has established around twenty subsidiary organisations addressing areas such as the economy, women, and youth, with the aim of engaging these groups more effectively. At the national level, however, party elites remain relatively distant, with decision-making processes often taking place within small circles. Morocco's clientelist politics – that is, the distribution of favours through personal networks – further weakens traditional party identification. While Istiqlal is able to draw on a loyal core electorate (particularly in certain medium-sized urban milieus) and the RNI benefits from strong local leadership in some rural regions, the binding power of the parties remains limited. Many voters feel more closely attached to their immediate social environment – that is, to families, clans, and patrons – than to any party ideology. Against this backdrop, several factors are likely to shape the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2026.

First, further fragmentation in parliament is to be expected. The electoral system – including the calculation method introduced in 2021 – is again likely to ensure that no party comes close to securing an absolute majority. Coalitions will therefore once more be necessary. For voters, this means that they are likely to choose individuals and party lists deemed capable of forming coalitions, with a coherent programme of government playing a secondary role. Istiqlal and the RNI nevertheless benefit from a certain incumbency advantage: As governing parties, they can point to tangible achievements (e.g. infrastructure projects, social measures, and successful major events, such as the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations in football). At the same time, however, these parties bear responsibility for unresolved problems (including unemployment and inflation) and may be penalised for these at the ballot box.

Second, voter turnout is likely to be a decisive indicator. Will the parties succeed in mobilising voters, particularly young first-time voters? Or might it even suit the centrist parties – given the quotient rule – if turnout remains low? In public, Istiqlal and the RNI are seeking to counter such perceptions by focusing on issues relevant to young people and by potentially nominating fresh faces. For example, Istiqlal has announced that it will field more candidates under the age of 40 and step up its use of social media in order to reach younger voters. The RNI, for its part, may benefit from the popularity of some of its younger ministers. Ultimately, however, it remains questionable whether this will suffice to rebuild young people's basic trust so long as deeper demands for genuine participation remain unmet.

Third, the role of the Palace in the run-up to the elections will be crucial, particularly regarding the traditional media landscape, which is largely steered by the Palace. The monarchy has no interest in engaging in an overt campaign in favour of any one party, however: Indeed, it is keen to preserve the image of a neutral arbiter. Instead, subtle influence is likely to be exerted in order to ensure that the post-election coalition arithmetic works out: Ideally, from the Palace's perspective, loyal centrist parties would form the majority. The RNI–PAM–Istiqlal configuration has proven effective from the state's viewpoint, thereby making its continuation likely. However, shifts within this bloc are possible. For instance, Istiqlal or the PAM could gain more weight and potentially provide the prime minister if they surpass the RNI in seats.

Fourth, the question arises as to how the opposition will perform. Can the PJD recover after its humiliation? Some signs suggest it could regain ground, attempting to present itself as a moral alternative to the governing parties. However, the PJD lacks coalition partners and new personnel. Meanwhile, the leftist forces are divided and show little capacity to form a coalition. Any surprise might come from the liberal spectrum: Parties such as Union Constitutionnelle and Mouvement Populaire are ideologically close to the current government, but could benefit from a desire for change, presenting themselves as a compatible renewal of the government.

Overall, there is much to indicate that Istiqlal and the RNI will remain central actors in the political system even after 2026. Both embody a political centre that guarantees stability and continuity in the Moroccan context while also juggling the population's expectations. Their significance lies less in enacting fundamental change than in managing gradual reforms under Palace supervision. Despite all the limitations of these parties, their achievements should not be underestimated: Indeed, the parties maintain parliamentary operations, contribute expertise to legislation, and serve as a transmission belt between state leadership and society. Without them, Morocco's system would either be entirely Palace-driven or leave dangerous gaps that radical forces could exploit.

Ultimately, the Moroccan monarchy aims to balance parliamentary forces so that reform projects can advance without endangering royal supremacy. Istiqlal and the RNI are useful to the royal household because both stand for predictability and a pro-Western orientation. If the gap between the youth and institutions continues to widen, however, even the political centre could falter. For now, though, the signs point towards continuity: The political centre in Morocco has learned to assert itself in a hybrid system, thereby making it indispensable to the stability of the system.

– translated from German –

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ISSN 0177-7521
Volume 42
Issue 1|2026

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

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Sources of photos and graphics as indicated.

Translation:
Proverb oHG, Stuttgart

Copy editing:
Ryan DeLaney, Heidelberg

Design / Typesetting:
sustentio GmbH, Berlin

Printing:
Print & Media, Rostock

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Responsibility corporate communication network by natureOffice.gmbh 2026

natureOffice.gmbh/DE-324-2JJGZ2M

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