

Who Redefined Democracy? Liberal Hegemony and the Rise of Christian-Conservative Alternatives

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In the aftermath of the Cold War, the concept of democracy underwent a significant redefinition in the West. What had once encompassed a broad spectrum of traditions—including Christian, conservative, and nationalist variants—became narrowly equated with liberalism. This paper examines how U.S. leaders, international institutions, and ideological frameworks contributed to the emergence of liberal democracy as the only legitimate political model in global discourse. Key actors—ranging from presidents like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to agencies like USAID and Freedom House—played pivotal roles in promoting liberal norms as universal democratic standards. Simultaneously, thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama and policymakers across the Atlantic helped entrench this view. In contrast, leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán have mounted a direct challenge to this hegemony, offering a vision of democracy rooted in Christianity, national identity, and cultural continuity. Drawing from political theory, foreign policy history, and global case studies, this paper argues that the liberal monopoly on democracy is historically contingent and increasingly contested. It calls for a renewed understanding of democracy as a pluralistic political form, not an ideological monolith.

Keywords: liberal democracy, Viktor Orbán, post-liberalism, Christian democracy, U.S. foreign policy, ideological hegemony, democracy promotion, illiberal democracy, EU politics, Francis Fukuyama, conservative governance, Cold War legacy, Carl Schmitt, political pluralism, national sovereignty. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of democracy from a concept historically inclusive of varied political traditions—such as Christian, conservative, populist, or nationalist forms—into a narrowly defined ideological framework equated almost exclusively with liberalism in the post–Cold War Western order. It argues that this redefinition was not a neutral evolution but a deliberate consolidation of power and narrative, promoted by a coalition of Western leaders, multilateral institutions, and ideological actors who framed liberal democracy as both the endpoint of history and the only legitimate model of governance. The study examines the central role played by U.S. leadership, particularly through foreign policy, conditional aid, and global advocacy for human rights and civil society. It also assesses the impact of institutions such as the European Union, United Nations, and global NGOs, which enforced liberal norms under the banner of democratic development.

In counterpoint, the paper analyzes the growing global resistance to this paradigm, focusing on the political philosophy and governance model of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. His articulation of a Christian, culturally rooted, and sovereignty-first democracy serves as a flashpoint in the larger battle over what “democracy” means. The paper situates this contest in a multipolar and civilizationaly diverse world, where the future of democracy may depend on recovering its pluralistic origins and rejecting hegemonic reduction.

I. Introduction

1.1 The Historical Plurality of Democratic Forms

From ancient Athens to modern constitutional republics, democracy has never been a monolith. In its many historical instantiations, it has taken vastly different shapes—ranging from direct citizen assemblies to representative parliaments, from Christian monarchies with elected estates to tribal councils with consensual decision-making. The American and French revolutions brought forth liberal constitutionalism, but other traditions—such as the Christian democratic

movements of 19th- and 20th-century Europe, the confederal democracy of the Iroquois, and even Confucian-inspired consultative systems—have shown that democratic legitimacy does not depend exclusively on liberal ideology. For centuries, democracy was defined by political participation, accountability, and the sovereignty of the people, not by adherence to a specific ideology of individual rights, secularism, or market capitalism.

1.2 The Problem: Democracy Redefined as Liberalism

In the wake of the Cold War, the West—led primarily by the United States and supported by a constellation of transnational institutions—effectively rebranded democracy to mean liberal democracy only. This ideological narrowing excluded alternative, culturally grounded political systems that maintained democratic elements without embracing Western liberal norms. Democratic governance became conditional upon specific values: individual autonomy, secularism, multiculturalism, global integration, and economic neoliberalism. As a result, any deviation from this model—whether rooted in religion, tradition, or nationalism—was cast as authoritarian or anti-democratic, even when backed by majority support and constitutional process.

1.3 Objectives of the Paper

This paper seeks to:

- Trace the ideological and institutional mechanisms by which liberal democracy became the global standard after 1990.
- Identify the key U.S. political leaders, global institutions, and theorists who reinforced this narrow definition.
- Examine how non-liberal democratic alternatives—particularly Viktor Orbán’s Christian-nationalist model—challenge this hegemony.
- Explore the consequences of this redefinition for political pluralism, national sovereignty, and the legitimacy of culturally distinct democratic traditions.

1.4 Methodological Note: Ideological Genealogy and Geopolitical Context

The approach combines ideological genealogy—tracing how specific ideas about democracy were promoted, canonized, and enforced—with an analysis of geopolitical context, including shifts in U.S. foreign policy, global power structures, and resistance movements. The paper draws on primary political speeches, institutional documents, academic theories, and comparative case studies to offer a comprehensive account of the West’s liberal-democratic turn and the emerging countercurrents. Rather than taking democracy as a self-evident good, it interrogates the historical, cultural, and strategic decisions that shaped its modern meaning.

II. Liberal Democracy’s Ascendancy After the Cold War

2.1 The Vacuum Left by the Soviet Collapse

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a geopolitical rupture that created both an ideological and structural vacuum. The Cold War had been framed as a binary competition between two incompatible systems: liberal democracy versus communist authoritarianism. With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the disintegration of the USSR, there remained no globally organized counterweight to liberal capitalism. The West, particularly the United States, interpreted this outcome not merely as a strategic victory but as a validation of its ideological framework. Consequently, liberal democracy—anchored in individual rights, free markets, secular governance, and procedural pluralism—was no longer one among many systems, but the default and allegedly final form of legitimate governance. In this context, previously pluralistic conceptions of democracy were absorbed or erased in favor of a Western-defined liberal template.

2.2 The "End of History" Thesis and Liberal Triumphalism (Francis Fukuyama)

Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History?” and subsequent 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* crystallized the intellectual mood of the early post–Cold War period. Fukuyama argued that Western liberal democracy had triumphed not only geopolitically but philosophically—that it represented the culmination of mankind’s ideological evolution. Though nuanced in his later

writings, Fukuyama's thesis became widely interpreted by policymakers and pundits as a green light for global liberal expansion. Liberalism, in this view, was not a cultural or historical product but a universal ideal whose eventual adoption was inevitable and desirable. This triumphalism fostered a missionary zeal in Western political elites: democracy was to be promoted not just through diplomacy but through economic incentives, media influence, institutional engineering, and, when deemed necessary, military intervention.

2.3 Democracy Promotion as Foreign Policy: From Theory to Instrument

With no existential threat to counterbalance it, the United States reoriented its foreign policy around the active promotion of democracy abroad—but crucially, democracy now meant liberal democracy only. Institutions like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor became key vehicles for exporting liberal norms. Financial aid, trade deals, and military alliances were increasingly contingent on countries adopting not only electoral systems but also liberal civil society frameworks, gender and minority rights policies, and neoliberal market reforms.

This agenda was not limited to soft power. In the 2000s, particularly under the Bush administration, democracy promotion was fused with security strategy, as seen in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were framed as efforts to democratize the Middle East. Meanwhile, non-liberal regimes—even those with democratic structures—were delegitimized, sanctioned, or isolated if they diverged from Western liberal norms. In effect, democracy ceased to be a system of popular sovereignty and became a package of pre-approved ideological contents, a shift that would eventually provoke resistance from nations and leaders unwilling to surrender their cultural or religious identity in exchange for Western approval.

III. Who Pushed the Redefinition in the West?

The redefinition of democracy as synonymous with liberalism did not occur passively or by accident. It was actively promoted by a nexus of political leadership, state-funded institutions, academic theorists, media outlets, and supranational organizations. Together, these actors shaped a geopolitical and epistemic environment in which only liberal democracies were recognized as legitimate, effectively delegitimizing non-liberal but democratically constituted states.

3.1 U.S. Presidents and Administrations

3.1.1 George H. W. Bush and the "New World Order"

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, President George H. W. Bush envisioned a “New World Order” governed by rules-based institutions and liberal norms. His administration laid the ideological groundwork for a global system where Western-style democracy would flourish under American leadership. Though cautious compared to later presidents, Bush I set the tone for the West’s global liberal trajectory, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

“A world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations.”

—George H. W. Bush, 1991

3.1.2 Bill Clinton’s Linkage of Aid and Liberal Norms

President Clinton expanded democracy promotion as a condition for U.S. aid, trade, and international partnerships. His administration supported a wide range of NGOs and civil society groups abroad that promoted feminism, LGBTQ rights, environmentalism, and press freedom—values aligned with liberalism rather than procedural democracy alone. U.S. foreign aid became increasingly tied to recipients’ adoption of Western liberal frameworks.

3.1.3 George W. Bush’s “Freedom Agenda” and Moral Universalism

Bush’s post-9/11 foreign policy cast democracy promotion as both a security necessity and a moral imperative. The “Freedom Agenda” assumed that liberal

democracy was the only legitimate safeguard against terrorism and authoritarianism. Military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were publicly justified as efforts to implant democratic governance, though in practice these attempts often failed to account for cultural and religious differences.

“The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.”

—George W. Bush, 2005

3.1.4 Barack Obama’s Global Liberalism and Moral Framing

Obama continued the liberal democratic project but reframed it through cosmopolitanism and moral persuasion. His administration emphasized inclusivity, gender equality, minority rights, and climate justice as inseparable from democratic legitimacy. His foreign policy rhetoric blurred the line between liberal progressivism and democracy itself, making it difficult for nations with conservative or religious traditions to participate without ideological concession.

3.2 State Institutions and Global Funding Mechanisms

3.2.1 USAID, NED, Millennium Challenge Corporation

These state-funded agencies channeled billions of dollars into shaping political institutions, electoral systems, civil society, and education in developing nations. Their support was conditional upon a country’s alignment with liberal values: anti-corruption, LGBTQ rights, gender equity, and Western-style rule of law. While often effective in stabilizing institutions, they also contributed to normative imperialism, whereby compliance with liberal values became a requirement for legitimacy.

3.2.2 Conditionality and Normative Enforcement

Conditionality mechanisms—such as tying development loans or security partnerships to human rights reports—created structural incentives for nations to adopt liberal reforms. What was once "technical assistance" evolved into an ideological filter. Countries that retained religious-based laws, emphasized traditional gender roles, or restricted foreign NGOs were routinely labeled

“backsliding democracies” or “illiberal regimes,” regardless of their popular mandates.

3.3 Academic and Media Reinforcement

3.3.1 Political Science Curricula and the Dahlian Model

In academia, Robert Dahl’s concept of polyarchy became the dominant definition of democracy: characterized by pluralism, civil liberties, free press, and institutional competition. While influential, this model implicitly aligned democracy with liberal proceduralism, marginalizing traditionalist or non-Western models that emphasized community, religion, or national identity. Over time, political science departments produced a generation of scholars and diplomats who treated liberal democracy as a universal good.

3.3.2 Western Media Conflation of Democracy with Progressivism

Mainstream Western media outlets—such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Le Monde*—regularly equated democratic health with the advancement of progressive values. Leaders like Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, or Benjamin Netanyahu were portrayed as threats to democracy, even when they governed with electoral legitimacy. This reinforced the assumption that deviation from liberal norms was equivalent to authoritarian regression.

3.4 Supranational Bodies and Legal Framing

3.4.1 EU Copenhagen Criteria and Judicial Pressure

The European Union’s Copenhagen Criteria require nations to meet standards of “democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities.” These standards, while laudable in intent, are operationalized through liberal interpretations of law and culture. Countries like Hungary and Poland have faced financial penalties and legal challenges for reforms grounded in Christian or nationalist principles, even when such policies have popular support.

3.4.2 UN, IMF, and World Bank Liberal-Democratic Conditioning

Global governance institutions often embedded liberal democratic assumptions into their frameworks for economic development and good governance. The IMF and World Bank attached liberal reforms to financial assistance, while UN bodies defined democracy in terms that favored individual rights over collective identity or cultural particularity. Consequently, traditional societies were pressured to abandon their values in exchange for global legitimacy and material support.

Conclusion of Section

The redefinition of democracy as liberal democracy was not incidental—it was the result of deliberate and coordinated actions by political leaders, bureaucracies, theorists, media institutions, and supranational bodies. Together, they reshaped the global landscape in a way that marginalized alternative forms of democratic expression, laying the groundwork for the ideological confrontations that define 21st-century politics.

IV. The Reaction: Viktor Orbán and Conservative Democracy

As liberal democracy became the hegemonic political model in the West, it also triggered resistance—most prominently from within democratic societies that did not share its cosmopolitan, secular, and relativist underpinnings. Among these challengers, Viktor Orbán of Hungary has emerged as the most articulate and institutionalized voice advocating for a fundamentally different conception: a *conservative, Christian, and national* form of democracy. Orbán's project does not reject democracy itself but seeks to reclaim it from liberalism, asserting an alternative rooted in cultural continuity, moral order, and national sovereignty.

4.1 The Illiberal Turn in Hungary: History and Context

Orbán's ideological transformation must be understood against Hungary's post-communist trajectory. Following the collapse of the USSR, Hungary transitioned into a liberal democracy under heavy influence from the West. However,

disillusionment with globalism, market liberalization, and foreign influence began to grow, particularly among rural and traditional populations. After returning to power in 2010 with a parliamentary supermajority, Orbán seized the opportunity to reshape Hungary's institutions and political identity. He described this not as a retreat from democracy, but as the construction of a “work-based, national, and Christian state” that would reject the “dogmas” of liberalism while maintaining electoral legitimacy.

4.2 Key Speeches and Political Philosophy

4.2.1 “The era of liberal democracies is over” (2014)

In his landmark 2014 speech in Băile Tușnad, Orbán declared:

“The new state that we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state... It does not deny the fundamental values of liberalism such as freedom, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization.”

Here, Orbán made explicit what many conservative leaders elsewhere had only implied: liberalism was not the same as democracy, and it had lost its legitimacy as a universal model. He cited Singapore, China, and Russia as functional alternatives, emphasizing order, identity, and effectiveness over procedural liberalism.

4.2.2 “Christian democracy is not liberal” (2018)

In his 2018 address at Tusnádfürdő, Orbán sharpened the distinction:

“Christian democracy is not liberal. Liberal democracy is liberal, while Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal.”

This philosophical reorientation rejected multiculturalism, relativism, and progressive social engineering. Instead, Orbán promoted a political vision grounded in Christianity, the defense of traditional families, and the preservation of Hungarian identity. This speech marked a rhetorical shift: Hungary was no longer merely resisting liberalism—it was offering a new democratic paradigm.

4.3 Institutional and Cultural Assertions of Sovereignty

4.3.1 Migration, Multiculturalism, and the Family

A cornerstone of Orbán's platform is resistance to mass migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries. His government constructed border fences, launched anti-migrant referenda, and pursued legislation curbing NGO activity related to asylum assistance. This was not merely about security; it was framed as a civilizational defense of Christian Europe. Orbán often contrasts Hungary's demographic policies—subsidies for native Hungarian families, tax exemptions for large families—with Western Europe's reliance on immigration to offset declining birthrates.

4.3.2 Religion, Tradition, and the Defense of Borders

Orbán views national borders as both physical and spiritual boundaries that safeguard Hungary's historical and religious identity. His government enshrined Christian heritage in Hungary's constitution, emphasized the importance of Judeo-Christian values in education, and curtailed foreign influence over Hungarian media and academia. These policies assert that sovereignty is not only political but also cultural—and that globalist liberalism seeks to dissolve both.

4.4 Orbán's Global Influence and Alignment with Post-Liberal Thinkers

While Orbán's model remains controversial in Western capitals, it has inspired a growing number of intellectuals, parties, and movements globally. In the U.S., he has received support from segments of the conservative right—particularly those aligned with national conservatism and post-liberal thought. Commentators like Patrick Deneen (*Why Liberalism Failed*) and Rod Dreher (*The Benedict Option*) have expressed sympathy for Orbán's framing of democracy as inseparable from civilizational foundations. Internationally, leaders in Poland, Israel, India, and parts of Latin America have echoed similar themes: democracy must serve the cultural and moral character of the people, not impose an external ideology.

Orbán's hosting of CPAC in Budapest, his alliance with Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS), and his rhetorical support from commentators critical of globalism

suggest that his influence extends beyond Hungary. He has positioned himself not merely as a national leader, but as the vanguard of a global revolt against liberal uniformity.

Conclusion of Section

Viktor Orbán's Hungary represents the most coherent and institutionalized counterexample to the West's liberal-democratic model. Rather than reject democracy, Orbán reclaims it for a different tradition—one that privileges cultural rootedness over cosmopolitanism, religion over secularism, and national sovereignty over supranational governance. Whether this alternative endures or spreads depends not only on its domestic success but on the extent to which liberalism continues to equate itself with democracy in the global arena.

V. Theoretical Foundations for Non-Liberal Democracies

To understand the philosophical underpinnings of Viktor Orbán's vision—and the broader rejection of liberal democratic orthodoxy—it is necessary to explore the theoretical foundations that legitimize non-liberal forms of democracy. While Western political science often treats liberalism and democracy as inseparable, a deeper analysis reveals that this is a contingent historical pairing, not an essential one. From Carl Schmitt's foundational critique to the recent resurgence of post-liberal Catholic thought, and through global case studies, we find robust intellectual currents arguing that democracy can persist—and even flourish—outside the liberal framework.

5.1 Carl Schmitt's Distinction: Democracy vs. Liberalism

Carl Schmitt, the German legal and political theorist, argued in the early 20th century that liberalism and democracy are fundamentally distinct, and often in tension. In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), Schmitt asserted that:

“Democracy requires—first homogeneity—and second, if need be, the elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.”

In contrast, liberalism emphasizes pluralism, individual autonomy, and the perpetual mediation of conflicting interests. For Schmitt, democracy is about the identity between ruler and ruled, the affirmation of a collective will—a “people.” This implies that a nation has the right to define itself, even if that definition excludes certain forms of diversity. By separating democracy from liberalism, Schmitt opened the theoretical door to majoritarian, culturally cohesive, and religiously grounded democratic forms—exactly the kind that thinkers like Orbán now promote.

5.2 Post-Liberalism and Catholic Integralism (Deneen, Vermeule)

In the 21st century, a revival of post-liberal political theory has emerged in response to what is perceived as liberalism’s failure to sustain moral coherence, community, and transcendental purpose.

- Patrick Deneen, in *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018), argues that liberalism has not delivered on its promises of freedom and flourishing but has instead hollowed out communities, degraded moral traditions, and produced atomized individuals vulnerable to state and market control. For Deneen, democracy must return to virtue-centered, tradition-bound, and theologically informed roots.
- Adrian Vermeule, a Harvard constitutional scholar and advocate of Catholic integralism, argues for a form of governance in which law is subordinated to the common good as defined by natural and divine law—not the procedural neutrality of liberal institutions. For Vermeule, liberal democracy has become a mask for coercive secularism and must be replaced by a substantively just order rooted in Christianity.

Both thinkers offer frameworks in which electoral legitimacy is not enough—political authority must be oriented toward substantive moral goods, even if that means curbing individual choice or liberal rights.

5.3 Alternative Models: Singapore, Israel, India, Poland

Several nation-states have pursued non-liberal democratic models that complicate the Western equation of democracy with liberalism:

- Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew developed a model of “soft authoritarianism” with democratic institutions but strict limitations on press freedom, public protest, and Western-style pluralism. Its legitimacy is rooted in technocratic competence, Confucian values, and social harmony, not liberal rights.
- Israel, while a parliamentary democracy, defines itself as a Jewish state, privileging national identity and religious tradition in ways that challenge liberal neutrality. Its nation-state law affirms the primacy of Jewish self-determination, even as democratic institutions remain intact.
- India, the world’s largest democracy, under Narendra Modi’s BJP, has increasingly emphasized Hindu identity, civilizational continuity, and majoritarian governance, prompting debates about whether liberalism is essential for democratic legitimacy.
- Poland, under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), has emphasized Catholic morality, family values, and judicial reform as part of its democratic identity, despite criticism from the European Union. Its electoral support suggests a strong domestic appetite for value-based democracy that resists liberal conformity.

These models demonstrate that democracy can coexist with religious, national, or cultural particularism, challenging the notion that only liberal democracies are valid or sustainable.

5.4 Challenges: Can Democracy Persist Without Liberalism?

The possibility of non-liberal democracy raises a critical set of challenges:

- Risk of authoritarian drift: Without liberal safeguards—such as independent courts, free media, and minority protections—non-liberal democracies may devolve into majoritarian tyranny or soft autocracy.
- International isolation: Countries pursuing non-liberal democracy may face sanctions, funding cuts, and reputational damage from Western institutions, constraining their diplomatic and economic options.
- Pluralism and dissent: Without liberal protections for dissenting voices, these systems risk suppressing legitimate opposition under the guise of national or religious unity.
- Philosophical coherence: Post-liberal theorists must articulate how rights, freedoms, and legitimate authority function in the absence of liberal premises—particularly in multicultural or globalized contexts.

Yet despite these challenges, the rise of non-liberal democracies signals that liberalism may no longer be necessary for democratic legitimacy—especially in societies with strong religious, ethnic, or historical identities. The future of democracy may depend on whether it can be reimagined as plural, civilizationaly grounded, and open to tradition, rather than confined to liberal dogma.

Conclusion of Section

The theoretical scaffolding for non-liberal democracy is no longer a fringe discourse. Drawing from political theology, realist theory, and lived examples, it posits that democracy need not be secular, neutral, or liberal to be legitimate. This paradigm shift reopens the question of what democracy is for—and whether it must serve liberty alone, or something greater, such as virtue, order, identity, or the common good.

VI. The Crisis of Political Legitimacy

As the liberal-democratic consensus that dominated the post–Cold War global order begins to fracture, a deeper crisis has emerged—a crisis of political legitimacy. Across multiple regions and civilizations, citizens and leaders alike are increasingly questioning whether liberalism truly represents their values, history, or aspirations. At stake is not just the survival of particular regimes but the very definition of what constitutes legitimate rule in a multipolar, culturally diverse world.

6.1 Global Backlash Against Liberal Hegemony

The rise of leaders such as Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), and even Donald Trump (United States) reflects a widespread backlash against the perceived overreach of liberalism. From the Middle East to Central Europe, from Latin America to Southeast Asia, a growing number of societies have expressed fatigue with liberal prescriptions—especially those perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from local tradition.

This backlash is not merely political but civilizational. In many countries, liberalism is viewed not as a neutral arbiter of governance but as a culturally alien ideology—one that disrespects national sovereignty, undermines traditional institutions, and redefines moral norms without democratic consent. Electoral victories by conservative and populist parties are often dismissed in Western media as signs of “backsliding,” yet for their supporters, they represent attempts to restore political legitimacy by reconnecting the state to the people’s cultural and moral core.

6.2 The Problem of Moral Imperialism and Universalism

One of the central critiques of Western liberal democracy is its claim to moral universality. Under the guise of human rights, democratic norms, and global governance, Western institutions and governments often export a specific set of values—secularism, individual autonomy, gender ideology, open borders—as if

they are universally valid. This has produced what critics call moral imperialism: the imposition of liberal morality onto societies with very different historical, religious, and ethical frameworks.

Such imposition often provokes resentment. For example, when Western aid or diplomatic recognition is conditioned on the implementation of progressive policies—such as liberal abortion laws, same-sex marriage, or gender quotas—it creates a perception that democracy is less about self-rule and more about conforming to a predetermined moral code. This undermines the principle of cultural self-determination and fuels resistance movements that explicitly reject “Western values,” even while retaining democratic mechanisms.

6.3 Rising Multipolarity and Civilizational Democracy

The decline of unipolar American dominance and the rise of alternative powers—China, Russia, India, Brazil—have opened space for civilizational models of governance. In this emerging multipolar world, political legitimacy is increasingly defined not by ideological uniformity but by civilizational coherence. Countries now assert the right to organize their societies according to their own traditions, religions, and collective identities—be it Confucian meritocracy, Orthodox Christian hierarchy, Hindu civilizational unity, or Islamic jurisprudence.

These alternative models do not necessarily reject democracy per se, but they redefine it in terms compatible with local metaphysics and cultural priorities. Democracy, in this context, is no longer synonymous with Western liberalism but is understood as a mechanism for expressing the will of a historically and spiritually rooted people. This shift challenges the liberal order’s claim to universality and introduces a pluralistic understanding of political legitimacy based on civilizational autonomy rather than ideological alignment.

6.4 The Narrowing of Acceptable Political Discourse in Western Institutions

While the rest of the world is experimenting with post-liberal or civilizational alternatives, Western institutions—governments, universities, NGOs, media

outlets—have undergone a process of ideological consolidation. Over time, the range of acceptable political discourse has narrowed, with dissent from liberal orthodoxy increasingly framed as bigotry, extremism, or fascism.

Within Western democracies, questioning the liberal consensus—particularly on issues like immigration, gender ideology, or national identity—often leads to social ostracism, de-platforming, or institutional sanction. This raises the paradox of illiberal liberalism: in the name of tolerance and inclusion, dissenting views are excluded from the public square. As a result, many citizens feel that democratic choice has become a performance, not a genuine contest between competing visions of the good.

This suppression of dissent contributes to a crisis of trust in Western democratic institutions. Voter turnout declines, populist parties gain ground, and conspiracy theories proliferate—not because democracy is failing, but because people no longer believe that the system is responsive to their values. In this climate, calls to reclaim democracy from liberalism—whether in Hungary or the American heartland—are gaining rhetorical and political traction.

Conclusion of Section

The legitimacy crisis confronting liberal democracy today is not rooted in technocratic failure, but in spiritual and civilizational estrangement. As liberal institutions enforce ideological conformity at home and project moral universality abroad, they provoke resistance from those who seek to reconnect political authority with cultural identity, moral order, and historical continuity. The path forward may require not a defense of liberalism, but a rediscovery of democracy as a pluralistic, tradition-compatible structure of self-rule, open to forms that reflect the true diversity of human civilizations.

VII. Conclusion: Toward a Pluralistic Understanding of Democracy

The history of democracy is far older and more diverse than the liberal framing that has dominated the post–Cold War period. Across cultures and centuries,

democratic legitimacy has taken many forms—rooted not always in individual autonomy, secular institutions, or market economies, but often in shared moral frameworks, religious traditions, and communal identities. In light of the growing crisis of legitimacy facing liberal democracy and the global resurgence of civilizational and conservative alternatives, it is time to rethink what democracy can mean.

7.1 Reclaiming Democratic Pluralism

To reclaim democratic pluralism is to recover the original breadth and adaptability of democracy itself. Democracy need not be yoked to a single ideological template; it is a formal structure of political self-governance that can be filled with different cultural, moral, and theological contents. This includes models shaped by Orthodox Christianity, Hindu civilizational ethics, Islamic jurisprudence, or Confucian meritocracy, so long as they reflect the will of a politically conscious people. Reclaiming pluralism means rejecting the tendency to dismiss democratic systems as illegitimate simply because they do not conform to a liberal rubric.

This also requires acknowledging that pluralism itself does not mean relativism. Democracies may legitimately reflect particular truths, collective moral claims, or traditional hierarchies. What matters is not whether every value is tolerated, but whether the structure allows for consent, participation, accountability, and coherence within a civilizational framework.

7.2 From Hegemonic Export to Negotiated Legitimacy

The liberal West's attempt to export its democratic model as a universal standard has, paradoxically, undermined its own credibility. By conditioning legitimacy on ideological conformity—rather than on authentic political expression—liberal democracy has come to be seen as a form of ideological imperialism, rather than a liberating framework. Moving forward, legitimacy must be negotiated rather than imposed.

Negotiated legitimacy acknowledges the complexity of a multipolar world in which political systems reflect local traditions, not imported blueprints. It means respecting that democracy in Poland may look different from democracy in France; that democratic consensus in India may arise from values rooted in Hindu dharma, not secular liberalism. This negotiation does not mean accepting authoritarianism or repression—it means recognizing that legitimacy emerges from within a people’s moral and historical imagination.

7.3 The Future of Christian and Conservative Democracies

The example of Viktor Orbán—and others like Poland’s Law and Justice Party, Israel’s nation-state framework, or various conservative populist movements in the West—suggests that Christian and conservative democracies are not relics of the past but emergent alternatives. These models seek to balance electoral legitimacy with cultural continuity, grounding governance in shared religious and moral narratives. Their continued rise reflects a broader hunger for rootedness in an age of rapid global change.

The future of such democracies will depend on their ability to avoid authoritarian excesses while articulating a coherent, non-liberal vision of justice, responsibility, and community. They must show that tradition and democracy are not enemies—that a society can be both ordered and free, reverent and participatory. If they succeed, they may offer a viable post-liberal path that resonates across civilizations.

7.4 Ending the False Binary: Democracy Is Not Only Liberal, Nor Is Liberalism Inherently Democratic

Perhaps the most important task is to dismantle the false binary that has dominated political thought since the Cold War: that one must choose between liberalism and democracy, as if they are synonymous or mutually dependent. They are not. Liberalism is a historically contingent philosophy emphasizing individual autonomy, neutrality, and rights-based pluralism. Democracy is a method of

political self-governance that can incorporate liberalism—but also conservatism, religion, nationalism, or other guiding norms.

Conversely, liberalism can operate without democracy—as seen in technocratic, elite-driven regimes that preserve rights but deny voice. To equate liberalism with democracy is to conflate procedure with purpose. Democracy’s essence is not the celebration of autonomy, but the ability of a people to govern itself according to its own understanding of the good.

Final Reflection

Democracy, if it is to survive the 21st century, must be released from the straightjacket of liberal orthodoxy. It must be rediscovered not as an exportable system but as a living expression of political anthropology, sensitive to culture, religion, and identity. The age of liberal monopoly is fading. What comes next will not be its rejection, but its integration—into a broader tapestry of democratic forms, reconciled not by sameness, but by the shared human desire to live under a rule that reflects who we are.

Epilogue: BRICS as a Reaction to Liberal Democratic Hegemony

The rise of BRICS—originally an economic bloc of emerging powers, now a broader political and strategic alliance—cannot be understood solely through material interests or multipolar pragmatism. It also reflects a deeper ideological realignment, one in which countries increasingly resist the normative authority of the liberal democratic model promoted by the West since the end of the Cold War. In this context, BRICS has evolved into a symbolic and institutional counterweight to liberal hegemony, offering a platform where diverse political systems—democratic, authoritarian, religious, or civilizational—can cooperate without being judged against the yardstick of Western liberalism.

The redefinition of democracy as inherently liberal, promoted by U.S. presidents, global financial institutions, and supranational bodies, catalyzed a revolt against the universality claim embedded in liberalism. Nations within BRICS were often

recipients of conditional aid or subjected to human rights evaluations that implicitly privileged liberal norms over indigenous traditions and sovereign policy decisions. The liberal model, when tied to economic leverage or diplomatic recognition, began to appear less as a framework for freedom than a vehicle of moral imperialism.

BRICS has responded by advocating for a new form of legitimacy—multipolar, negotiated, and civilizationaly rooted. At the 2025 Rio Summit, BRICS issued a declaration promoting inclusive global governance, financial reform, and institutional diversification. The rhetoric emphasized *sovereign equality* and *plural developmental paths*, rejecting the one-size-fits-all prescriptions of liberal democracy. Notably, these declarations came even as internal tensions among BRICS members—some democracies, some not—demonstrated that shared resistance to ideological hegemony can outweigh regime-type differences.

BRICS also offers an alternative to Western-dominated institutions like the IMF and World Bank by providing development funding without liberal conditions. This "no-strings" diplomacy appeals to many Global South nations who view Western liberalism as incompatible with their cultural, religious, or nationalist priorities. By allowing member and aspiring states to define democracy on their own terms, BRICS validates non-liberal political traditions as equally modern, legitimate, and sovereign.

While critics point to organizational incoherence or conflicting national interests within BRICS, these are the growing pains of a new geopolitical formation—not signs of irrelevance. The very act of assembling diverse political civilizations into a single cooperative framework is itself a repudiation of the liberal order's exclusivist logic. Where the West once insisted that to be democratic was to be liberal, BRICS now insists that to be sovereign is to be plural.

In this light, the success of BRICS is not merely economic—it is ideological. It reveals the exhaustion of the liberal monopoly on political meaning and heralds a world where democracy is reclaimed, reframed, and re-rooted in civilizations that refuse to abandon themselves in exchange for Western approval.

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