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THE HORIZONLESS GENERATION: CALLINGS, NARRATIVES AND YEARNING OF A GLOBAL YOUTH

metapolis Editorial Office is located at:

Common Action Forum
Calle General Pardiñas, 78
28006 Madrid, Spain

Tel: +34 910 175 850
Email: editors@metapolis.net

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«**metapolis** is a pluralist space: it is a place to propose ideas that supersede the traditional borders of knowledge, mobilizing them to confront global challenges. **metapolis** is a territory of hyper-connection, liberated from past nostalgia, critical of the present and committed to a sustainable

and just future. It does not wait for reform that maintains the status quo, nor does it aspire to do so, either. In fact, in **metapolis** everyone suspects that this future may never come, but still are

not convinced to give it up for good. The latest political, economic, technological, environmental, sociological and health emergencies just reinforce the need for us to work harder».

metapolis is an initiative by common action forum. A collective effort of caf's team, members, collaborators and participants. Our goal is to develop and support a progressive agenda as alternative to the current model that has led us to a world of increasing inequalities, environmental devastation and unaccomplished freedom for most of the global citizenry.

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Managing editor: **Irene López**
Volume editors: **Tristán Torrejón, Paula Medina**

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Loueila Sid Ahmed

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THE HORIZONLESS GENERATION: CALLINGS, NARRATIVES AND YEARNINGS OF A GLOBAL YOUTH

Tristán Torrejón | Paula Medina

Jun, 2025

Twenty-five years ago, at the turn of the century, the world congratulated itself with the promise of linear progress and (post)modernity. The hegemonic narrative of the 1990s was forged in a peculiar crucible: with the disintegration of the Soviet Union (USSR), the post-war liberal order declared an unqualified victory, flirting even with the notion that History itself was over [1]. The rise of neoliberal globalisation, the expansion of markets, the consolidation of representative democracies, and the characteristically postmodern "space-time compression" [2] were all framed by technological optimism, the digital revolution, and the sense that the world had finally charted a unified course. After a century marked by collective neurosis and a string of wars and crises, many, especially in the Global North, erupted into a quasi-theological euphoria, daring to view economic, political, and technological progress as inevitabilities—or at least as the best available bid for weathering any future turmoil.

Turning a blind eye to Bosnia, Tajikistan, Kosovo and the Persian Gulf—or even to the chronicle of barbarism foretold in Srebrenica—the global order doubled down on upholding its triumphalism. The world, it was believed, merely required a bit of time and just a few adjustments. The Washington Consensus would cement a new framework of cooperation and a new development orthodoxy: industrialisation, liberalisation, privatisation, free competition and open markets. Criticism of the colonial model would be displaced by paternalistic aid, while wealth would come to be understood as a universal opportunity, requiring only fiscal discipline, lofty aspirations, and dutiful homework. It was not only the golden age of charitable NGOs, but also naïve environmentalism: the new generations of the time were raised with a reformist, enlightened optimism, confident that small gestures—such as avoiding CFCs or separating plastics from organic waste—were all that was needed to protect nature.

From the heart the Global North to its very margins, as well as in more than a few corners of the South, the youth coming of age at the turn of the century discovered the world through expectations—maybe the promises—of certainty, abundance and peace: safe, free from the fears and prejudices of previous generations, and above all, nurturing dreams and hopes; certain that access to the information and resources brought fforth by such progress was within reach. The mantra of universal rights proclaimed then that all human beings had their rights guaranteed, regardless of race, sex or religion [3]. Economies continued to grow, despite the occasional hiccup. And anyone who put in enough effort could take it for granted that they would live as well as, if not better than, their parents had.

It will likely come as no surprise to the reader that this was little more than the climax of a civilisational mirage. Ironically, one of the most influential global cultural phenomena of this *zeitgeist*, the film *The Matrix* (1999), offered a dissonant premise. While humanity celebrated a technological heyday and the triumph of consumer

society, its protagonist must face the fact that reality is a mere illusion, a permanent distraction carefully crafted to mask a system of domination that consumes human lives as if they were mere resources. Transformed into a cult classic and etched into the imagination of millennial youth, the film was interpreted more as a philosophical allegory than as a genuine warning about mass distraction and the perils of a headlong rush into technology.

Having grown up under the promise that investing in education would yield material security and professional relevance, the youth of the Global North instead witnessed their sacrifice upon the altar of economic orthodoxy.

Indeed, the dream would be as short as one might expect, ushering in a slow but steady awakening. Introduced as a defence of freedom, the "War on Terror" of the new millennium swiftly morphed into a global project of permanent exception, outsourcing conflict to regions such as the Middle East and West Africa—all while cynically advocating a hegemonic model which had, in truth, long benefited economic centres by externalising armed conflicts, social experiments, environmental hazards and structural risks to the peripheries. This course of events laid the groundwork for "preventive" military invasions, illegal detention centres, mass surveillance, the criminalisation of dissent, and the suspension of constitutional rights—all of which would meet their match in the 2008 financial crisis: the final piece of the puzzle in a perfect storm of social disenchantment.

Having grown up under the promise that investing in education would yield material security, meritocracy, professional relevance, and democratic participation, the youth of the Global North witnessed their sacrifice upon the altar of economic orthodoxy. Across much of the Global South, despair and resistance to the prison of structural conditions would cause the seams of social contracts to burst. Thus, in 2010, the generational confusion and the outrage of youth around the world found one another in nascent digital spaces, mutually inspiring peaceful mobilisation. From the Arab Spring to the vast array of *Occupy* movements, disillusionment and indignation once again donned that distinctive mantle of millennial hope, seeking joy and dance, as much as revolution. And it failed: the post-political [4] inertia of Western democracies assimilated this reformist impulse until it was neutralised, smothered in the proceduralism and technocratic debate that underpinned social resignation. As wealth concentration soared, a collapsed middle class convinced itself it had lived beyond its means. Representative political systems did all they could to wear down social leaders, deploying the narratives, technologies and judicial manoeuvres they built in the previous phase to criminalise and suppress protest. Authoritarian regimes, for their part, crushed youth-led revolutions into suffocation and submission, getting embroiled in massacres, failed democracies and more than a few civil wars.

Contemporary reality presents us with a grimly ironic perspective on this time. The generation that witnessed the collapse in real time is now leaving youth behind, burdened by the anguish of having failed to meet even the most basic requirements of adult life—that is, success. Those who follow, meanwhile, have had the fortune or misfortune of growing up with lower expectations. The cost-of-living crisis, lack of access to housing, endemic job insecurity, the demographic decline of the Global North, and epidemics of anxiety and depression are all interconnected symptoms of a world that has consolidated inequality as a paradigm. The very technology once seen as a lifeline—which catalysed democracy and protest—now consumes and monetises our attention, colonising it with an unrelenting extractive fervour. Innovation and prosperity now serve consumption and lie in the hands of increasingly concentrated and powerful oligopolies. The damage caused by social polarisation—afflicting young people in particular—has moved from an unfortunate by-product to becoming a deliberate ideological service. Hard-won achievements such as equality, feminism, and labour and asylum rights are now being targeted by projects of biopolitical engineering [5] obsessed with demography and control over bodies almost as much as over that of thought. Indeed, personal stories such as those of Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, or Donald Trump himself now serve to illustrate how the neoliberal myth of the successful entrepreneur has been reborn as that of the leader of the reactionary oligarchy.

And though scientific truth—if not truth itself—seems under siege amidst the reign of denialism and fake news, we must resist the temptation of believing this scenario is in fact something new. The world was never as we were told—but neither was it as we told ourselves. The mirage of human rights was never felt in Iraq, Darfur, or the Sahrawi refugee camps, and the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people is owed to those who triumphantly believed the Oslo Accords were merely a matter of time and technical adjustments. The anthropogenic origins of today's climate crisis, now destabilising ecosystems and nations alike, were first raised by the scientific community as early as 1965—a warning deliberately stifled by powerful extractive interests, whose consequences are now deafening. The price of performative politics is laid bare not only in the continuous failure of climate summits, but also in a cornucopianism [6] that excuses having placed consumption at the heart of its productive model. Our fervent faith in demand, innovation and the market as necessary saviours has been met only with the false promises of green capitalism, financialisation and technological control.

Amid this generational odyssey, and drawing on diverse and global perspectives, this volume explores the resignation of today's youth, as well as their defiance: two generations caught in a time-pressured obstacle course, dodging the impact of a seemingly endless string of "historic events."

Migration analyst and expert **Sani Ladan** opens this volume with the article *Youth in West Africa: Between Democratic Mobilisation and Supporting Regime Change*, exploring how the backing of younger generations is driving the reordering of political power in West Africa. Since the supposed end of the colonial period, and especially over the past 25 years, dynamics such as military interventionism—and the destabilisation brought by the War on Terror,—extractive pressure in the global race for strategic resources, and the imposition of cyclical debt crises have weighed heavily on the Global South, the African continent in particular. Whether through support for democratic transitions or military coups, youth mobilisation has become a decisive force: not only fuelling collective reflection on neo-colonial interference—and migration as a phenomenon resulting from its damages—but also interrogating the obstacles that supposedly democratic institutions can present to emancipatory processes.

From the Arab Spring to the vast array of *Occupy* movements, disillusionment and indignation once again donned that distinctive mantle of millennial hope, seeking joy and dance, as much as revolution.

In *Digital Solidarity and Activism Against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in South Africa*, researcher **Jody Metcalfe** turns her attention to the acts of solidarity that still flourish in increasingly transactional digital spaces. Her research focuses on the work of new digital activist movements exposing the epidemic of sexual violence and its links to colonial legacies. Faced with the rise of fascist ideologies, which, alongside cultures of silence, pose a global threat to the rights of women, children, young people and LGBTQIA+ communities, the author calls for recognition of the power of resistance strategies developed by vulnerable groups—while also warning of the risks of demonisation they face, and of the role of social media in reinforcing hegemonic narratives like rape culture.

The world was never as we were told—but neither as we told ourselves. The mirage of human rights was never felt in Iraq, Darfur, or the Sahrawi refugee camps.

Also examining the sex-gender system, philosopher and politician **Ángela Rodríguez "Pam"** critically addresses, in her article *Between Imposture and Legitimacy: Young Women in Public Life*, the recent development of feminist consciousness and the generational contrasts that this qualitative leap has entailed. In the midst of a struggle to consolidate feminist achievements against the reactionary backlash, she highlights the dynamics that have nonetheless perpetuated the gender gap—from historical androcentrism to the persistence of a care economy sustained by unrecognised female labour. From class, sexuality and gender to ethnicity and race, the political cultures of representative democracy continue to replicate the tacit delegitimisation and scrutiny of non-hegemonic subjects, particularly when they access positions of power. The disruptive questioning of youth stands in direct opposition to this singular legitimising narrative [7]—one that is fundamentally patriarchal, colonial, classist and adult-centric—not only exposing the randomness of

its rites, but also challenging its structures. In other words, imagining new political horizons of possibility.

Whether in pro-Palestinian demonstrations or the climate fight, young people are being forced to transform moral and existential emergencies into a principled commitment to the right to dissent.

Taking the baton of the issues discussed above—namely, dizzying digital risks, hegemonic divides, and the transnational scale of neo-colonialism—MP and activist **Tesh Sidi** offers a personal and generational account of the price of growing up too fast. *A Generation Born Old* is a cross-cutting narrative about exsistential contrast: a childhood marked by responsibility, split between life in a refugee camp and the otherness of being hosted by a well-off family; the experience of Spanish youth scarred by the neoliberal stigma of meritocracy, and a Sahrawi one, heir to the miseries of a prolonged conflict and the weight of a dream of nationhood. This intimate testimony captures the bitter aftertaste of aspirational mirage and a fading political horizon. However, like the previous article, it also defies nostalgia, instead calling for active organisation, capable of birthing a new era and rejuvenating collective desire.

Turning to a key issue of our time, activist and economist **Zaid Jaloudi** undertakes a detailed examination of the tradition of student protest in the United States (US). In *The Cost of Solidarity: Suppression of Pro-Palestinian Voices in U.S. Academia*, the author contrasts its historic role in exposing crises of legitimacy—not only within US higher education but across its entire democratic system—with the brutal levels of persecution and repression witnessed during the 2024–25 anti-genocide protests. Jaloudi warns of a phenomenon now spreading throughout the rest of the world. Far from signalling the "end of history," the normalisation of arbitrary anti-terror narratives and judicial states of exception has led to the active dismantling of Western democracies. Whether in pro-Palestinian demonstrations from the US to Germany, or in the exemplary prosecution of climate activists in the Netherlands and the UK, young people are being forced to transform moral and existential emergencies into a principled commitment to the right to dissent.

Lastly, turning to the growing dehumanisation within state repressive systems, in *The Youth Who Arrive Alone: Narratives and the Dehumanisation of Migrant Minors in the Canary Islands*, lawyer and activist **Loueila Sid Ahmed** centres her focus on the narratives of power directed at another primary youth cohort: migrants—in particular, those making the journey from Africa to Europe. This article examines the interplay—and the convenience—between media and political discourse in Spain, serving as a case study for a phenomenon that extends far beyond national borders.

From double standards in reception to numerical fallacies and narrative devices, it examines how migration itself is selectively criminalised, and how specific migrant populations are targeted, simultaneously excusing state inaction and covering up a host of illegal practices. Through a stark portrait of the so-called "Atlantic route"—from Africa's western coast to the Canary Islands— the author urges us to rehumanise the narrative, to consider not just the numbers, but the lives they obscure. The conditions that push these young people to face extreme hardship and mortal danger, often to the point of trying again and again.

In a broad sweep that spans technological dilemmas, structural disillusionment, nostalgia, and calls to resistance, this volume explores the struggle of youth in its most critical dimension. The planet continues to signal the limits of neoliberalism, extractivism and colonialism. And youth are not only the ones truly listening, but are reading these signs with honesty and urgency. Where previous generations, comforted by their blue pill, saw mirages of abundance, today's youth see the cracks in the system, without ever needing to swallow the red one.

Tristán Torrejón

Tristán Torrejón is Program Manager at the Common Action Forum (CAF) foundation. He holds a degree in Literary Theory from the Complutense University of Madrid and a master's degree in Cultural Management from the Carlos III University. He has extensive experience in the production and organisation of international forums and high-level conference cycles. Previously, he was Program Assistant at the Casa de América diplomatic cultural centre in Madrid.

Paula Medina

Paula Medina García holds a PhD in Political Science and Administration and International Relations from the Complutense University of Madrid. She was a Margarita Salas postdoctoral researcher for two years at the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1265 "Re-Figuration of Spaces" (Technische Universität Berlin). Her main areas of research are feminist political geography, political theory and intersectional feminism. In her latest work, she has emphasised the relationship between border devices and migrant agency, delving into the impacts of the rise of the far right. She currently combines her work in the third sector with independent research.

[1] Fukuyama, Francis (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, Toronto, Singapore, Sidney: The Free Press & Maxwell Macmillan.

[2] Harvey, David (1990). *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell.

[3] "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

[4] Swyngedouw, Erik (2010). *Apocalypse Forever? Post-political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change*. Theory, Culture & Society, 27(2-3), p. 225. Also: Wilson, Japhy & Swyngedouw, Erik (2014). *The Post-Political and Its Discontents Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*. Edinburgh: University Press.

[5] Foucault. Michel (2006). *Seguridad, territorio, población*. Curso en el Collège de France (1977-1978). [Security, Territory, Population: a Collège de France course (1977-78)]. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

[6] L. Simon, Julian (1981). *The Ultimate Resource*. Princeton University Press. This idea was later popularised by Paul Ehrlich and other ecologists to describe the boundless faith in growth and technological innovation in the face of the planet's biophysical limits.

[7] Donna Haraway argues that "master narratives", often associated with Western, patriarchal, and capitalist systems, are harmful because they impose a singular, often biased, view of the world, marginalizing diverse experiences and knowledge. Haraway, Donna J. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

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01. YOUTH IN WEST AFRICA: BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC MOBILISATION AND SUPPORTING REGIME CHANGE

Sani Ladan

Jan, 2025

The youth of West Africa find themselves at a historical crossroads, confronted with political, economic and social challenges that have shaped their participation in the region's transformations. In countries such as Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, young people have emerged as key players in the reconfiguration of power, whether through democratic mobilisation or by supporting military interventions. In this article, the motivations behind these actions and their impact on the evolution of the region's political landscape are analysed in depth.

West Africa is one of the regions with the highest proportion of young people in the world. According to the African Population and Health Research Centre [1], one-third (35%) of its 468.7 million inhabitants (a figure forecast to reach 1.2 billion by 2050) are aged between 10 and 24. This demographic structure presents a paradox: despite representing a majority segment of society, young people have historically been marginalised from socio-political decision-making spaces [2]. In recent decades, however, this scenario has undergone a dramatic shift due to myriad factors, including growing internet access, the broadening of higher education and greater exposure to global conversations on rights, democracy and sovereignty.

The rise of digital technologies has afforded young people unprecedented access to information and has served as a catalyst for protest movements. Social media and communication platforms have enabled the swift organisation of demonstrations, the dissemination of alternative narratives and the denouncement of regimes seen as corrupt or authoritarian. Young people have moved from playing a passive role to taking centre stage in political advocacy, either demanding transparent electoral processes, as in the case of Senegal, or voicing their support for coups d'état in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where disaffection with the political elites and foreign interference has fuelled pro-sovereignty sentiments.

So, what drives this generation to adopt such disparate strategies for action? What are the factors behind their support for democratic reform in specific contexts and their adherence to military-led regime change in others? To understand these dynamics, it is essential to explore the historical, economic and social background that influences the decisions and behaviour of young people in the region. Growing inequality, structural unemployment, the loss of confidence in institutions and the perceived remoteness of the political class when it comes to the realities of youth are key elements in understanding this juncture.

Senegal and the Bid for Democratic Reform

Since its independence in 1960, Senegal has long been considered a paragon of political stability in West Africa; its democracy is frequently praised as an unshakeable pillar in the continent. However, despite this reputation for institutional

robustness, Senegalese democracy was, in many respects, one of "low intensity"—a predominantly procedural and electoral system, structurally deficient when it came to consolidating its institutions and political parties. Such a positive impression has often overshadowed a more complex picture: a long-standing crisis of the presidential system and a gradual weakening of state institutions ruled by structures that have worn out over time.

Under Macky Sall's regime, this institutional crisis reached new depths through a sophisticated manipulation of political mechanisms. A system was established in which electoral fraud, the weaponisation of the judiciary and suppression of dissent became commonplace [3]. Arbitrary arrests, violent crackdowns on protests, direct executive interference in the courts, media censorship and a propagandistic misuse of state resources laid bare the structural fault lines that the country's apparent democratic stability had disguised.

Between March 2021 and June 2023, Senegal drifted dangerously towards authoritarianism, combining a patrimonial State model and the radicalisation of presidential power. Macky Sall took authoritarianism to levels unprecedented in the country's modern history, resorting to extreme tactics like shutting down internet access and arbitrarily forcing the closure of Cheikh Anta Diop University, one of the country's most prestigious academic institutions. These actions fuelled the outrage of a youth who had already felt excluded from economic and political opportunities.

Macky Sall took authoritarianism to levels unprecedented in the country's modern history, resorting to extreme tactics like shutting down internet access and arbitrarily forcing the closure of Cheikh Anta Diop University, one of the country's most prestigious academic institutions.

Despite the repression and violence endured, it was precisely this self-sacrificing yet resilient generation of young Senegalese that emerged as the main driving force in the fight for political change in the country. Faced with institutional choking and state brutality, youth mobilisation illustrates that, instead of remaining mere bystanders in politics, they are determined to take centre stage in redefining their democratic future.

It is worth remembering that this awakening of youth consciousness goes back several years to 2011 when the country similarly faced a surge of youth unrest over corruption, unemployment and the lack of opportunities. This upheaval gave rise to the "*Y'en a marre*" ("We've had enough") movement, founded by rappers and journalists, who channelled their frustration into active political engagement.

The "*Y'en a marre*" movement was a decisive factor in the 2012 presidential elections, articulating the disaffection of the young and mobilising society against President Abdoulaye Wade's bid for a third term, which defied the country's democratic spirit. Through innovative strategies, like civic awareness campaigns, promotion of electoral registration and monitoring of the ballot casting procedure, the movement greatly contributed to the victory of Macky Sall, who at that time represented the hope for political renewal and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, as time went by, the relationship between Senegalese youth and Macky Sall soured. In a twist of irony, the same leader who rose to power with their support tried, years later, to amend the Constitution in order to stand for a third term himself. This attempt was met with widespread condemnation, particularly from those very sectors of society that had propelled him to power in 2012. The government's response was heavy-handed, including the disproportionate use of force, the judicial persecution of opposition figures and the media censorship, exposing the fragile nature of the Senegalese democratic system and certain leaders' tendency to cling to power.

Faced with this scenario, the Senegalese youth once again assumed a critical role as arbiters of national politics, reaffirming their commitment to democratic principles. Disillusionment with Macky Sall led to mass mobilisation in favour of the opposition, particularly around figures such as Ousmane Sonko and Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who successfully leveraged popular discontent. This phenomenon

highlights a distinctive feature of Senegalese youth: their organisational capacity and their willingness to challenge those who seek to undermine democracy, regardless of political affiliation.

Senegalese youth exceed their historical role as democratic arbiters by becoming a proactive force that formulates and advocates for its own demands. Representing a significant proportion of the population, this demographic has displayed a remarkable level of organisation and mobilisation around a wide variety of demands that express their current aspirations and concerns.

One of their main demands, in common with other young people around the world, is the creation of economic opportunities capable of mitigating an unemployment rate that disproportionately affects them. The lack of job prospects has led many youngsters to consider irregular migration as a viable alternative despite the risks that this entails. Organisations such as *Collectif #480* have emerged in response to this problem, decrying those policies that perpetuate job insecurity and promoting a nationwide debate on irregular migration. This collective not only provides psychological support to the families of migration fatalities but puts pressure on the state to implement employment and sustainable development policies, thereby reducing the necessity to emigrate. [4]

In addition to economic concerns, young people in Senegal are pushing for greater participation in political decision-making and more equitable representation in power structures. Social and student movements spearheaded demonstrations demanding reforms that would strengthen democracy and safeguard human rights. Such mobilisations have been instrumental in curbing power grabs and promoting more transparent and accountable governance.

In the sphere of sustainability and climate justice, young leaders such as Mariama Djambony Badji have promoted innovative, sustainable construction initiatives, promoting the use of local materials and traditional techniques adapted to present-day needs. These initiatives not only address environmental challenges but also seek to generate employment and revitalise cultural practices, contributing to the integral development of their communities. Programmes such as "*les vacances patriotiques*", organised by the *Jeunesse Patriotique du Sénégal* (JPS), mobilise young people to participate in agricultural activities during their academic breaks. These initiatives seek to promote food self-sufficiency and revalue the agricultural sector, fostering responsibility and commitment to national development.

"*Y'en a marre*" ("We've had enough") movement, founded by rappers and journalists, channelled the frustration of the youth into active political engagement.

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger: Youths' Support for the Military

The role of youth in West African politics reveals intricate dynamics that vary across each country's context. While in Senegal, young people mobilised en masse to defend the democratic handover of power and prevent President Macky Sall's bid for a third term in the countries of the Alliance of Sahel-Saharan States (French: Alliance des États du Sahel – AES), Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a significant portion of the youth supported the military coups that overthrew elected governments. At first glance, this stance might appear contradictory: in one case, young people are fighting for democracy; in the other, they endorse the rupture of constitutional order. However, upon closer examination, we can see how both behaviours respond to the same impetus: the demand for a political system that is legitimate, effective and representative of the interests of the population.

In the AES countries, younger generations have been brought up in an instability-ridden environment where the social contract between the State and citizenry lies in disrepair. The insecurity caused by the expansion of Jihadist groups, endemic corruption, the lack of economic opportunities and institutional failure to meet the needs of the population have fuelled a deep-seated disaffection towards civilian

Many youngsters have come to see military coups as a means of steering their countries in a new direction, recovering national sovereignty and breaking with what they regard as an extension of colonial rule.

governments. Added to this is the growing impression that these regimes have been more aligned with the interests of foreign powers than with the aspirations of their own citizens. In this context, many youngsters have come to see military coups as a means of steering their countries in a new direction, recovering national sovereignty and breaking with what they regard as an extension of colonial rule.

Youth support for the juntas does not necessarily represent an absolute rejection of democracy but rather an outpouring of frustration with political systems failing to guarantee security and wellbeing. In many cases, they have interpreted the military's rise to power as an opening to rebuild the state on new foundations, no matter the use of exceptional means. However, this gamble raises questions about the future: will the military regimes live up to the expectations of change, or will they replicate the same problems as their predecessors? Is there a risk that these transitions will lead to new forms of authoritarianism?

The challenge facing AES youth lies in the dilemma of having to choose between fraudulent elections—which delegitimise the democratic process—or coups d'état that, although illegal, represent a way to restore order and justice. In many cases, elections in these countries have been marred by political tampering, corrupt practices, as well as an inability to guarantee free and fair suffrage, hence leading to a general distrust of traditional democratic mechanisms, especially among the youth. As a result, a significant number of young people, in particular, began to regard coups as a controversial but potentially radical alternative to governments that have failed to address the basic needs of the population.
In this context, the young people who have endorsed the coups d'état in the countries of the Alliance of Sahel-Saharan States argue that the transition to a new order must be based on fundamental principles such as justice, equity and respect for human rights. For them, a coup d'état should not be a simple shift in leadership, so much as an opportunity to reform the structures of power, build a solid legal framework and establish a rule of law that is truly at the service of the people. According to these advocates, this process must go beyond a mere transfer of power: it must involve a thorough decolonisation of the state, understood as a process of liberation from the power structures bequeathed by colonialism, which continue to influence government institutions and people's daily lives.

The truth is that, in the post-colonial history of Africa, the quest for power has taken many forms, mirroring the complex social, political and economic realities of the continent. Over the decades, African countries have resorted to four main ways of seizing power: elections, often marred by lack of transparency and fraud; dynastic successions, whereby power has remained in the hands of a few families or groups; political settlements, often resulting from internal or external pressures; and finally, coups d'état, both military and parliamentary. This last method, the coup d'état, has been particularly frequent in the Sahel region and other parts of Africa, where democratic institutions have often been fragile or ineffective in the face of corruption, violence and poverty.

It is worth noting that some African countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria, underwent remarkable political and democratic re-founding owing to the efforts of military juntas, which, despite being seen at the time as agents of authoritarian change, played a crucial role in the reconfiguration of their respective political landscapes. The case of Ghana under the leadership of Jerry John Rawlings stands out in the political history of West Africa, as it marks a break with the usual pattern of coups d'état perpetuating the rule of authoritarian military governments. Unlike the many leaders who resorted to military might to cling to power, Rawlings justified his intervention as a means of restoring order, fighting corruption and laying the foundations for effective governance. His first coup in 1979 had a corrective purpose: he purged the army, executed senior military officers accused of corruption, carried out economic reforms and, a few months later, handed over power to a civilian government, thus demonstrating that his intention was not to hold on to power, but to correct the mistakes of the past.

However, when the elected government fell into a major crisis due to both corruption and economic mismanagement, Rawlings returned to power in 1981, arguing that further intervention was necessary to prevent the country's collapse. This second phase under his leadership enabled the implementation of economic and structural policies that brought stability to Ghana. Unlike other military leaders, Rawlings established a transitional regime and promoted a true democratisation of the country. In 1992, multi-party elections were held, in which he stood as a candidate and legitimately won the presidency. The same thing happened in 1996, when he was re-elected, consolidating a process that strengthened democratic institutions and established a framework of governance that turned Ghana into one of the most stable democracies in Africa.

Rawlings' case provided a very persuasive argument to a significant proportion of youngsters in the AES, who would justify the military takeover because they should be given the chance to govern before being judged. This position might seem reasonable at first glance, but if one analyses these countries' histories, it becomes clear that their militaries have held power for longer than their civilian counterparts. Thus, the idea that military rule should be somehow "tried out" as a novelty does not withstand scrutiny. Historically, most coups d'état in Africa have led to ineffective regimes led by the military with no political training or vision of economic governance, which has generated even deeper crises in the name of the interests of the people.

Furthermore, coups d'état tend to lead to a hardening of power, as any government that seizes control by force will live under the constant threat of being overthrown by some other power. Paradoxically, in the case of the AES states, this dynamic has led to ousted civilian leaders seeking foreign military support to restore their authority, thus reenacting the well-known imperialist cycle in which democracy is re-established by coercion.

Youth support for the juntas does not necessarily represent an absolute rejection of democracy but rather an outpouring of frustration with political systems failing to guarantee security and wellbeing.

Factors Influencing Youth Support for Military Regimes in the AES

The disenchantment of AES youth towards their elected governments is not an isolated phenomenon but the result of years of cumulative failure in formal democracy and political, economic and social management. The inability of governments to deliver basic security in the face of advancing terrorism and endemic corruption has eroded confidence in state institutions. As a result, many youngsters no longer think of the military as a threat to democracy but as an alternative to restoring order and national dignity.

The ever-growing presence of jihadist armed groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) has plunged the Sahel into an unprecedented security crisis. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, civil governments have been criticised for their failure to curb the violence, especially in rural areas, where terrorist attacks have left thousands dead and displaced. Since 2012, Mali has faced an insurgency in the north that has spread to the centre of the country, despite the intervention of international peacekeeping forces such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the France-led *Barkhane* operation. According to the *Global Terrorism Index* [5], Mali ranks among the countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.

Burkina Faso has followed a similar trajectory, experiencing an exponential increase in attacks since 2015. The lack of an effective strategy on the part of the civilian government of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré led to his deposition in 2022. In Niger, although the country was considered relatively more stable, the Tillabéri region, bordering Mali and Burkina Faso, has become an epicentre of violence. The administration of Mohamed Bazoum, overthrown in 2023, stood accused of failing to prioritise security in these areas.

The youth have been the most affected by this insecurity. Many have lost family members, been displaced or, in some cases, recruited by terrorist groups. For them, civilian governments have not only failed in their duty to protect the population but have rather displayed a complete lack of political will to tackle the problem.

Adding to this security crisis is corruption, which has further undermined confidence in civilian governments. In all three countries, the elites have been accused of lining their pockets at the expense of public resources while the majority of the population remains mired in poverty. During the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (2013-2020) in Mali, accusations of corruption were commonplace, and the country ranks among the worst on *Transparency International*'s Corruption Perceptions Index [6]. In Burkina Faso, Kaboré's efforts against corruption were perceived as insufficient, and scandals such as the misuse of funds destined for combating terrorism sparked outrage. In Niger, despite some progress in governance under Bazoum's mandate, corruption remained a persistent challenge, particularly

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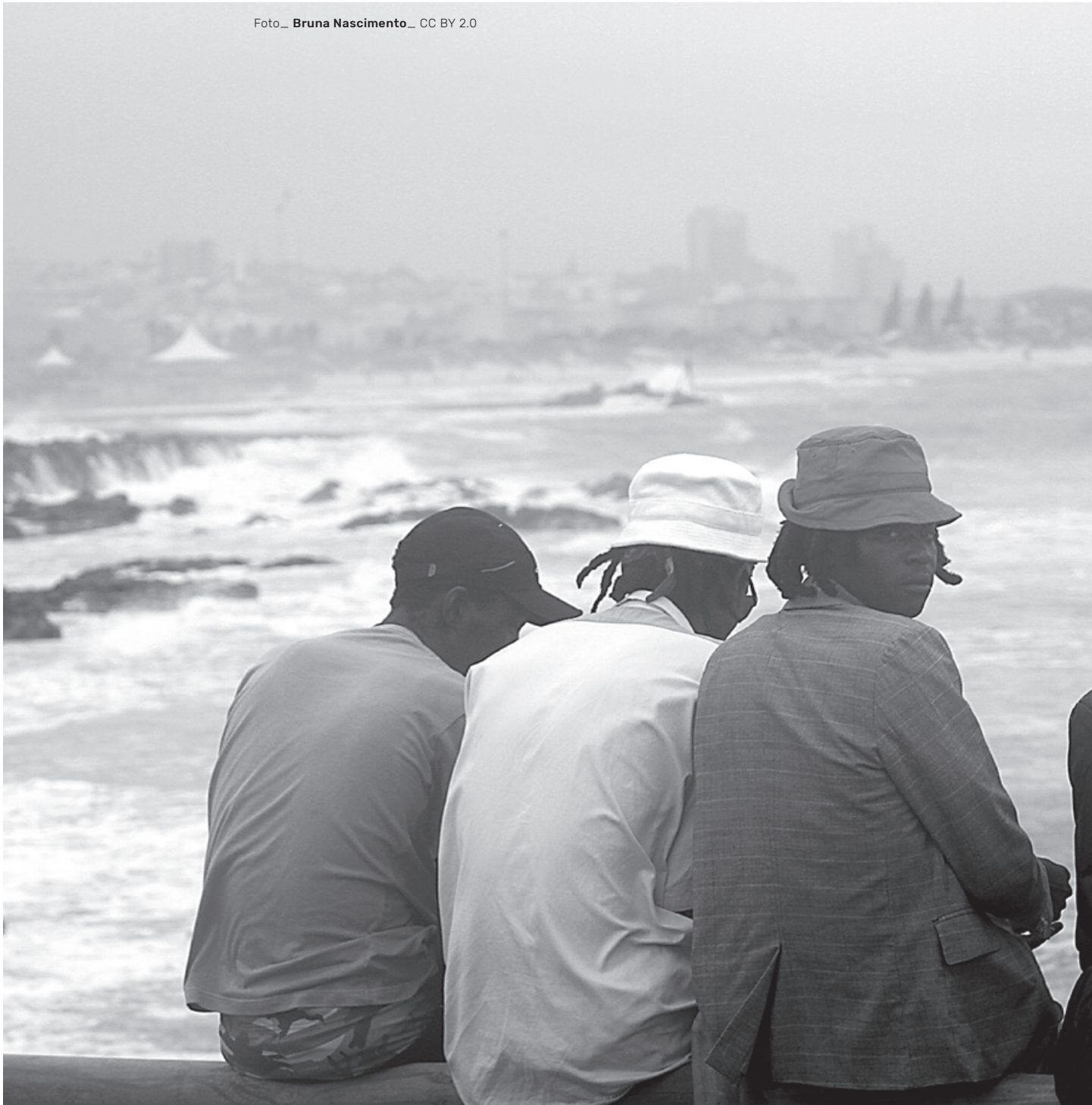

impacting young people, who denounced the lack of economic opportunities and the disconnect between elites and citizens.

In these countries, over 60% of the population is made up of young citizens, but many of them feel excluded from political and economic decision-making. According to the *African Youth Survey* (2022), 68% of youth in the Sahel believed that their governments did not represent their interests [7]. This disconnect has created a legitimacy vacuum that the military has successfully exploited to present itself as an alternative.

In times of crisis, military forces are often perceived as disciplined and capable of restoring order. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, coups d'état have been justified as necessary measures to "save" the country from chaos. Army leaders have adopted populist rhetoric, promising to end corruption and restore national dignity, a message that has resonated with the youth.

Ousted civilian leaders continue to seek foreign military support to restore their authority, thus reenacting the well-known imperialist cycle in which democracy is re-established by coercion.

The Rejection of Neo-Colonialism and Foreign Military Presence

The exploitation of natural resources such as uranium in Niger or gold in Mali has been strongly criticised by grassroots youth movements, who accuse foreign companies of extracting wealth without creating meaningful development for local communities.

The rejection of neocolonialism and foreign military presence was also one of the determining factors in the support of young people for the military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This feeling is deeply rooted in a history of colonial domination and in the perception that foreign powers, particularly France, have perpetuated a relationship of dependency that limits the sovereignty and autonomous development of these countries. France, as a former colonial power, has maintained significant influence in the politics and security of the region, especially through military operations such as *Barkhane* in Mali, which was presented as an initiative to combat terrorism and stabilise the area. However, far from fulfilling its stated objectives, this presence has been perceived as a resounding failure. Not only did it fail to contain the expansion of Jihadist groups, but in many ways, it exacerbated insecurity, leading to deep resentment among the local population. In particular among young people, who interpret these interventions as a covert form of neocolonialism in the guise of international cooperation.

The *Barkhane* operation, launched in 2014, was initially greeted with cautious hope by some parts of the population, hoping that the French presence would help to slow the advance of terrorist groups in the Sahel. However, over the years, this hope gave way to disappointment and frustration. Jihadist attacks not only continued but intensified, spreading into regions that had previously been relatively stable. For many Sahelian youth, this failure to guarantee security demonstrated that the French military presence wasn't really aimed at solving local problems but at protecting external geopolitical and economic interests. This perception was reinforced by the lack of transparency in military operations and by specific incidents, such as the French bombing in Bounti, Mali, in 2021, which resulted in the deaths of civilians, sparking a wave of outrage. Events like these fuelled the narrative that France, far from being an ally, was an actor perpetuating instability and dependence.

In this context, the military junta's ousting of French troops from Mali in 2022 met with enthusiasm among many young Malians. For them, this decision was not simply a change in security policy but an act of affirmation of national sovereignty and a symbolic rebuff to decades of foreign interference. According to an article in *Jeune Afrique*, 75% of young Malians supported the departure of France, arguing that its presence was not only ineffective but also perpetuated a relationship of subservience that prevented the country from seizing the reins of its own destiny [8]. This sentiment is not limited to Mali: in Burkina Faso and Niger, young people have also expressed a growing rejection of foreign military presence, especially after the governments of these countries signed cooperation agreements with France that, in practice, handed over significant control over their armed forces and security policies.

This rejection of neocolonialism is not limited to the military sphere but also extends to politics and the economy. Many in the Sahel perceive local political elites as being more aligned with the interests of foreign powers than with the needs of their own population. This perception is reinforced by economic agreements that critics say benefit French companies more than local economies. The exploitation of natural resources such as uranium in Niger or gold in Mali, for example, has been strongly criticised by grassroots youth movements, who accuse foreign companies of extracting wealth without creating meaningful development for local communities. This sentiment of economic exploitation adds to resentment over military presence, creating an explosive cocktail of discontent that military regimes have been able to capitalise on.

Moreover, the pro-sovereignty discourse espoused by the military juntas has resonated profoundly with the young, for whom they are leaders willing to challenge the status quo and defend national interests against foreign interference. In Mali, for example, the military government has sought alternative alliances with actors such as Russia through the Wagner group, presenting this collaboration

as a way to counter French influence and regain control over the national territory. Although this strategy has been roundly criticised by some sectors of the international community, it has struck a chord with many young people, who see it as a way of breaking with their country's historical dependence on France and exploring new avenues of cooperation.

In Search of a New Sovereigntist Paradigm

In the Sahel, the search for a new sovereigntist paradigm represents a fundamental shift in the way young people in the region conceive the future of their countries. This movement, largely led by a generation raised in a time of globalisation, information access and increasing political awareness, seeks to redefine the traditional ties of dependency with foreign powers while building a model based on self-determination, social justice and South-South cooperation. This approach is not simply a reaction against neocolonialism but an assertive bid to reimagine the role of Sahelian states on the global and regional stage, as well as to redirect internal priorities towards local development and equity.

This change in mindset has led young Sahelians to place greater emphasis on regional cooperation as a cornerstone of this new paradigm. The creation of the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES) between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is a prime example of this effort. Not only does this partnership strive to strengthen collective security against the Jihadist threat, but it promotes a common agenda that prioritises regional interests over external impositions. For the young, the AES represents a step towards integration and solidarity between countries facing similar challenges, as well as an opportunity to build local solutions to problems exacerbated by foreign intervention. The idea that the Sahelian states can and should resolve their own challenges without relying on external actors has gathered momentum, especially among a generation that has witnessed the limitations and failures of externally imposed strategies.

But this new sovereigntist paradigm is not limited to the sphere of foreign policy: it also encompasses a demand for profound internal reforms, prioritising local development and social justice. Young people have been key voices in the call for their countries' natural resources to have beneficial impacts on the local population and not be exploited for the benefit of foreign multinationals or corrupt elites. In countries such as Niger, where uranium wealth contrasts with high levels of poverty, or in Mali, where gold mining has yielded huge profits for foreign companies while local communities remain impoverished, this demand has become particularly urgent. For many youngsters, sovereignty is not only a matter of international relations but also of justice and fair distribution of wealth. This approach has fuelled an increase in activism around issues such as transparent management of natural resources, public participation in decision-making and the provision of economic opportunities for marginalised communities.

Sovereignitsm is not just a political stance, but a cultural and social project that seeks to rebuild confidence in the region's capacities and potential to overcome its challenges.

Furthermore, the search for a new sovereigntist paradigm has been coupled with a narrative that emphasises dignity and national pride. Young people in the Sahel do not want to remain passive actors in a global system that marginalises them; they aspire to be the architects of their own destinies. This sentiment is reflected in cultural, educational and political initiatives that seek to revalue local identities and promote a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic and regional divisions. In this sense, sovereigntism is not just a political stance, but a cultural and social project that seeks to rebuild confidence in the region's capacities and potential to overcome its challenges.

However, this new paradigm is not without its challenges. Dependence on external actors, even if diversified, remains a latent risk. In addition, the lack of solid and transparent institutions in many Sahel countries raises doubts about the ability of governments to implement reforms that truly benefit the population. Young citizens,

aware of these obstacles, have insisted on the need to build a model of sovereignty that not only rejects external interference but also promotes accountability and citizen participation internally.

The role of these youth cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism; rather, it reflects a far-reaching and pressing search for solutions to the structural problems that have marked their lives.

The youth of West Africa have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of many challenges. Whether through democratic mobilisation in Senegal, where they took to the streets to defend political turnover and prevent the re-election of President Macky Sall, or by backing military interventions in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where they supported the juntas that overthrew governments perceived as ineffective and corrupt, young people have emerged as central actors in the reconfiguration of the region's political landscape. Their role cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism; rather, it reflects a far-reaching and pressing search for solutions to the structural problems that have marked their lives: insecurity, corruption, lack of opportunities and foreign interference.

Understanding the role that younger generations play in these processes demands that we analyse the factors shaping their decisions and explore the extent to which their support for the military juntas represents a real alternative or an expression of desperation in the face of a lack of viable options. In Senegal, young people mobilised to defend a democratic system which, although imperfect, offered them a framework to demand change and hold their leaders accountable. In contrast, in the Sahel, where democratic institutions were perceived as incapable of guaranteeing security and justice, many saw the military as a pragmatic option to restore order and regain national sovereignty. This apparent contradiction is nothing more than the expression of a youth that, far from homogenous or dogmatic, acts as an arbiter of the political processes in their countries, assessing each context and making decisions based on the immediate realities they face.

What emerges from this examination is a generation that, despite adversity, is not resigning itself to the status quo. Young people in West Africa are redefining their role in politics, no longer as mere spectators but as protagonists, demanding that institutions respond to their own aspirations. Their mobilisation, whether on the streets of Dakar or in the military barracks of Bamako, is a call to action to build a future where dignity and self-determination are not privileges but fundamental rights. This impetus, although marked by challenges and contradictions, is also a beacon of hope. The region's youth have proven that, even in the most difficult of times, it is still possible to fight on.

The road towards that future is not free of hurdles. Consolidating democracy in Senegal and the search for a new sovereignty paradigm in the Sahel raise thorny questions about how to secure truly representative and accountable institutions. However, the energy, creativity and determination of youth offer grounds for optimism. Their ability to mobilise, challenge power structures and propose innovative alternatives is a sign that, despite everything, West Africa is in the midst of a process of sweeping transformation. And in this process, youth is not only a force for change but also the promise of a more just and equitable future.

Ultimately, the story that is being written in West Africa is that of a generation that refuses to be defined by the limitations of their present. Whether defending democracy or seeking new forms of sovereignty, they are making it clear that their voice cannot be ignored. Their struggle is not only for power but for the possibility of a world where justice, dignity and development are not distant dreams but realities within everyone's reach. In that struggle lies the hope of a continent that, despite its trials and tribulations, marches ever onward towards a brighter future.

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Sani Ladan

Sani Ladan is an International Relations expert specialising in foreign policy, security and migration. A pan-Africanist researcher, intelligence analyst and social educator, he is the creator of the podcast "*África en 1 click*" and a trustee of the FUNDEC Foundation. He is the author of *La luna está en Duala*, an autobiographical work that analyses the relationship between Europe and Africa from a decolonial perspective, and he also collaborates in the programme "*Mañana Más*" on *Radio Nacional de España*.

[Photo by Gianfranco Tripodo]

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02.

DIGITAL SOLIDARITY AND ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND FEMICIDE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Jody Metcalfe

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CEach year between the end of November and the start of December marks 16 days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence globally. The government of South Africa has embraced this campaign with yearly advertisements and events, raising awareness about the horrifically high rates of gender-based violence in the country. Police Minister Bheki Cele, in the release of the 2023/2024 crime statistics, stated that "South Africa recorded 10,516 rapes, 1,514 cases of attempted murder, and 14,401 assaults against female victims in July, August, and September" [1] and reported that in the same period, "881 women were murdered" [2]. It is well known, however, that incidents of gender-based violence are repeatedly underreported.

Stories of both survivors and victims reflect the most gruesome dehumanisation. The shocking rate at which women are dying can only be labelled as femicide. However, femicide and intimate partner violence are not officially recognised as a particular "category of crime" [3]. In many instances, gender-based violence and femicide of adult women and children are committed by intimate partners and male relatives, including husbands and fathers. With the Covid-19 pandemic, women and children became most vulnerable [4], further susceptible to violence, forced to stay in homes with abusive partners, only exacerbated by strict lockdown measures and financial strain [5].

It is important to note that gender-based violence is not only limited to women. It includes gender minorities, specifically members of the LGBTQIA+ community, who experience violence both from within and outside of the community [6]. Non-profit organisations like the Triangle Project work towards increased access to justice and reducing violence committed against LGBTQIA+ people through education, empowerment, economic justice, and affirming health care.

This paper seeks to understand how digital solidarity plays a crucial role in the movement against GBVF through contextualising GBVF in South Africa. It provides examples of how GBVF activism has happened online and highlights two organisations using the digital space for their activism. Lastly, this paper connects digital solidarity to global digital solidarity trends, showing how online activism can propel movements forward while exposing the risks of online harm in the digital realm.

Contextualising Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in South Africa

Legacies of colonial and apartheid entrenchment of white heteropatriachal violence underpin the current climate of GBVF in South Africa. In her book, *Female Fear Factory*, Pumla Gqola [7] outlines her main arguments made in her previous book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare* [8], which were:

> "Concerned with how deeply embedded rape culture was in these systems, I specifically used certain examples that trace the roots of the current South African legal system to a slavocratic past, and later, the colonial order that enabled the routine rape of enslaved and other Blackwomen as a matter of course—while at the same time refusing to officially recognise such rape as rape. Slowly, as the rape of Blackwomen became institutionalised, normalised and mythologised, these women were constructed as 'unrapeable.' To be unrapeable does not mean 'to be impossible to rape.' It means the opposite. The unrapeable is that category of humans constructed and marked as free to be raped without consequence. Blackwomen are constructed as unrapeable through the marking of their bodies as available for rape as enslaved women, and partly through the refusal of the court system to ever convict a man for the rape of a slave woman throughout the era of slavery" [9].

Both books detail sexual violence as a detrimental legacy of colonialism and apartheid, including the building stereotypes of vilification of Black [10] men and hypersexualisation of Black women. The legacies of the *swartgevaar* (Black peril), where Black men were constructed to be a threat to white women [11]. These racist narratives fed into beliefs that Black men wanted to commit acts of sexual violence on white women, who were viewed as the guardians of white "purity" and the white "race" [12]. This was juxtaposed to the widespread sexual violence committed against Black women by white men without contempt or illegality, which extended into the apartheid era [13].

The apartheid regime often weaponised sexual violence on Black women, especially liberation fighters and activists [14]. Sexual violence in liberation camps is also widely reported. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up special hearings on sexual violence, where women spoke of sexual and biological harm done to them while held without trial, in detention, by the apartheid police, as well as everyday harm, harassment and violations [15]. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid were not only detrimental to Blackwomen in these ways but also through their treatment as second-class citizens despite, in many cases, bearing the financial burden for the family. Legacies of inability to effectively deal with sexual violence at all levels of society and the interlinked experiences of women through racialised economic injustice, have sustained cultures of silence around GBVF, which continue to be upheld through patriarchal institutional violence [16]. The lack of justice built into how sexual violence was heard at the TRC emulates the lack of justice that victims and survivors continue to experience in post-apartheid society.

GBVF Activism

Femicide and intimate partner violence are not officially recognised as a particular "category of crime" in South Africa.

In post-apartheid South Africa, several laws and campaigns have been established to combat gender-based violence and femicide. However, the brunt of everyday organising and raising awareness about GBVF is done through NGOs, community-based and grassroots activism, which include many of those who have been affected and/or are survivors of GBVF. University spaces, community centres, public streets, and schools have all been sites where activism against GBVF has taken place. In 2016, at the University Currently Known As Rhodes [17] (UCKAR/ Rhodes University) in Makhanda—formerly known as Grahamstown—, a list was published on social media, including the names of current and former students who were known to have committed sexual violence against women on campus (despite this not being specifically stated on the list) [18]. This list became known as #RUReferenceList. Using this hashtag across social media, not only was the list of 11 men distributed, but it was a catalyst for weeks of protests, not only at the UCKARbut across multiple universities, both in solidarity and in recognition of the shared experience of GBVF on campuses and in society more broadly [19]. As a result of these protests, three students, identified as the leaders of the movement, were "academically excluded for life", meaning they could never complete their

degrees. This decision included a lengthy disciplinary process where those named on the list—perpetrators of sexual violence—acted as witnesses.

The protests across universities were also extended into the digital realm. A hashtag campaign called #endrapeculture was launched along with others such as #nakedprotest and #endpatriarchy [20]. Orth et al.'s 2020 [21] study of public perceptions of the movement found two key themes that reflect responses to GBVF activism in South Africa, namely, a culture of victim blaming and trivialising rape culture through demeaning the protestors. On this point, Orth et al. argue that at the crux of understanding the discourse surrounding rape culture is an acceptance that "that sensible people in their lives are, in fact, capable of committing such a senseless act of violence". The denial of both the act of rape and the culture that perpetuates it leads to the assumption that neither the act nor the culture exists [22]. Despite the pervasiveness of GBVF, many remain in denial that they might know someone who is a perpetrator, thus choosing to vilify activists instead. While social media can play a significant role in propelling a movement forward, it can also be a space of further violence to those involved. Ultimately it can further expose narratives that sustain rape culture and continue to vilify activists, as was the case in the #RUReferenceList.

The widespread sexual violence against Black women, committed without contempt or illegality by white men, extended from colonial times into the apartheid era.

These examples are emblematic of the normalisation of GBVF, where perpetrators are protected at the cost of those who they have harmed. High-profile cases of GBVF rarely end in effective justice either. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, several high-profile men were accused of sexual violence. One example is Danny Jordaan, head of the South African Football Association (SAFA), who was accused by an ex-member of parliament of raping her in the 1990s. Jennifer Ferguson stated her reasons for speaking out were: "I am not speaking out to get revenge on Danny Jordaan or a million South African men like him. I am doing this so we can help each other be courageous, speak out and begin to heal as we find we are not alone" [23]. After speaking out, Jennifer was then publicly vilified and defamed by members of Jordaan's team and legal counsel. Unfortunately, this experience is not rare for survivors who speak out.

Despite the pervasiveness of GBVF, many remain in denial that they might know someone who is a perpetrator.

As evidenced by the examples provided, hashtag activism is used to spread awareness about GBVF and call perpetrators to account. In the face of the lack of justice, survivors receive, their frustrations with the system and sustained humiliation by officials, social media has become a space for solidarity, resistance and non-traditional forms of awareness.

Digital Solidarity

The digital space is also used by NGOs to provide information to survivors or those who are currently in abusive situations. Non-profit organisations, like Women for Change SA (WFC), specifically focus on advocating for the rights of women and children across South Africa. Established in 2016, they provide resources, medical and legal assistance, and information about gender-based violence and femicide. In addition, they provide an online glossary of terminology related to gender-based violence, making available information and resources not only for the general public but specific to those affected. While violent patriarchal roots remain deeply entrenched within South African society, non-profit organisations are constantly hard at work to uproot these societal beliefs. Grassroots activism, community networks, and solidarity amongst organisations working on these topics across all levels of society remain rooted in South African society, and this activism is highly prevalent online and offline.

WFC has an online presence across TikTok, Instagram and X. In 2023, they reached over 10 million people visiting their profiles across platforms per month [24]. Founder Sabrina Walters stated that she received between 50-150 messages per day online from women seeking support and information [25]. On their Instagram

page—@womenforchangesa—, WFC posts about helplines that can be called, responses to frequently asked questions, testimonials and stories of gender-based violence experiences, terminology related to gender-based violence and the latest statistics. In addition, they consistently share the names and faces of women and children who have been murdered, are missing or have experienced violence and are seeking justice, along with a comment about who the person is, what happened to them and a statement of support.

The importance of this type of information cannot be understated. Platforms like Women for Change can reach survivors and those living in unsafe environments in their homes. As we continue to consume social media content, the work of WFC provides both a tool for information and a network of support. As of 23 February 2025, WFC's Instagram page had 156K followers. In the highlights section of their page, they have organised information according to themes like "GBV Toolkit" and "Glossary" and highlighted specific high-profile cases that have happened. In their pinned post from 13 November 2024, WFC shared Annual crime statistics for 2023/24, outlining the grim statistics of GBV and Femicide, with the accompanying post stating, "This is not even a pandemic anymore; it is a war against the women and children in this country, with our latest femicide rates rising by 33.8% compared to last year" [26]. The comments on the post reflect the rage of many who blame the government for their lack of action. Survivors also use the comment section to share their stories, and many stand in solidarity with each other, echoing feelings of being abandoned in the fight for our right to live. As mentioned, the WFC Instagram page also forms an online obituary, highlighting the stories of women and children who have been murdered and sexually assaulted, along with their in-memoriam pictures. The comment sections of these posts mourn the loss of each life, showing solidarity amongst those experiencing GBVF.

In the face of the lack of justice, social media has become a space for solidarity, resistance, and non-traditional forms of awareness.

Similarly, Keep the Energy is a non-profit organisation that uses its Instagram profile to showcase the many names and faces of women, children and members of the LGBTIQIA+ community who have been killed or affected by gender-based violence and femicide. Founder, Michael van Niekerk, started the page in response to the rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana in 2019, a fellow student at the University of Cape Town, where they felt that the University and government response was poor to the horrific violence committed by the perpetrator. #KeepTheEnergy provides a critical role in ensuring that the names and stories of those affected by GBVF remain in the public eye and give dignity to the families and victims.

In their most recent post, Keep the Energy shared the story of Imam Muhsin Hendricks, who was murdered in a hate crime in Gqeberha while on his way to officiate a wedding. Imam Hendricks is widely known as one of the world's first openly gay imams. Coming out as gay in 1996, he founded an organisation called The Inner Circle, which provided support for queer Muslims [27].

With 96,6K followers—as of 23 February 2025—Keep The Energy uses its platform to highlight names of those murdered, in some cases by nameless perpetrators. This rehumanising effort forces us to remember that there are real people behind the shocking statistics we are confronted with. Like WFC, comments on these posts mourn the loss of the person pictured in the post and commiserate what seems to be viewed as an unavoidable fate of women in South Africa.

As governmental support falls short offline, more and more women and LGBTQIA+ people are using the digital sphere to access organisations that can support them. The two platforms shared in this paper are by no means the only ones. Several pages are dedicated to the eradication of GBVF, whether through providing toolkits, access to information or spreading awareness through hashtags. Those who need support can find it online. Non-profit organisations have always historically filled the gaps of governmental failings, but the digital space is providing new opportunities to reach people who are in vulnerable situations. Many who find themselves in abusive

situations might only have access to their phones, proving how the digital space and access to these organisations can become a lifeline.

Towards Global Digital Solidarity

As we see the increased stripping away of women and the LGBTQIA+ community's rights around the globe, the need for global digital solidarity becomes even more pertinent. The enormous scale of gender-based violence, femicide and war crimes committed against women and children in the multiple genocides currently happening across the globe reflect the dire situation of those most vulnerable in society. From reports of horrific acts of sexual violence in Sudan and Congo to the relentless targeting of young children and women in Gaza and sexual violence as torture for Palestinian men, this violence is constantly underreported by mainstream media. This has led to a rise in international solidarity campaigns and alternative news sources, as well as an increase in calls for aid by those affected by genocide and colonial violence. Across social media, acts of digital solidarity continue to take place.

This rehumanising effort forces us to remember that real people are behind the shocking statistics.

On TikTok, creators have used their platforms to generate support and raise awareness for their plight. This ranges from using certain sounds on TikTok videos to raise funds for families under siege in Gaza and across Palestine, to raise funds for organisations doing work in Congo, or for LGBTQIA+ people to find suitable housing after being forced out of their family homes. Not only are sounds used to boost particular profiles, but TikTok users have also become savvy in how they interact with posts to prevent shadow banning. This is done explicitly through commenting, interacting and liking comments on TikTok posts for the algorithm to continue to boost the post to a wider range of people, rather than solely relying on views to do so. These strategies use algorithms and force platforms to provide monetary contributions to creators whose videos go viral. This simple form of instrumentalising content consumption for solidarity and support shows how the digital space is being optimised through digital and algorithmic literacy.

Many who find themselves in abusive situations might only have access to their phones, proving how the digital space can become a lifeline.

Hashtag activism, such as the #BringBackOurGirls movement across First Nations people in the US and Canada, has gained international traction with other Indigenous communities, highlighting the plight of domestic violence and GBVF as legacies of colonial violence in Indigenous communities. These sentiments are echoed in how Sámi content creators use their platforms to advocate for the protection of Sámi women and LGBTQIA+ people from intimate partner violence, echoing the legacies of colonial violence that continue to reproduce violence in formerly colonised contexts across the globe [28]. Hashtags can promote visibility for topics that are often ignored by the mainstream media [29].

Additionally, the digital space has also seen an increase in online harm, hate speech and the spread of propaganda. The rise of podcasts of men projecting patriarchal and violent rhetoric towards women, actively dehumanising women and advocating men's rights to control women's bodies continues to show a backward turn in the advancements of equality. The ways of digital spaces can exacerbate violent speech, where platforms rarely respond proactively, choosing to blame singular "bad apples" rather than structural inequalities [30]. However, women, LGBTIQIA+ people, and allies continuously fight back both offline and online. Social media is an activist space and is used to actively mobilise against gender-based violence and femicide through community, resources, information and solidarity. It will continue to be used to do so—a *Luta Continua*.

Jody Metcalfe

Jody Metcalfe PhD is a postdoctoral researcher on the NWO Project *Re/Presenting Europe* at Utrecht University, Netherlands. She holds a PhD in Intersectionality Studies from the Doctoral College of Intersectionality Studies (PKIS) and in English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Her research interests are focused on colonial silences, representation, belonging, intersectionality, decolonialism and post-apartheid identity building in South Africa and Europe.

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03. BETWEEN IMPOSTURE AND LEGITIMACY: YOUNG WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

Ángela Rodríguez «Pam»

Mar, 2025

"Presence is the struggle."
Anonymous

Feminism has evolved together with race, social class, and generational change. In aspiring to make all people genuinely equal in terms of rights and opportunities, it has transformed society and permeated into the relationships of today's youth, setting them markedly apart from those of our parents and grandparents—shaped by a much more patriarchal culture.

One of the phenomena that feminist culture has enabled us to recognise is the so-called "impostor syndrome." It is a combination of feelings many women experience in new situations that demand more responsibility or—above all—greater power.

When searching online for "female impostor syndrome," one can find numerous links to fashion publications or so-called "women's magazines," describing it essentially as a matter of self-esteem. Interestingly, due to some scientifically unexplainable cosmic coincidence, countless women around the world see themselves as unprepared to perform tasks and hold positions traditionally assigned to men. Of course, if this is the case, it must be because they do not love themselves enough. Unsurprisingly, these articles on "impostor syndrome" are often complemented by a stream of self-esteem quizzes, self-improvement advice, and even specific ads for targeted therapies to treat it. However, this phenomenon does show up as a scientifically recognised syndrome when the search term is just "impostor syndrome" more broadly. This is telling, considering that the authors who coined it—Drs. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanna Imes—did so in a 1978 article focused on the experiences of over 150 women in positions involving significant success and professional achievement who secretly believed they did not deserve them. Privately, these women felt that their achievements were not the result of their merits but rather a stroke of luck—one that could vanish at any moment.

A wide range of subsequent research has directly linked the development of this syndrome to the implications of gender roles. In 1995, Rose Clance herself, alongside other researchers such as Debbara Dingman, Susan L. Reviere, and Dianne R. Stober [1], had already explicitly tied its origin to the messages men and women receive in familial and social contexts regarding success and social mobility.

Various studies have continued to shed light on the gender bias underlying this condition, which, moreover, remains unrecognised in the latest edition of the DSM [2]. Prominent testimonies such as those of former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama or actress Emma Watson [3]—who have publicly admitted to experiencing stress and anxiety from feeling like a fraud [4]—illustrate how widespread the phenomenon

is among women of all kinds. According to journalist Yomi Adegoke, over 66% of women report suffering from it as a result of intersecting, superlative and yet incompatible expectations imposed on us by both society and ourselves—and the subsequent crushing sense of falling short on all fronts. As Adegoke notes, "impostor syndrome" is not so much about an alleged inability to succeed or manage one's self-esteem but rather a response to a world that simply does not believe in women [5].

Factors such as age, gender, or physical appearance determine each person's chances to exercise power.

When the political party *Podemos* emerged in Spain, I became MP at the Spanish Congress of Deputies—a bisexual 25-year-old woman with zero euros in my bank balance and several extra kilos on my body. It must be said that conditions such as age, gender, or physical appearance are decisive and unabashedly crucial in defining each person's chances to exercise power. These notions constitute a force as relevant as ideology or the tallies of each party.

I was fortunate not to be the first nor the only young woman to hold a seat in the Spanish Parliament—and with each new legislature, the average age of MPs continues to decrease. There is an increasing number of elected women and a broader diversity of profiles and backgrounds representing constituents. However, the paths leading those who are not white, heterosexual men to such positions of power are not any less hard to navigate. In fact, they are often convoluted and violent, capable of inflicting real trauma and, of course, the aforementioned impostor syndrome.

During my first months on the job—and unlike most of my fellow MPs—I had to continuously show my credentials to access Congress. After detaining me for quite some time, one security officer in charge of parliamentary access even told me that this was because I "certainly didn't look like an MP." Entrance guards and legislators from other parties seemed hellbent on daily reminding me that in order to "look like an MP," I had to be thin, attractive, and wear heels. I was expected to become a smiling woman in a blazer who moderately disagreed with her colleagues. The institution as a whole seemed to send the message that a young woman attaining the same power in Spain as an older man was a fraud-like situation that the Electoral Commission would have to rectify sooner or later.

This impostor syndrome had much to do with the fact that the first women who dared to step into the political frontlines did so thanks to quotas. But it had even more to do with a problem of legitimacy: when we don't dare to speak up in an assembly, when we refrain from sharing our opinion in a meeting because we think it doesn't matter, when we believe we're not well-dressed, coiffed, or wear enough make up to show up in public; when we feel unfit to hold positions of responsibility—or when, even while holding those, we accept being addressed by our first names while our male counterparts are addressed by their full names—all those times we are faced by a clear lack of legitimacy. Legitimacy is something denied to us for being women, but that, in truth, should belong to us precisely because we are women—and citizens.

The fact that women—especially younger ones—so widely experience this feeling of illegitimacy in exercising power or holding public office is not due to "low self-esteem" but to patriarchy, plain and simple. Patriarchal society does not expect women to take on certain roles; in many cases, it does not even expect them to have careers or receive recognition. And while society may not expect men to dislike success, the acceptance of men adopting "women's roles" is far more common than the acceptance of women doing "men's things."

The shift in parenting and fatherhood, for example, is evident among younger generations. Yet, as Azpiazu Carballo explains, "new fatherhoods" still collide with old stereotypes—that is, with tasks and attitudes traditionally not expected of or assumed by men:

> "In recent years, heterosexual men appear to be developing a different relationship with fatherhood compared to their predecessors. In the past, fathers were men who would come and go, with whom one would have a distant relationship, lacking emotions like empathy or affection. (…) Today, however, men seem to be approaching fatherhood differently: emotional closeness, a desire to spend time with their children. (…) Yet this image of change still clashes with the data. (…) Very few men, when faced with parenting responsibilities, consider pausing their professional careers." [6]

Two centuries of feminist thought have worked to map out this unequal and unjust division of labor, showing how these new feminist frontiers exert pressure on those who find themselves at their margins.

Sexist Neoliberalism and Unpaid Labor

If anyone ever identified the key dynamics underlying the gendered history of relations between men and women, that is feminist theorist and historian Silvia Federici. In her work *The Patriarchy of the Wage* [7], this Italian thinker analyses the intersections and tensions between Marxism and Feminism—that is, the Marxist elements she incorporates into feminism and vice versa—essential tools for understanding gender.

The first women who dared to step into the political frontlines did so thanks to quotas.

According to Federici, Marxism equips feminism with its concept of history: a way of understanding society as a story of perpetual, oppositional divisions—class, gender, race, age, etc. Narrating history or analysing society by homogenising its protagonists simply reproduces the perspective of those who hold the most power—in this case, men—since, as we will see later, it is they who also write historical narratives.

The second Marxist concept Federici enshrines for the feminist struggle is that of a human nature product of social relations—not as something fixed or eternal. She illustrates this with the example of the derogatory discourse aimed at women who cease to fulfill their roles as caregivers—roles historically framed as "naturally feminine." Such women are often labeled "freeloaders" or "selfish," reflecting the punitive social expectations imposed on those who resist these roles.

Lastly, the author refers to the Marxist take on labor as the primary source of wealth production—a concept utterly blind to the reality of women. One of the central pillars of Federici's critique of capitalism lies in the idea that the capitalist system sentences women to be "the proletariat of the proletariat." The notion is rather simple: for society to function, women take on a large share of the labor that must be carried out. Specifically, a type of labor that does not facilitate the accumulation of wealth but rather enables others—men—to accumulate it. The work taken on by women is not productive but reproductive: domestic work and the care for those in need. An invisible labor that underpins the entire economic system designed to generate deep inequalities.

The neoliberal model endures, among other reasons, because it ensures women continue to assume forms of labor that neither States nor Businesses contemplate paying for—labor that enables others, but women, to become wealthy.

Making this labor visible, turning it into paid employment, and distributing it equitably between men and women is the ultimate task advocated by feminism. One of its main achievements has been to unequivocally highlight that the decisive reason why gender stereotypes are replicated generation after generation is, above all, economic. The neoliberal model in which we are embedded endures, among other reasons, because it ensures women continue to assume forms of labor that neither States nor Businesses contemplate paying for—labor that enables others, not women, to become wealthy. If such labor were ever duly remunerated, the system would cease to be as profitable. This is precisely what makes neoliberalism not just an economic system but a cultural machine and a propaganda device that perpetuates sexism.

Photo_ **Joelle Lavoie**

A Deafening Absence

Cultural production perpetuates not only gender roles and stereotypes but the long-standing narrative on the nature of men and women and the ways we are conditioned to interact with one another. Since the dawn of human thought, women have always been regarded as inferior, subordinate to men, even created from fragments of their bodies. From Aristotle to Kant, passing through Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Hume, we can trace how the entire compounded body of Western human thought over the passage centuries is not only deeply sexist but also profoundly masculine—that is, produced by male writers, thinkers, and philosophers, not by female ones. In the five years I spent majoring in Philosophy at the University of Pontevedra, not a single one of my professors—male or female—included a detailed chapter of a female philosopher in their course syllabi. Not a single one.

The compounded body of Western human thought is not only deeply sexist but also profoundly masculine.

This absence of women is not limited to the realm of culture, literature, or the humanities. The same is true when reviewing the composition of the General Council of the Judiciary, the Royal Spanish Academy, the Council of Ministers, the boards of major companies, labor committees, political and union leadership, and the lists of the world's wealthiest, most influential or powerful individuals. And this is but a performative kind of absence—one that actively shapes many of the social structures that govern our lives across all spheres.

Another clear example of this absence is medical science in itself, which has been built around the characteristics of the male body [8]. In their book The Scientific Lies About Women, Eulalia Pérez Sedeño and Silvia García Dauder explore, among others, how the widely held belief that experiencing pain can point to heart trouble is based on a scientifically proven fact, extensively documented through dozens of clinical cases. These patients, however, were exclusively men. Indeed, men tend to exhibit specific symptoms prior to a heart attack, such as chest pain radiating to the left arm, but women do not. It has taken many years and mounting feminist critique—by women scientists from several disciplines—to expose that, as the symptoms experienced solely by men are treated as the standard, medicine may be more effective for men than for women in many other contexts.

Gender itself is very much power, and like any political issue, it casts a veil of conflict over society as a whole.

In no way can this be a far-fetched idea, considering that medical science has built its knowledge around certain bodies—fundamentally, male ones. We must not forget that, for a long time, not only were women excluded from practicing medicine, but they were also not considered to participate in clinical trials [9]. These trials were neither conducted by women nor designed around them. This phenomenon, coined by the literature as "scientific androcentrism" or "scientific patriarchy," can be summed up in the idea that medicine—like science, philosophy, or history—has been built and shaped predominantly by men and tailored for them.

Conclusion: Gender as a Philosophical Question

This overwhelming absence of women in history, philosophy, medicine, science, the judiciary, politics, and, more broadly, in every domain of power and public visibility, is a structural resistance that younger generations of women continue to face—despite all the progress made. The so-called "impostor syndrome" is but one of many expressions of a patriarchal social structure, one that constantly calls into question women's legitimacy to hold spaces traditionally dominated by men.

Factors such as age, gender, and physical appearance shape the perception of authority and competence, rooted in social expectations and stereotypes that perpetuate inequalities. The tensions young women will face in leadership contexts are, in this sense, a reminder that gender is very much power—and that, like any political issue, it casts a veil of conflict over society as a whole.

If there is something we can ultimately thank feminism for, it is for teaching us to use gender as a philosophical and political question even in our daily lives. Access to that tool is, most likely, one of the main factors telling younger women apart from those of older generations..

Ángela Rodríguez «Pam»

Ángela Rodríguez "Pam" is a Spanish philosopher, politician, feminist and LGBTQ+ activist. Between 2021 and 2023, she served as Secretary of State for Equality and Gender-Based Violence. She was also MP at the Spanish Congress of Deputies for two consecutive terms. She holds a Master's degree in Creation and Research in Contemporary Art from the University of Vigo, and another in Abuse and Gender-Based Violence from the Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED).

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04. A GENERATION BORN OLD

Tesh Sidi

Apr, 2025

When I was little, I used to say, "*I was born a grown-up.* " That phrase filled me with pride and emotional independence. That idea made me feel good. As I grew older, though, I tried to trace the origin of that statement—who I'd heard it from, why I felt so connected to it. And I concluded that I "*was born grown-up*" because in the place where I came into the world, the only flowers that grow in the desert are shaped like stones. You grow up quickly in the Sahara, and emotions there are rarely expressed. Not because love doesn't exist, but because people try to be honest with children from a very early age.

My mother, for instance, actively tried to fast-track our childhood and adolescence. She wanted us to behave like functional adults, and so she treated us as such. That sense of early responsibility was her way of protecting us: she wanted us to understand that, unlike millions of children around the world, my brother and I were born with the responsibility—and the burden—of upholding her hopes, and those of an entire country. A nation stripped of all its rights. That is why we Sahrawis are born old.

Over the years, what surprised me the most was realising this upbringing wasn't just something particular to my mother. As I approached adulthood, I lived alongside other youngsters who felt the same way: they had been born old. That famous proverb, "*youth, divine treasure,*" felt like a stale metaphor from a different period, to us who were already exhausted and anxious, living in chronic uncertainty.

Where I was born, civil rights are still a distant prospect: material rights are but the priority—what people in Spain now call "*las cosas del comer*" (*food concerns*). Many of those I grew up with left the country as soon as they finished their degrees. Gradually, the town I was raised in became emptied of youth.

With this piece, I hope to let my personal experience resonate with other realities and help the reader understand that youth is a broad notion—one that changes a lot depending on where and under what conditions one is brought to this world. To be born under occupation, as a refugee, as the child of migrants, or simply in one neighbourhood instead of another, profoundly shapes what it means to "*be young*". In fact, my youth was hardly that of my twin brother's, despite being born on the same day and into the same cultural and political context—simply because he is a boy, and I am a girl.

A Faucet in the Desert: New Forms of Digital Socialisation

Like that film, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, it feels as though most of my generation was born old: with the price of environmental debt already looming over us, precarious jobs as our only certainty, anxiety settling in before we even turned 20… They told us that youth was meant for dreaming, and yet we had to learn how to survive.

To be born under occupation, as a refugee, as the child of migrants, or simply in one neighbourhood instead of another, profoundly shapes what it means to "*be young*".

In 2002, when I first began travelling to Spain under a hosting programme, many of us children from Sahrawi refugee camps came only to spend a summer away from the extreme heat. We arrived excited to try new flavours, eat different things, and bring souvenirs back to our families. I was lucky enough to be hosted by a family with substantial purchasing power, from a town in Alicante full of factories and entrepreneurial spirit. Although at the time, to me, every Spanish person *seemed* wealthy. I had the impression that the whole town—even those who didn't live in that enormous house I stayed in—enjoyed the same pleasures at the very least. My host mother's friends had weekly routines for playing tennis, meeting for breakfast, and going to the cinema.

On any given summer day, that house would fill up with couples, friends of my host parents, who came round to share a meal. The day after, over 20 young friends of my host sisters would repeat the same ritual, and so it would go on and on until summer drew to a close. When August arrived, we would set off as a family, doing the rounds and visiting friends who owned flats by the sea or cottages in some remote corner of Spain. We could join as many as five families, including all their children of different ages, in the same house.

My fundamental childhood wishes starkly contrasted with that setting: "*I want a faucet for my mum*" was the first thing I asked for. I'll never forget the day they took me to buy a one to bring back to the Sahara—nor the huge disappointment that took over me after realising water didn't just endlessly flow from. That was the moment I glimpsed the importance of the system and infrastructure needed to have water at home.

As I hadn't achieved that goal, I set my sights on the next one: "*I want a cow for my mum.*" I'd never seen one, but I often heard my mother say it was her dream, since they were gentle animals that produced a lot of milk. When I saw one for the first time—that massive animal—I realised it would be impossible to take it all the way to our refugee camps. What worried me most, though, was what the cow would eat, considering that no trees grew there.

Ultimately, I settled on an even more ambitious goal: "*I want a million euros.*" My host mother and her friends laughed, but in my mind, all Spanish people were still rich. Our host mother gifted us a ceramic piggy bank to teach my twin brother and me the value of money and saving. We kept it by the entrance of the house and, every time someone visited, they would drop in a coin. To me, every euro felt like a million. By the end of the summer, we had collected €300—an amount that substantially supported my mother in caring for us during the harsh winters of the Hamada, the Algerian desert.

In 2007, I had the chance to stay throughout the entire winter under the hosting scheme, so I could continue my studies. That initial two-month summer experience gave way to a much greater challenge: attending school with children I didn't know, with whom I could barely communicate, and with whom, on the surface, I seemed to have almost nothing in common. I would spend hours reading encyclopaedias just to be able to do my homework. At home, they had encyclopaedias bigger than I was, filled with all the world's knowledge, with pictures and maps that looked hand-drawn. In towns like that, the internet was still something of a myth.

Teenagers' biggest aspiration in such a setting wasn't yet to become influencers, but to have a Tuenti profile—the Spanish social network par excellence for teens and twenty-somethings, which between 2007 and 2011 indeed became its own cultural phenomenon. It was our Instagram before Instagram: we would constantly upload pixelated photos, leave comments on people's feeds, snoop on friendships, and begin our first digital flirtations.
Facebook, founded in 2004 in the United States, began gaining ground in Spain around 2008–2009, especially among university students and young adults. Its more minimalist design and global reach soon overtook Tuenti, marking the transition

to a new kind of digital socialisation—one that would forever change how young people relate to notions like intimacy, identity, and community.

The Financial Crisis and the Butterfly Effect

Those winters allowed me, little by little, to really get to know Spanish society and gradually understand that working-class families in Spain not only had many of their material needs met, but could also afford the occasional treat: holidays at the beach or skiing trips over Christmas.

On television, there was constant talk of advances in civil rights. At the time, under the leadership of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain underwent significant social transformations: equal marriage, the Historical Memory Law, the Gender Equality Law… But it was also a period marked by the outbreak of the financial crisis.

The words ecjoed most often across all TV channels—my primary source for learning Spanish—were "*crisis,*" "*economic crisis*," and "*recession.*" The few times I managed to call my family in the refugee camps, I tried translating that word into my mother tongue. Frightened, my mother would pray and try to reassure me. None of us understood back then that an economic crisis in Spain could have a direct impact on international aid. Those €300 I managed to save each year were beginning to not be enough. Crises, I later realised, work like the butterfly effect: a financial flutter in Europe can mean a harsher winter in the desert.

During the years of the crisis, it became increasingly common for young Spaniards of my generation to move to England for work, drop out of university because they could no longer afford it, or juggle their studies with low-paid weekend jobs. The collective message sent slowly began to normalise the disappearance of the Spanish middle class, and even to romanticise certain forms of precarity. Yet, at the same time, many of my host parents' friends still hadn't come to terms with the fact that even they could lose their jobs, and that perhaps their children would not be able to enjoy their financial support, to go to university or to afford the deposit to rent a flat.

It's hard for most of us to accept we may not belong to the much-idealised middle class, but in my case, the shame of being poor is a feeling I know all too well. For many of the following summers, when I returned to the refugee camps, I would help my mother sell bread and sweets in her small shop. Even though I was barely ten, I was her bookkeeper and sales assistant. It was not uncommon for me to come to the main market in Tindouf during the weekends. There, more than once, she was pushed to sell the toys my brother and I had brought back from Spain. And although it was painful for us to let go of those toys, we convinced ourselves we were "*too old*" to play with Barbies anyway. It was our way of accepting that we were giving them up for the greater good.

Facebook marked the transition to a new kind of digital socialisation—one that would forever change how young people related to intimacy, identity, and community.

That memory left a deep scar on my teenage years and early adulthood. In a way, being poor hurt—and embarrassed—me. Perhaps that's why I could relate so closely to the collective numbness that was beginning to take hold in Spain when, almost overnight, many could not even afford holidays anymore, could no longer save, access higher education, find work or earn a decent wage. They went from a relatively stable life to one of hardship, simply trying to make ends meet.

Soon after, the more austere and economically liberal right came to power in Spain, with Mariano Rajoy as Prime Minister. Social cuts and austerity policies marked his leadership. Getting a permanent job became something of a myth: the dream for many among the young was to find precarious work abroad, particularly in England. Upon returning, they would complain about the racism they experienced from the English.

The collective anaesthesia of today's youth lies, precisely, in scrolling through their screens and forgetting their own precarity—if only for a few minutes.

Photo_ **Mark Bonica**_ CC BY 2.0

What could I tell any of them, when many of those complaining about xenophobia had behaved in exactly the same way towards me? At least they could move freely across Europe and travel to whichever country they liked. Yet, despite everything, we had more in common than I realised at the time.

The "Ni-ni" Generation: Meritocracy, Social Media, and the Street's Outrage

Musk's purchase of X illustrated how major tech platforms can become toys for billionaire elites.

Many of my university peers had to take on the burden of paying off their parents' abusive mortgages, after seeing them lose their jobs at the age of fifty and being unable to find other posts. Others witnessed their homes go into foreclosure, ending up in the hands of yet another bank. At that precise moment, the children of the Spanish financial crisis became parents. They began to worry about the material conditions of the generation that preceded them. They tried to pile up degrees and PhDs to apply for those competitive public service calls offering 50 positions for 50.000 applicants. The conditions were ripe for the majority to start identifying their peers, sons and daughters of the working class, as adversaries, rather than pointing the finger at the economic elites.

That generation, too, was failed by the absence of a strong state. The media dubbed them the "*Ni-nis*" (neither studying nor working), thus cementing the most neoliberal and divisive concept in the history of class struggle: meritocracy—"*I have this because I deserve it, because I worked for it*"— as if others hadn't worked just as hard as you, or even more.

As austerity advanced, the rise of Twitter—now X—alongside Facebook and Instagram gave way to an increasingly interconnected digital society. The internet became much more affordable, and those calls to my mother, which had once been prohibitively expensive, became free—I could simply make them using WhatsApp. The dizzying pace of digital transformation was visible in something as simple as my host mother's holiday photos: at first, there were just a few, scanned and saved on a floppy disk; later, I taught her to burn them onto a CD, and storage possibilities multiplied; then came the USB stick and, suddenly, "*the cloud*". Like many others, she never had the time to keep up with so much change. It would have taken non-stop digital training just to keep up with such ever-updating technology.

Perhaps because of the dazzling speed of technological progress, I decided to study computer engineering. With the arrival of the Bologna Process and its strictness regarding class attendance, poor students like me had few options for combining study and work. Like many of my classmates, I would defer modules to the September remedials to afford my tuition. When it came to job-hunting, I was always faced with the same questions and answers: "*You don't have experience,*" "*Are you a legal resident?*" "*Spaniards first.*" I was once paid €3/hour working in a factory where, before the crisis, I'd been earning €10.

Simultaneously, social media gave rise to the first new forms of political communication and helped to organise major mobilisations. Student movements and online activism were much more limited in regions like Alicante than in big cities like Madrid or Barcelona, though. We used to watch those large camps and protests on television, and the emergence of new progressive leaders: Spain was finally moving away from bipartisanship.

Power became more fragmented, but the country was heading towards a more genuine democracy. Together with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Unidas Podemos formed the first coalition government in the democratic history of the country. The hopes and the anger stemming from the streets had finally reached the institutions. There was a renewed commitment to advancing the social rights once spearheaded by Zapatero and to dignifying work. The labour reform driven by Yolanda Díaz drastically reduced precarious, short-term contracts. It made

permanent contracts the norm, while the steady rise of the Minimum Wage —reaching €1,134 in 2024—improved the lives of thousands. This new generation of political leaders, many of whom were former social activists, did not solve all structural problems. Still, they took a tangible step forward for younger and more precarious generations.

While it's often said that being in government wears you down, it was the relentless media and judicial persecution that wore down many of the MPs and young progressive leaders who had entered the institutions. To top it all off, the entire population suddenly found itself in lockdown from one day to the next.

"Let Us Dream!" Collective Rage and the Digital Agoraa

After the 2008 financial crash, COVID lockdowns would constitute the second major event in recent history, forever marking global youth. A generation that had already normalised the idea of having to take care of itself as well as of its parents throughout the worst economic crisis in living memory was suddenly also faced with war, inflation, and a global pandemic.

Even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, many youth were already using social media for more than just keeping in touch with friends or relatives, flirting, or posting pictures. They had begun to debate and share opinions in the digital agora. This generation had witnessed how social movements and collective anger had self-organised during the Occupy protests through Twitter, and was now attending to the emergence of new platforms: TikTok, BeReal… They were starting to lead public opinion, commenting on news stories and launching podcasts.

Big tech companies had been experimenting for years, gamifying content and studying behavioural patterns to foster greater addiction to their platforms. Being an influencer was already a legitimate job: some private universities even advertised master's degrees with slogans such as "*become an influencer,*" selling a dream only truly accessible to a very privileged few.

Social media became flooded with branded content promoted by ordinary youth, many of them cosmetic products with exorbitant price tags, well out of reach for the aspirational middle class that content creators seem hellbent on anaesthetising. And that's just it: the collective anaesthesia of today's youth lies, precisely, in scrolling through their screens and forgetting their precarity—if only for a few minutes.

In a parallel reality, young Sahrawis dealt with the outbreak of war in our homeland. The youth of my native continent faced the grim necessity of leaving everything behind and heading to the front lines. In my case, and in that of many others, we felt responsible for confronting the deafening media silence by speaking out on social media. These platforms not only brought us closer to our families, they were also our window to the world—one through which we could speak about what was happening in our country.

The young generations of this quarter-century have lived in reverse: carrying emotional old age upon our backs, longing to return to something essential.

Unlike the Palestinian youth, Sahrawis were newcomers to the digital agoras. They had little experience and very few followers. This was partly because many were already consumed by the demands of the Spanish migration bureaucracy. But when a progressive government aligns with the very power occupying your land, normalising the violation of your human rights… that fury—the fury of thousands of Sahrawis in Spain and in the refugee camps—fuelled protests across the entire country. Still, unlike their parents, these young Saharawis didn't know that no war is won in just five days. Months passed, and the euphoria faded.

Many stopped taking to the streets, becoming exclusively social media activists. But they weren't producing ideas, or consistent podcasts, nor did they have easy access

A world where being young does not mean surviving the algorithm or competing for the attention of a system that wants us isolated. A world where one doesn't have to be born an adult to be heard.

to mainstream media—which always preferred to hand the mic to a Spanish talking head. They were reduced to Twitter hooligans. And yet, I don't blame them: it's hard enough to go through migration, to study, to work—and on top of all that, to take responsibility for a conflict you've inherited. But their frustration reflects the broader reality of contemporary youth: a deep distrust of institutions, a lack of political leadership, and ever more precarious living conditions. The youth of this quarter-century cannot imagine a possible future; they are aged before their time, exhausted, and without a guiding light to follow.

Many young people have come to find refuge in social media—not only to create content, but to become role models, both for themselves and for their communities. They have managed to harness the potential of technology to build digital spaces for thought. And yet, what many still fail to realise is that technology, far from being neutral, always has someone behind it—designing it, controlling it, manipulating it.

Conclusions

In October 2022, Elon Musk, the billionaire CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, completed the $44 billion purchase of Twitter. This acquisition became one of the most talked-about episodes in recent digital platform history, not only because of Musk's own contentiousness, but due to the political, social, and technological implications of the change in ownership.

From the outset, Musk insisted that his interest in Twitter was not financial, but ideological: he championed "freedom of expression" as a core principle, claiming that the previous Twitter had become a censorious platform. However, following the purchase, his decisions sparked widespread controversy: he fired thousands of employees, dismantled content moderation teams, reinstated accounts previously suspended for hate speech—such as Donald Trump's—and altered key policies on verification and visibility.

The result was a more chaotic platform, with reduced control over disinformation, a surge in hate speech, and a notable exodus of users and advertisers alike. For many analysts, Musk turned Twitter—later rebranded as X—into a personal experiment combining libertarian ideology, tech-personality cultism, and a deeply individualistic view of the digital public sphere. His purchase illustrated how major tech platforms can become toys for billionaire elites, casting doubt on the neutrality of these spaces, which, in theory, ought to serve as democratic agoras for debate and participation.

Much like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, it feels as though many of today's young people were born in reverse: we began life with a maturity forced upon us, burdened with inherited responsibilities and the awareness that the world was not waiting with open arms—but with bills to pay, wars to denounce, and rights still to be won. We were born old—not because we wanted to be, but because there was no other option.

Because when you are born under occupation, as a refugee, in marginalised neighbourhoods or in households where love coexists with scarcity, childhood is rushed through and youth becomes a trench. The young generations of this quarter-century have lived in reverse: carrying emotional old age upon our backs, longing to return to something essential—play, community, tenderness—as a possible destiny to hope for. Yet, unlike that film's protagonist, we cannot afford to unlearn the world: we must build a new one.

A world where being young does not mean surviving the algorithm or competing for the attention of a system that wants us isolated, fragmented, doomscrolling our lives away, far from any collective organisation. A world where one doesn't have to be born an adult to be heard, where childhood and youth are protected, not sacrificed on the altar of capital or geopolitics.

To reach that future, dreaming alone is not enough; we must organise. We must abandon the nostalgia for lost time and build new ones, together. Because despite the exhaustion, the precarity, and the emotional exile, global youth still holds the seed of a new world. And perhaps there is still time to begin again and reverse this story—not by growing old, but by making our collective desires young again.

Tesh Sidi

Tesh Sidi is a Sahrawi computer engineer and Big Data Lead. Currently serving as a Spanish MP, she was born in the refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria). Tesh is a renowned expert in Global technologies and has worked in large consulting firms and tech startups. She's a dedicated feminist activist, advocating also for migrant and refugee rights.

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THE COST OF SOLIDARITY: SUPPRESSION OF PRO-PALESTINIAN VOICES IN U.S. ACADEMIA

Zaid Jaloudi

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Introduction: Bearing Witness and the Price of Dissent

The spring of 2024 marked a watershed in the history of American higher education and political activism. Across the United States, university campuses —long regarded as sanctuaries of free inquiry and democratic engagement— became epicentres of a profound moral and political reckoning. The catalyst was the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza, broadcast in real time through social media and news outlets. The images of bombed hospitals, razed neighbourhoods, and children killed in their homes were not distant abstractions; they were immediate, visceral, and implicated American institutions directly. For countless students, the knowledge that their universities were financially entangled with companies profiting from the violence in Gaza transformed outrage into a personal and institutional crisis.

In response, an unprecedented wave of student activism swept the nation. Students, faculty, and staff mobilised to demand that their universities divest from Israel and from corporations complicit in Israeli occupation, apartheid, and genocide. The central demand was clear: institutions of higher learning must not profit from, or be complicit in, the machinery of oppression and systematic human rights violations. This movement was not an isolated or fringe phenomenon; it was broad, intersectional, and deeply rooted in longstanding traditions of campus protest and solidarity.

Yet, rather than engaging in dialogue or institutional self-examination, university administrations, in concert with political leaders and media elites, responded with a campaign of repression unprecedented in recent decades. More than 3,100 arrests, mass suspensions, expulsions, doxxing, and arbitrary deportations followed. The scale and intensity of this crackdown revealed the extent to which the right to dissent—ostensibly a cornerstone of American democracy—remains contingent and vulnerable, particularly when it challenges entrenched power structures and foreign policy orthodoxies.

This article situates the current wave of pro-Palestinian activism within the broader legacy of student protest in the United States. It interrogates the bipartisan machinery that has criminalised dissent, exposes the complicity of universities and the U.S. government in eroding fundamental freedoms on behalf of Zionism, and analyses the implications for academic freedom, free speech, and democratic governance. Drawing on historical analysis, recent events, legal frameworks, and case studies, I argue that the struggle for Palestinian rights is inseparable from the struggle for democracy and justice in the United States. The criminalisation of pro-Palestinian solidarity is not merely a campus issue; it has been a test case for the future of dissent and the integrity of American institutions.

U.S. Legacy of Student Activism and the Roots of Pro-Palestinian Activism

The American university has long served as a crucible for dissent, social transformation, and the contestation of power. From the 1930s, when students at Columbia and other institutions organised against fascism and for academic freedom, to the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s, students and the youth have repeatedly forced the nation to confront its complicity in war, racism, and injustice. The anti-Vietnam War protests, the civil rights sit-ins, and the woman's rights movements all found their epicentres on college campuses.

These movements were not mere symbolic gestures; they achieved substantive victories. Student activism was instrumental in forcing universities to divest from companies supporting Apartheid South Africa, pressuring the government to end the war in Vietnam, and in expanding civil rights protections for marginalised groups. Yet, these victories were won in the face of fierce repression: surveillance by the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), police violence, blacklisting, and administrative crackdowns. The university has always been a contested space—a site of both emancipatory possibility and institutional control.

Pro-Palestinian activism is deeply embedded within this legacy of campus activism. The late 1980s, following the First Intifada, witnessed the first significant wave of student-led teach-ins, rallies, and solidarity campaigns with Palestine. The 2000s saw the rise of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, explicitly modelled on the anti-apartheid struggle. BDS called for nonviolent economic pressure to end Israeli apartheid and occupation, and student governments at numerous universities—including UC Berkeley, Northwestern, and Barnard—passed divestment resolutions.

While often symbolic, these votes reflected a growing consensus that universities should align their investments with human rights and international law. Yet, university administrations routinely ignored or actively undermined these efforts, citing legal, financial, or reputational risks. In some instances, student groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) were suspended or banned, and activists faced harassment and doxxing.

The 2010s and early 2020s saw student government referendums and votes for divestment become regular features of campus politics. At institutions such as New York University, the University of Michigan, and Brown University, students and the youth organised multi-year campaigns, building coalitions and winning democratic mandates for divestment. Yet, in nearly every case, administrations either ignored or overturned these votes, invoking "institutional neutrality," donor pressure, or legal concerns.

Administrators frequently engaged in bad-faith negotiations, promising to "consider" divestment or establish advisory committees that produced no meaningful change. Retaliation against activists intensified: SJP chapters were suspended, student leaders were targeted with doxxing campaigns, and anti-BDS laws threatened student organisations' funding. This administrative hostility underscored the political stakes: universities prioritised donor relations and political expediency over student and faculty demands for justice.

The events of October 2023 and their aftermath marked a paradigmatic shift in the political consciousness of American university students. Unlike previous episodes of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the devastation in Gaza was not filtered through the slow, sanitised lens of traditional media. Instead, it was rendered immediate and intimate by the ubiquity of smartphones, livestreams, and social media platforms. The direct circulation of images and testimonies from Gaza—bombed universities and hospitals, mass graves, children murdered in their homes—dissolved the geographical and psychological distance that had previously insulated many Americans from the realities of occupation and war.

This collapse of distance had profound implications for student activism. The suffering of Palestinians was no longer an abstract humanitarian issue; it became a moral emergency with direct institutional implications. Students at Columbia, UCLA, Harvard, and dozens of other universities confronted not only the horror of the violence itself but also the complicity of their own institutions-universities whose endowments were invested in weapons manufacturers, surveillance technology firms, and corporations complicit in the genocide of Gaza. The question was no longer whether to care about Palestine, but how to respond to the knowledge that one's tuition dollars and institutional affiliations were implicated in Israel's project of apartheid, occupation, and genocide in Palestine.

The Moral Imperative of Divestment

It is in this context that the demand for divestment assumed a new and urgent significance. Student activists, drawing on the precedents of anti-apartheid and antiwar movements, articulated divestment not as a symbolic gesture, but as a concrete ethical imperative. The call for universities to sever financial ties with Israel and its corporate enablers was grounded in international law, human rights norms, and the principle of nonviolent resistance. The movement's demands were precise: transparency in university investments, divestment from companies complicit in occupation and war crimes, protection for Palestinian and pro-Palestinian studentsfrom harassment and doxxing, and amnesty for those targeted by disciplinary proceedings.

The pro-Palestinian movement was notably intersectional and inclusive. Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and secular students participated side by side, joined by faculty, alumni, and community members. Organisations such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow, and the Young Democratic Socialists of America formed broad coalitions, linking the struggle for Palestinian liberation to movements for Black lives, Indigenous sovereignty, climate justice, and immigrant rights. This intersectionality was not merely rhetorical—rather, it was embodied in the composition of encampments, the content of teach-ins, and the solidarity actions that proliferated across campuses.

The escalation of protest tactics was neither spontaneous nor inevitable. Students initially pursued dialogue and engagement: drafting open letters, circulating petitions, requesting meetings with administrators, and organising educational events. These efforts were met with bureaucratic stonewalling, administrative silence, or, in some cases, outright hostility. The refusal of university leaders to engage in substantive dialogue or to address the movement's demands forced students and collaborating protestors to escalate their tactics.

Across the United States, university campuses —long regarded as sanctuaries of free inquiry and democratic engagement— became epicentres of moral and political reckoning.

Encampments became the defining feature of the 2024 campus uprising. Inspired by the anti-apartheid shantytowns of the 1980s and the Occupy Wall Street movement, students established Gaza Solidarity Encampments on university quads and lawns. These spaces were not only sites of protest; they were laboratories of participatory democracy, mutual aid, and political education. Students organised food drives, interfaith prayers, teach-ins on the history of Palestine, and workshops on political resistance. The encampments fostered a sense of collective purpose and solidarity that transcended individual campuses and linked activists across the globe.

Administrative Intransigence and the Turn to Repression

Despite the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the protests, university administrations responded with disproportionate and escalating repression. At Columbia University, President Minouche Shafik's decision to call in the New York Police Department to clear the encampment set a national precedent. Similar scenes unfolded at UCLA, Harvard, the University of Michigan, and other institutions, where militarised police units were deployed to dismantle encampments, arrest

students, and suppress dissent. The spectacle of riot police storming university campuses, dragging students from tents, and arresting faculty members shocked the conscience of many observers and exposed the fragility of academic freedom.

The repression was not limited to physical force. Administrators imposed mass suspensions, expulsions, and evictions from campus housing. Some students were denied their degrees just days before graduation. International students faced the added threat of visa revocation and deportation. In parallel, universities and allied organisations launched campaigns of doxxing, blacklisting, and public shaming, targeting student activists with coordinated harassment and threats.

The refusal of university administrations to engage in genuine dialogue revealed the limits of institutional neutrality and the depth of institutional complicity. By prioritising donor relations, political expediency, and public relations over the demands of their own students and faculty, universities exposed themselves as sites not of critical inquiry and moral leadership, but of risk management and reputational control. The language of "safety," "order," and "campus climate" was deployed to delegitimise protest and justify repression, even as students and faculty insisted on the fundamentally nonviolent and inclusive character of their movement.
The crisis of legitimacy facing American higher education is thus inseparable from the crisis of Palestine. The Gaza protests have revealed not only the violence of occupation abroad but also the violence of institutional power at home. In both cases, the demand for justice is met with repression; the call for dialogue is met with silence or force. The lesson is clear: when moral clarity confronts entrenched power, repression is often the first response.

Despite the scale and intensity of the crackdown, the pro-Palestinian movement has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Students have shifted to digital organising, held off-campus teach-ins, and built networks of mutual aid to support those targeted by disciplinary or legal action. The movement's persistence is a testament to the depth of its moral conviction and to the enduring legacy of student activism in the United States.

The images of bombed hospitals, razed neighbourhoods, and children killed in their homes were not distant abstractions; they were immediate, visceral, and implicated American institutions directly.

The Gaza protests have also forged new forms of solidarity, linking struggles for justice across racial, religious, and national lines. In bearing witness to the suffering of Palestinians, students have insisted on the universality of human rights and the indivisibility of justice. Their actions challenge not only the policies of their own universities but also the broader structures of power that sustain occupation, apartheid, and repression.

The Illusion of Partisan Difference and the Reality of Consensus

A critical feature of the repression of pro-Palestinian activism in the United States is its unmistakably bipartisan character. While popular narratives often frame the erosion of civil liberties and the crackdown on dissent as the province of right-wing or conservative politics, the empirical reality since October 2023 is that both major political parties have converged in their opposition to campus protest and their unwavering support for Israel. This bipartisan consensus is not theoretical; it is operationalised through policy, law enforcement coordination, and administrative action at the highest levels of government and university governance.

The majority of mass arrests, suspensions, and police interventions have occurred in states and cities governed by Democrats, including New York, California, Massachusetts, and Illinois. University presidents and administrators, many of whom publicly identify as liberals or progressives, have been at the forefront of calling in police, imposing protest bans, and enacting new speech codes. The deployment of militarised police on campuses such as Columbia, UCLA, and the University of Michigan was not an aberration but a manifestation of a deeper political alignment that transcends party lines.

Presidential rhetoric has played a legitimising role in this process. President Biden's public statements, which have emphasised the need for "order" and condemned "violent behaviour" on campuses, have failed to affirm the rights of students to peaceful protest or to engage substantively with the underlying demands for divestment and justice for Palestine. Rather than defending academic freedom, the administration has provided political cover for university crackdowns and continued to supply military aid to Israel, even as international legal bodies and human rights organisations have raised the alarm regarding ongoing war crimes and collective punishment in Gaza.

The bipartisan nature of repression is further reinforced by the influence of donors, trustees, and pro-Israel lobbying organisations, most notably the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). These actors wield significant power over university governance and public policy, often conditioning financial support on the adoption of pro-Israel stances and the suppression of pro-Palestinian activism. The threat of donor withdrawal has been a decisive factor in administrative decision-making, with university leaders frequently citing concerns about fundraising and institutional reputation as justifications for punitive action against student protesters.

The influence of pro-Israel lobbying extends beyond the university. In Congress, AIPAC and allied organisations have invested millions of dollars in campaign contributions and lobbying efforts to ensure unwavering support for Israel across party lines. Politicians who have expressed solidarity with Palestinian rights or criticised Israeli policy, such as Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, have faced well-funded primary challenges and public vilification. The message to both university administrators and elected officials is clear: dissent from the pro-Israel consensus will be met with political and financial consequences.

This environment creates powerful incentives for institutions to preemptively suppress protest and to align themselves with the demands of donors and lobbyists. The result is a narrowing of the space for open debate, the marginalisation of pro-Palestinian voices, and the entrenchment of institutional complicity in occupation and apartheid.

The scale of this crackdown revealed the extent to which the right to dissent remains contingent and vulnerable, particularly when it challenges entrenched power structures and foreign policy orthodoxies.

Manufacturing Consent: Media Narratives and the Demonisation of Protest

The mainstream media has played a leading role in constructing and disseminating narratives that legitimise the repression of student protests. Coverage of campus activism has frequently emphasised "disorder," "chaos," and alleged threats to Jewish students, often without distinguishing between isolated incidents and the overwhelmingly peaceful character of student protests. This framing is reinforced by statements from university officials and political leaders, who routinely conflate criticism of Israeli war crimes with antisemitism and public disorder.

The effect of these narratives is to manufacture public consent for aggressive administrative and police action. At Columbia University, for example, President Minouche Shafik's testimony before Congress and subsequent decision to invite the New York Police Department onto campus were shaped by intense media scrutiny and political pressure. The resulting arrests and suspensions of student protesters were justified on the grounds of maintaining campus safety and combating antisemitism, despite substantial evidence to the contrary.

This process of manufacturing consent has material consequences for the rights and well-being of student activists. By equating dissent with hate speech and disorder, university administrations and political actors insulate themselves from accountability, delegitimise legitimate protest, and contribute to a broader climate of fear and self-censorship. The willingness of the media to amplify administrative

talking points and to marginalise pro-Palestinian perspectives has further entrenched the narrative that protest is synonymous with extremism or violence.

Students and the youth have repeatedly forced the nation to confront its complicity in war, racism, and injustice.

A central tactic in the suppression of pro-Palestinian activism has been the redefinition and instrumentalisation of antisemitism. The adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism by numerous universities and government agencies has facilitated the conflation of criticism of Israeli war crimes with antisemitic hate speech. This definitional shift has provided a legal and normative basis for the restriction of speech, the imposition of disciplinary sanctions, and the threat of federal funding cuts—not only in the U.S. but also in civil, educational, and parliamentary institutions across the world.

The consequences of this weaponisation are multifaceted. On the one hand, it undermines the legitimacy of genuine efforts to combat antisemitism by trivialising the term and deploying it as a tool of political expediency. On the other hand, it places students and faculty in an untenable position, forcing them to choose between their ethical commitments and their academic or professional futures. The chilling effect on campus discourse is profound, as individuals and organisations self-censor to avoid accusations of bigotry and the attendant risks of disciplinary or legal action.

In sum, the machinery of suppression that has targeted pro-Palestinian student activism in the United States is the product of a complex interplay of political, economic, and cultural forces. It is sustained by a bipartisan consensus, reinforced by donor and lobbyist influence, legitimated by media narratives, and operationalised through the strategic weaponisation of antisemitism. The implications for free speech, academic freedom, and democratic governance are far-reaching and demand urgent scholarly and political attention.

Arbitrary Deportations and the Erosion of Academic Freedom

The intensification of repression against pro-Palestinian student activism has been especially acute for international students, who occupy a uniquely vulnerable position within the U.S. higher education system. Unlike their domestic counterparts, international students are subject not only to university disciplinary processes but also to the discretionary power of federal immigration authorities. In the wake of the 2023-2024 campus protests, this vulnerability has been weaponised by university administrations and government agencies alike, transforming immigration enforcement into a tool of political suppression.

The majority of mass arrests, suspensions, and police interventions have occurred in states and cities governed by Democrats, including New York, California, Massachusetts, and Illinois.

Reports have emerged from multiple campuses of international students facing the threat of visa revocation, detention, and deportation as a direct consequence of their participation in campus protests. In some cases, university officials have referred student activists to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or have provided information to federal agencies that could jeopardise students' legal status. The case of Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident and Columbia graduate detained and threatened with deportation for his activism, stands as a stark warning to all non-citizen students: speaking up against Israeli war crimes, the exercise of constitutionally protected rights may result in the loss of educational and professional opportunities, or even expulsion from the country.

This use of immigration law as a disciplinary mechanism is not merely a matter of individual overreach; it is part of a broader pattern of criminalisation that targets dissenting voices, particularly those from marginalised or non-citizen backgrounds. The invocation of "public safety," "national security," or "campus order" has served as a pretext for punitive action that effectively chills political participation and undermines the university's stated commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The threat of deportation has produced a profound chilling effect on international student activism. Fearful of jeopardising their immigration status, many students have withdrawn from protests, declined to participate in organising efforts, or self-censored their political views in classrooms and public forums. This climate of fear is antithetical to the principles of academic freedom and open inquiry that universities purport to uphold. The chilling effect extends beyond the individual to the collective. The presence of international students has historically enriched campus life, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and global perspectives. The targeting of these students for their political beliefs not only undermines their individual rights but also impoverishes the intellectual and moral fabric of the university as a whole. The message to all students, regardless of citizenship status, is clear: dissent will be punished, and solidarity with Palestine is grounds for exclusion.

The use of immigration enforcement as a tool of political repression also raises serious legal and ethical questions. The First Amendment guarantees the right to free speech and peaceful assembly, rights that have been repeatedly affirmed by the courts as extending to all persons within the United States, regardless of citizenship. The selective application of punitive measures against non-citizen students represents a violation of both the letter and spirit of constitutional protections.

University administrations have played an active role in facilitating the criminalisation of international student activism. In some cases, institutions have failed to provide adequate legal support or advocacy for students facing immigration consequences, instead prioritising risk management and institutional reputation. The reluctance of university leaders to defend the rights of international students reflects a broader pattern of institutional complicity in the machinery of suppression.

The targeting of international students for their political beliefs has implications that extend far beyond the borders of the United States. American universities have long positioned themselves as global leaders in higher education, attracting students from around the world and projecting an image of openness, diversity, and intellectual freedom. The criminalisation of pro-Palestinian activism and the threat of deportation undermine this image and risk alienating future generations of international scholars.

Moreover, the repression of international student activism reverberates globally, sending a signal to other governments and institutions that the suppression of dissent is permissible, even laudable, when it serves the interests of power. The struggle for Palestinian rights on U.S. campuses is thus inseparable from broader struggles for academic freedom, human rights, and democracy worldwide.

The Erosion of U.S. Values: Free Speech, Academic Freedom, and the Rule of Law

The systematic repression of pro-Palestinian activism on U.S. campuses exposes a profound contradiction between the nation's professed democratic ideals and the actual practices of its leading institutions. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution enshrines the rights to free speech, peaceful assembly, and petitioning the government for redress of grievances, rights that have been repeatedly invoked as defining features of American democracy and as foundational to the mission of higher education. Yet, as the events of the past two years have demonstrated, these rights are not absolute, but are frequently subordinated to the imperatives of political expediency, donor influence, and foreign policy orthodoxy.

The deployment of militarised police against student encampments, the imposition of mass suspensions and expulsions, and the threat of criminal and immigration penalties for peaceful protest reveal the fragility of civil liberties in the face of institutional power. Universities that once celebrated their roles in the civil

rights, antiwar, and anti-apartheid movements now invoke "safety," "order," and "neutrality" to justify the suppression of dissent. This rhetorical shift is not merely semantic; it marks a substantive retreat from the principles of academic freedom and democratic engagement that have historically distinguished American higher education.

The redefinition and manipulation of antisemitism has provided a legal and normative basis for the restriction of speech, not only in the U.S. but also in civil, educational, and parliamentary institutions across the world.

Academic freedom—the principle that scholars and students must be free to pursue knowledge, express controversial ideas, and challenge orthodoxy without fear of institutional reprisal—has long been regarded as the lifeblood of a university. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has repeatedly affirmed that academic freedom is not merely a privilege but a necessary condition for the advancement of knowledge and the cultivation of democratic citizenship.

The current wave of repression represents a direct assault on this principle. Faculty members who have spoken out in support of Palestinian rights have faced harassment, threats to their employment, and, in some cases, termination. Departments and programs that have hosted events or issued statements critical of Israeli policy have been subjected to external pressure, donor threats, and administrative censure. The effect on scholarly inquiry and classroom discussion is palpable, as students and faculty alike self-censor to avoid retaliation.

This erosion of academic freedom is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather represents a pattern of institutional risk aversion and political conformity. The willingness of university leaders to sacrifice the core values of their institutions in the service of short-term stability and donor appeasement raises urgent questions about the future of the American university as a site of critical thought and social transformation.

The Rule of Law and the Selective Application of Justice

The suppression of pro-Palestinian activism has also exposed the selective and politicised application of legal norms. While the First Amendment and related legal protections are often cited as bulwarks against government overreach, their enforcement is uneven and contingent upon the political context. Students protesting for Palestinian rights have been subjected to vague and inconsistently enforced codes of conduct, arbitrary disciplinary procedures, and, in some cases, criminal prosecution for actions that would be protected speech in other contexts.

The deployment of immigration law as a weapon against international student activists further illustrates the malleability of legal norms in the service of political repression. The threat of deportation for constitutionally protected protest is not only a violation of due process, but a repudiation of the principle that justice must be blind to political belief and national origin.

The repression of pro-Palestinian activism on U.S. campuses is not a parochial or sectoral issue; it is symptomatic of a broader democratic crisis. The willingness of both political parties, university leaders, and major media institutions to subordinate fundamental rights to the exigencies of foreign policy and donor pressure signals a dangerous erosion of the norms and institutions that sustain democratic life. When peaceful protest is criminalised, when academic freedom is sacrificed, and when the rule of law is selectively applied, the very foundations of democracy are at risk.

The campus uprisings of 2023–2024 thus serve as a bellwether for the health of American democracy. They reveal the extent to which dissent is tolerated only insofar as it does not threaten entrenched interests, and the speed with which the machinery of suppression can be mobilised against those who challenge the status quo. The struggle for Palestinian rights on U.S. campuses is, in this sense, a struggle for the future of U.S. democracy itself.

Conclusion: The Struggle for Palestine Is the Struggle for Democracy

The repression of pro-Palestinian activism on American campuses is not an isolated episode, nor can it be understood solely as a matter of campus policy or university governance. Rather, it is a crystallisation of deeper contradictions and crises at the heart of American democracy, higher education, and foreign policy. This article has argued that the criminalisation of dissent in support of Palestinian rights is the product of a bipartisan consensus, sustained by donor and Israeli lobbying pressure, legitimated by media narratives, and operationalised through legal and administrative mechanisms that subvert the very values they purport to defend.

The student movement for Palestine has drawn on a long and proud tradition of campus protest in the United States. Like the antiwar, civil rights, and anti-apartheid movements before it, the current wave of activism has challenged universities to align their investments and policies with the imperatives of justice, human rights, and international law. The demand for divestment from Israel and from corporations complicit in occupation and apartheid is not a fringe or radical position; it is a moral imperative grounded in the principles of nonviolent resistance and global solidarity.

The response from university administrations and political leaders has exposed the limits of institutional neutrality and the fragility of academic freedom. The deployment of militarised police, the imposition of mass suspensions and expulsions, the threat of deportation for international students, and the weaponisation of antisemitism accusations have revealed the extent to which dissent is tolerated only insofar as it does not threaten entrenched interests. The university, far from being a sanctuary of critical inquiry, has in many cases become an instrument of risk management, reputational control, and political conformity.

Yet, the persistence and resilience of the pro-Palestinian movement offer grounds for hope. Despite the scale and intensity of the crackdown, students and faculty have continued to organise, adapt, and bear witness. They have forged new solidarities across racial, religious, and national lines, insisting on the universality of human rights and the indivisibility of justice. Their struggle has exposed the deep connections between the violence of occupation abroad and the violence of institutional power at home.

International students are subject not only to university disciplinary processes but also to the discretionary power of federal immigration authorities.

The implications of this struggle extend far beyond the question of Palestine. The criminalisation of protest, the erosion of academic freedom, and the selective application of the rule of law are symptomatic of a broader democratic crisis. The willingness of both political parties to subordinate constitutional rights to the imperatives of foreign policy and donor pressure signals a dangerous erosion of the norms and institutions that sustain democratic life. When universities become sites of surveillance, censorship, and state violence, the very possibility of meaningful democratic engagement is imperilled.

In this sense, the struggle for Palestine is inseparable from the struggle for democracy in the United States. To defend the rights of Palestinian students and their allies is to defend the right of all people to dissent, to bear witness, and to demand justice. The future of academic freedom, free speech, and democratic governance depends on the willingness of students, faculty, and the broader public to resist the machinery of repression and to insist that universities serve not power, but truth.

This youth will be remembered not only for the repression they provoked, but for the moral clarity and courage they inspired. They have forced a reckoning with the contradictions of American democracy and have challenged a new generation to imagine and enact a more just and inclusive future. In standing with Palestine, students have stood for the possibility of a university—and a society—where justice, freedom, and solidarity are not empty slogans, but living practices.

Zaid Jaloudi

Zaid Jaloudi es un economista palestino-estadounidense, especializado en estrategia sociopolítica, desarrollo institucional y justicia internacional. Como presidente de la Red Global de Estudiantes por Palestina (GSPN, por sus siglas en inglés) lidera esfuerzos para vincular activistas de todo el mundo mediante el desarrollo de coaliciones estratégicas y la promoción de la capacidad organizativa de proyectos tanto del tercer sector como del ámbito corporativo.

The greatest achievement has been the unflinching exposure of Israel's systematic war crimes and human rights abuses in Palestine and throughout the globe. Through relentless protest and courageous truth-telling, these students have forced the world to confront the reality that Israel's actions—deliberate mass displacement, the targeting and destruction of hospitals and civilian infrastructure, and the calculated deprivation of water, food, and medical care-constitute not only war crimes but crimes against humanity and, as leading human rights organisations [1][2] and the UN [3][4] have now concluded, acts of genocide. Their activism has brought to light the scale and intent of Israel's project: the extermination and forced transfer of Palestinians, the deliberate targeting of children and families, and the rendering of Gaza uninhabitable in violation of all moral, ethical, and international law.

By lifting the veil of impunity and silence, these youth have ensured that the truth of Israel's atrocities can no longer be hidden or denied. The world cannot—and will not—look away. The students' resilience has not only exposed the failures of American institutions to protect free speech but has also irrevocably altered the discourse on Palestine, making it impossible for the architects and enablers of the criminal Zionist project to ever fully recover from this reckoning.

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[3] United Nations Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices (2024). *A/79/363: Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories*. General Assembly - seventy-ninth session, 20 September 2024. Available here: https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/363

[4] Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (2024). *A/HRC/55/73: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*. Human Rights Council Fifty-fifth session, 25 March 2024. Available here: https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/55/73

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06. THE YOUTH WHO ARRIVE ALONE: NARRATIVES AND THE DEHUMANIZATION OF MIGRANT MINORS IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

Loueila Sid Ahmed

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Increasingly, young Africans are arriving alone on Spanish shores. This phenomenon is being widely covered by the media, though mainly from a dehumanising perspective. What mainstream outlets emphasise the most about this humanitarian crisis is its figures: the number of minors arriving illegally in Spain. These numbers are often stripped of context and serve to convey a negative model of migration—grounded in rejection of foreigners and in the ideal of "zero migration," and aimed at reducing, controlling, or even eliminating migratory flows [1]. Or, at the very least, denying them as a concept.

The media speak of numbers instead of telling us that some of these young foreigners have travelled over 8,000 kilometres, embarking on whatever means they can to survive one of the deadliest migratory routes of the modern world. Highly volatile, the so-called "Atlantic route" runs along the Western coast of the African continent to the Canary Islands—the most remote outpost of Europe's southern border. From Tarfaya or Laayoune, the journey to the archipelago is a 225km battle against a merciless ocean, aboard fragile vessels designed for coastal fishing. The journey from the furthest documented departure points—off the coast of Guinea—can involve more than 1,500km of coastal navigation and a further 500km in open sea, dodging coastal patrols. In other words, weeks of travel in the same kind of boats and inhuman conditions.

It is not only the media, but also political representatives who constantly speak in numbers to suggest there is a problem with foreign adolescents and young people who arrive in Spanish territory without any adult reference. They weaponise figures to claim the Canary Islands are "overwhelmed" and cannot take in 5,000 unaccompanied minors. And they speak flippantly of a "pull effect," as though it were the conditions at the destination, rather than those at the point of departure, that motivate tens of thousands to risk their lives. This reasoning, based on the fallacy that a migrant's success story will attract others as if it were the advert for an all-you-can-eat buffet, stems from that same understanding of migration as a disruptive force threatening the claimed internal tranquillity of the national society [2].

Both media and political leaders insist on talking in numbers because showing the stories and faces of the people who arrive irregularly in this territory would make us empathise with their pain—with who they are, and what compelled them to leave their countries in such unsafe conditions. And then we would likely feel called to act: to organise, to connect, to display solidarity, to demand action from our leaders, and to provide a collective response to the failures of the Administration—as we recently saw in Spain in the wake of the natural disaster caused by the DANA [3] storm. Civil movements, grassroots activists, and committed citizens managed, in the face of that disaster, to reach communities the Government had not. Could we see the same happen in welcoming young migrants, or tackling the deaths at sea, if we stopped seeing them as mere statistics?

Talking in numbers serves power, as it allows the authorities to gloss over the fact that exceptionality, provisionality, emergency measures, racism, and lack of political will shape current migration policies. Talking in numbers helps avoid exposing them as discriminatory and racist. But there is a deeper reason still: they speak in numbers because these young people arriving alone are the very "nobodies" the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once wrote about. "Children of no one, owners of nothing, who have no name, only a number" [4]. They speak in numbers, ultimately, to conceal what truly bothers them: the poverty and identity of those arriving alone, and who are brazenly associated with criminality in the Western collective imagination.

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This phenomenon, known as *crimmigration*—a term coined by Stumpf in 2006—is one of the main stigmas these young migrants face in host societies: fear of the foreigner and stereotypes about their dangerousness, which lead to confusion or overlap between immigration law and criminal law [5] in many developed shelter countries. The perception of immigrants as potential criminals drives states to arm themselves both administratively and punitively against those foreign, deploying legal mechanisms that violate fundamental human rights and basic principles of the legal system itself. This means that, among many other dangerous outcomes of this phenomenon, criminal and administrative law are becoming increasingly intertwined [6].

Ismail El Majdoubi, from the ExMenas Collective, is one of the youngsters who experienced this stigma and criminalisation first-hand: "In truth, [among migrants] there's a bit of everything. If you are looking for a criminal, you will find one. If you are looking for a poet, you'll find one. If you want to find a musician or a footballer, they're there too," he states [7], referring to the wide diversity among Maghrebi and West African youths who migrate to Europe and are met with this dehumanising treatment by institutions and the media. The ultimate danger of perceiving and presenting foreigners as "crimmigrants" is that, by means of constant "othering", atrocities committed against them begin to appear justifiable [8]. It can even lead to the creation of social contracts in which only "our own" are recognised, and "outsiders" are excluded [9].

The Flooding Narrative

Do they really want us to talk numbers? Since the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands became active—accounting for 70% of maritime arrivals to the Spanish state in recent years—some 255,000 displaced people [10] have reached our shores. That is, over a span of 30 years, 255,000 people from the African continent have arrived irregularly—an average of 8,500 per year, or 709 per month. The registered African population in the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands represents 5% of the total, comprising 45,000 people out of a population of 2.2 million. This is what the dominant narrative refers to as being "overwhelmed."

Behind this demagogic discourse hides the notion of a "tolerance threshold," the level of immigration a country can supposedly bear without putting its own socio-political integrity at risk [11]. Once again, this idea is rooted in the rejection of immigration from various angles: economically, immigration is seen as a cost; politically, as a threat; and sociologically, as a source of conflict [12].

This concept of a tolerance threshold has an administrative counterpart in what is often referred to as the "quota ideology" [13]. That is, the attempt to ration immigration through social regulation so that the host society can "absorb" these flows without jeopardising its supposed "social order"—one that feels threatened by groups of immigrants, viewed as bearers or creators of social predicaments [14].

As opposed to that reductionist paradigm dominating the Spanish collective imagination, it must be said that those 5,000 foreign minors we speak of come

from over 16 countries, including Senegal, Mali, and Gambia—not just Morocco. Reinforced by media narratives, this fallacy does not align with real figures and is heavy with xenophobic prejudice and stereotypes. And the core problem with the latter is that they do not vanish, even when disproven by factual data: they become, in Rumbout's 2016 words, "zombie ideas"—refusing to die despite being consistently refuted by empirical evidence [15].

Exceptionality, provisionality, emergency measures, racism, and lack of political will shape current migration policies.

Some 93% of these unaccompanied migrant minors are boys, with girls and young women representing just 6.2%. If the journey is harrowing for a young male, the reader can try to imagine what it means for a female. 85.4% of these unaccompanied youth come from West Africa, with Senegal (2,027 minors) and Mali (1,434) as the main countries of origin, followed by Morocco (823), Gambia (543), Guinea (367), and Côte d'Ivoire (157). To a lesser extent, these young migrants also come from Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Congo, Benin, and Pakistan.

These kinds of statistics, however, do not always succeed in dispelling falsehoods and racist narratives, as stereotypes are as rooted in emotion as they are impervious to reality [16]. Just like the "flooding" does not align with actual figures, hatred likewise lacks a statistical foundation: the so-called "replacement theory," based on the assumption that all unaccompanied minors are Muslims, has a fundamentally racist and anti-Islamic basis, originating in 9/11 and other attacks committed by terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. The atrocities perpetrated by these extremists laid the rhetorical groundwork for the imposition of securitisation and exceptionality narratives through the scapegoating of migration, thereby dismantling our democratic normality and many of the principles of the rule of law.

These rhetorical foundations, which continue to shape migratory processes—and their protagonists—to this day, stem from a presumption of suspicion towards immigration, regarded as an undesirable element within society and, as suggested, a potential threat to the way of life of the "native" population. It is a narrative with an unmistakably identitarian character, marked by a paradox: the foreigner, through their "otherness", helps to reinforce national identity and sense of belonging, which are thus consolidated as a symbolic boundary against those from outside [17].

All of these xenophobic prejudices continue to be exploited today to criminalise the migrant population, and the rise of far-right populist parties has only served to further fuel and spread such discourse. It hardly needs saying, but this masks deep-seated political and economic interests. As long as far-right parties continue to find it easy to capitalise on ethno-nationalist rhetoric in their bid for power, it will remain vital that those of us committed to human rights make every effort to build new narratives that transcend these deceitful conceptual frameworks.

Of Dualisms and Centres of Dehumanisation

45,000 people out of a total of 2.2 million. This is what the dominant narrative refers to as being "overwhelmed".

Following the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the migratory exodus it triggered, Spain's Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration took in 236,000 Ukrainians within two years. "The integration of displaced people has been a priority for the Spanish government," proudly declared the minister [18], while the media made no suggestion that this represented any kind of threat. In resisting this double standard we are being pushed towards, it is impossible not to question ourselves, "why some and not others?". If this were achievable for Ukrainian refugees, why not for others who are also displaced? Like the jurisdictional dilemma—the central government's excuse that the responsibility for accommodating migrant minors lies with Spain's regional governments—this comparison lays bare the fact that this matter is all about political will.

According to the Ministry, 39,741 Ukrainian students have been enrolled in the Spanish education system. Of these, approximately 5,500 are in Early Childhood Education, 15,500 in Primary School, 9,500 in Secondary School, and over 8,000

The core problem with Stereotypes is that they do not vanish, even when disproven by factual data.

in Vocational Training and language learning courses. At a university level, 1,800 students are enrolled in undergraduate, master's or doctoral programmes. The Canary Islands, meanwhile, host just 5,000 unaccompanied minors. How many of them are not in school? How many have been unable to regularise their administrative status? How many are being held in reception centres that only deepen their dehumanisation?

There are 86 such centres for the reception of minors across seven islands. Theoretically, they are designed as emergency resources, but in practice, they have been rendered permanent. Overcrowded, overwhelmed, and accused of mistreatment, abuse and torture of the people they host [19]. These centres are but part of what has been called "hard borders": the array of control mechanisms acting as the first barriers to migrant integration in the country they arrive in. Indeed, it must be noted that borders are not only physical walls, maritime crossings, or airport controls; they are also the imposed conditions in which to cross them. Temporary Foreign Nationals Reception Centres (CATE), Immigration Detention Centres (CIE), Child Care Centres (CAI), emergency facilities, and general centres for minors are all examples of these hard borders, which ensure that, even before they begin to settle in their host society, migrants are pre-assigned a marginal status [20].

Moreover, these centres act as a kind of cork, containing migratory flows on a number of islands which, much like those in the Aegean Sea during the displacement caused by the war in Syria, are not the final destination intended by young migrants. Besides dehumanising minors, these detention/emergency centres hold them in a legal limbo, preventing them from reaching mainland Spain—and, by extension, the rest of Europe. "The right to emigrate has not been fulfilled, nor made concrete, with the right to immigrate," Michaud once said, pointing to a common contradiction in the migration laws of nation-states: in theory, they enshrine freedom of movement, but in practice, they prohibit migrants from settling. The insular nature of the Canary Islands makes this isolation all the more effective: minors become trapped in these supposedly temporary centres, from which they cannot find a way out. Surrounded by the ocean, stranded in what was meant to be only the first stage of their journey.

Conclusions: The Problem is Poverty

As a lawyer specialised in Immigration and Human Rights, I can state with certainty and first-hand knowledge that the issue with those 5,000 foreign minors who arrived alone in the Canary Islands is not their status as foreigners, but their condition of poverty. That is what makes the presence of these young people, who have no adult to take responsibility for them, appear, or be portrayed, as a threat to the archipelago.

There are things we can enquire about these minors who have travelled over 8,000km, who boarded brittle boats alone, who have survived the Atlantic Ocean faced with hunger, thirst, fear, and cold. What drives these young Africans to risk their lives on a deadly route to another continent? What forms of abuse did they suffer in their countries of origin? Did they have a family? Did they find no opportunities in the places they were born? What must their living conditions have been like for them to decide to leave in such a way?

Although arrival tipping points tend to occur during seasons with reduced cyclonic activity in the North Atlantic—the final months of the year—the boats are not built to withstand the impact of extreme weather and waves ranging between four and six metres. These are often patched-up vessels, retrofitted to cut costs, and burdened with far more passengers than their original design allows.

They generally do not carry enough fuel for the journey, nor adequate equipment for the days they must spend exposed to water and cold, nor enough food or drinking water. While there are signs of increasing technological improvement, such

Foto_ **Irene López**

as GPS navigation devices, the helmsmen are usually not experienced sailors. Thus, in addition to fear, panic attacks, severe seasickness, lack of sleep, and even injuries caused by the waves, it is not uncommon for those travelling in these boats to suffer from malnutrition, sunstroke, burns, dehydration, and hypothermia—the last two of which often result in death.

A lack of fuel or any mechanical failure can leave a boat adrift, and it is also common for vessels to begin breaking down within days or even hours of departure, due to the battering of the sea and the excessive weight of the cargo. Leaks often appear first, and the passengers must fight to block or bail out enough water to keep afloat. In the worst cases, a cayuco or patera can split apart entirely, be struck by a ship or dragged under by its wake. Sometimes, the overcrowding, the waves, and the sudden movements of passengers can destabilise the vessel to the point of capsizing, not always within sight of coastal patrols. The exhaustion of the migrants and the force of the water make survival chances slim under such conditions, even near the coast or during a rescue operation. On top of the extreme fatigue caused by the travel conditions previously described, it is worth noting that these boats typically carry no life jackets, and many of the migrants lack swimming skills. For all these reasons, the leading documented cause of death on the Atlantic route remains drowning.

We thus return to the central question: what drives these migrant minors to expose themselves to such dangers? The harsh reality is that migrating hundreds of

If the journey is harrowing for a young male, the reader can try to imagine what it means for a female.

kilometres in the hope of reaching Europe is not a fleeting whim, but an aspiration deeply embedded in the collective imagination of societies, such as those in West Africa, faced with misery and the plundering of their resources. These are societies where environmental degradation and climate destabilisation are compounded by weak modes of production, a dire lack of infrastructure, rampant corruption, and numerous other structural conflicts closely tied to their colonial past, leaving entire generations behind.

There is no fishing, no industry, and the productivity of agricultural labour is collapsing. Most of those who take on the enormous risks of irregular migration as their only escape route from such conditions are fully aware of what they are likely to face—just as most of those repatriated intend to attempt the journey a second time. The key to understanding what compels these young people to migrate, even as minors and without any accompanying family or adult, lies in acknowledging the persecution they are fleeing, the violence of civil and ethnic conflicts, hunger, and the confinement of refugee camps. In most cases, migration is not simply a hope for a better life—it is a response to the most primal instinct of all: survival.

The explanation is perfectly clear: migration does not decrease so long as the advantages of leaving one's country outweigh the advantages of staying [21]. This is another empirically proven reality, which also undermines the rhetoric that investment in countries of origin, in and of itself, helps curb migration. Quite the opposite, in fact: it has been demonstrated that the development of countries and societies leads to greater emigration, owing to improved financial and social means to undertake the journey, which in turn contributes to that same development through remittances sent by migrants already settled in host societies [22].

Hatred lacks a statistical foundation.

In short, migration will not stop, regardless of how many migration/population control practices and policies are implemented. Starting from this premise, it becomes clear that the negative ideology surrounding immigration—framing it as a security issue—serves as a justification for the tightening of migratory policies and the growing rigidity of border controls. The discourse of "migratory pressure," as analysed in this article, conceals a collective, unfounded ethnocentric bias that relies on the same rhetorical mechanisms as securitisation: through the demonisation of migrants, public authorities secure popular approval to override the rule of law in the name of public safety. It is for this reason that "crimmigration" and the rhetoric of a migratory invasion represent extremely dangerous tools in the hands of political parties and opinion-makers alike.

We must not forget that understanding immigration as a cultural and social threat turns young migrants into scapegoats—seemingly necessary ones—for a society plagued by crisis, uncertainty, and fear of the future [23]. To dismantle this view of migration as a potential threat to the collective cultural security of host societies, we must work to transform the narratives around the "youth who arrive alone." And to do so, we must appeal not only to empathy and compassion, but also to our shared responsibility as fellow humans.

[1] Abad, L. V. (1993). *Inmigración, pluralismo y tolerancia* [Inmigration, Plurality and Tolerance]. Madrid: Alianza Editoral.
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Loueila Sid Ahmed

Loueila Sid Ahmed Ndiaye is a lawyer of Sahrawi origin, specialising in Immigration Law. A Law graduate from the University of La Laguna (Tenerife), she has focused her professional practice on regularisation procedures, nationality applications, and the defence of vulnerable migrants. As a feminist activist, she is involved in various human rights networks and platforms in the Canary Islands and across Europe. In 2023, she was awarded the Feminist Activism Prize by Spain's Ministry of Equality and the Social Equality Prize by the international jury of *Peironcely 10*, in recognition of her commitment to refugees and racialised women.

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