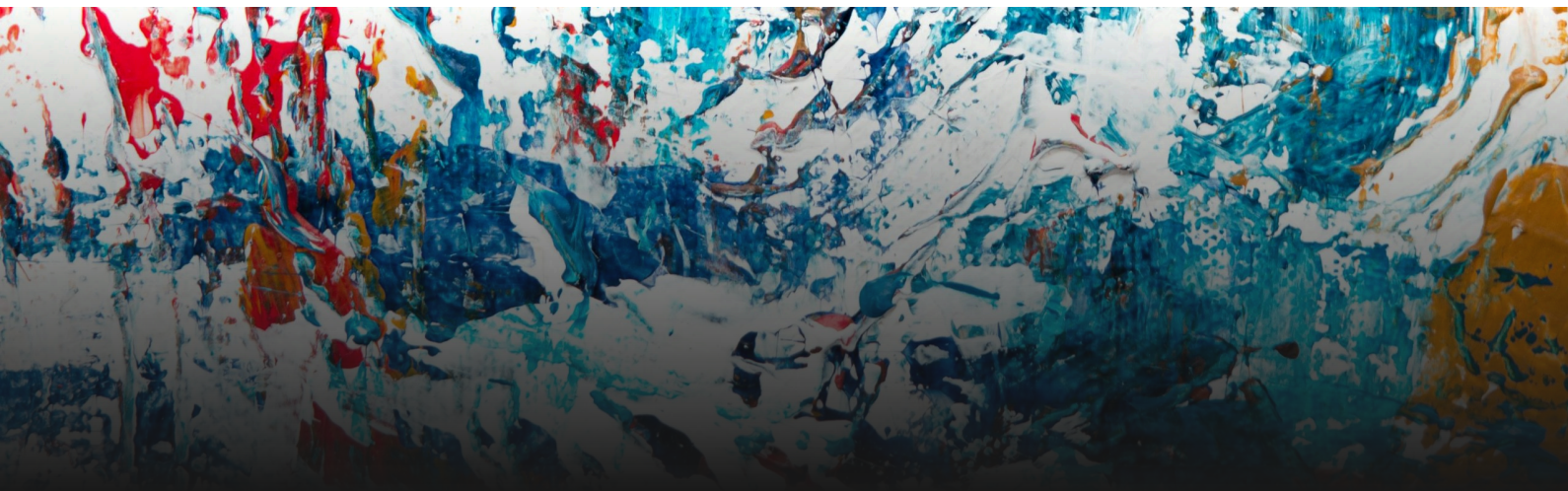




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The political maelstrom in the US

Professor Robert Wade and Dr Jakob Vestergaard critique President Trump's second-term administration for consolidating personal power, undermining democratic institutions, and using government authority for retribution and control—both domestically and abroad—while pursuing an authoritarian agenda that threatens U.S. democracy and stability.

It is exhausting to follow the feverish news cycle in Washington during the first half of October. Every hour of every day brings a new shock. One shock has been positive, namely the deal substantially achieved by President Trump and the leaders of Qatar and Egypt for Hamas to release the hostages and Israel to stop — at least temporarily — its war in Gaza. If Trump had not invited Netanyahu to the White House and metaphorically put his hands to Netanyahu's throat and said "sign this", the deal would not have happened.

But the later-stage conditions of the deal make it very unlikely that its outcomes will bring anything close to "liberty and prosperity" for Gaza. Israel's troops will remain in half of the area until Israel agrees that Hamas has completely disarmed; which means Israel troops may stay indefinitely. Even implementation of the near-term conditions depends on whether the president remains engaged despite his short attention-span. It is strange that his government has not paused its domestic attack agenda for even a week so as to have the media focus on celebrating the Israel-Hamas Gaza deal.

Instead, it is pushing full steam ahead on the larger strategy to eviscerate the federal government (the "deep state"). The strategy was well signalled in advance. In 2021 JD Vance compared his ambition for the reform of the US government to US policy in postwar Iraq. "We need like a de-Baathification program, but a de-wokeification program in the United States." He went on to say that if and when Donald Trump returned to the White House, he should "fire ever single midlevel bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people" (Goldberg 2025).

Since the start of the second Trump government many thousands of federal employees have been fired, and the firing or furloughing has intensified with the government shut-down in October. At the same time the president has been sending military troops onto the streets of Democrat-governed big cities like Chicago and Portland without the approval of the state or city government, in response to alleged crime waves — for which there is no evidence. Trump declares “Portland is burning to the ground”, when the protests against the ICE agents operating in Portland to round up “illegal immigrants”, which have provided video scenes of police-protestor violence from time to time, are confined to one city block. The larger purpose of the military on the streets of these cities seems to be to make voters — who vote majority Democrat — afraid to come out to vote in the approaching mid-term elections in 2026.

Watching television coverage and talking to people in Washington brings to mind the “tactic for rule” enunciated by Steve Bannon, prominent Republican influencer, in November 2021. “The Democrats don’t matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit” — meaning to bamboozle the public to the point where it mostly loses track of what the Trump government is doing to undermine US democracy, leaving people fearful and prone to supplicate or keep silent.

Trump and his government are empowered by the decision of the US Supreme Court during the campaign of the 2024 presidential election that the president has immunity from prosecution while performing duties of the office. On taking office Trump knew he would not face prosecution almost whatever he did, as none of his predecessors knew.

He has used government — particularly the Department of Justice — as an instrument of retribution against those he sees as “enemies” who do not submit to him, as though federal employees including the military owe their loyalty to him, not the Constitution. In October a message Trump sent to Attorney General Pam Bondi, the head of the Department of Justice, came into the public domain, accidentally put there by Trump himself. He told Bondi that the prosecutions against three named people — James Comey, former head of the FBI in the first Trump government, Leticia James, Attorney General of New York, and California’s Senator “Shifty Schiff” (as Trump calls him) — were going too slow, must be speeded up. It is just one example among many how Trump is using the Department of Justice as his personal law firm and the Attorney General as his personal lawyer. No other president has treated the Department of Justice in this way. No other president has gone so far in converting “rule of law” into “rule *by* law”. It indicates a serious erosion of US national “state capacity” going forward.

At hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee, 7th October, Bondi was asked whether she took the message as an instruction, yes or no. She evaded the question, as she evaded most questions put by the senators. One of those was the hot question of whether she had seen photos in the Epstein files of Trump with scantily dressed young (possibly under-aged) women, as witnesses have alleged. (Months ago, asked about the Epstein files, she said that they were sitting on her desk.)

It is said that one of the main reasons behind the current federal government shutdown now entering its third week — with many thousands of federal employees already fired or furloughed — is that Speaker Mike Johnson does not want to call the House back into session because a newly elected Democrat — not yet sworn in office — indicates she will vote in favour of releasing the full Epstein files (which the Trump government has strongly resisted). Her vote would tip the House decision in favour of releasing. If the House is not in session the vote cannot be held.

Pushback against the Trump agenda has been slow. Republican office-holders and would-be officer-holders are afraid that if they do not tow the Trump line, enough finance will be provided to opponents to have them unseated at the next election. Many law firms and elite universities have struck compromise deals with the administration.

But pushback is growing. On Saturday October 18th thousands of protest marches are planned across the country under the banner “No Kings Day”. The Republican leaders refer to them as the “Hate America” marches. They say the No Kings protestors are the enemy within — domestic “terrorists”, “Antifa”, Pro-Hamas, Pro-ISIS, Marxists.

Eight years ago a Rutgers University professor, Mark Bray, published a short book called *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*. He described a very loose movement of left-leaning people in America, with no formal organization. Recently Trump and Vice President Vance started referring to Antifa (anti-fascist) as the blanket term for the highly organised “enemy within” — including sponsors of the Hate America marches, who are determined, they say, to bring violence across America. A heading in Bray’s book says “A call to arms”. The text makes clear this is not a call to violence or insurrection. But the Trump government has used this heading — among other arguments — to justify its threat to invoke the rarely used Insurrection Act (the last time was in 1992 for the Los Angeles riots). The Act would give legal backing to the domestic deployment of the US military to suppress unrest and enforce laws, without the consent of the target states.

Meanwhile, following Trump’s invocation of Antifa as the omnipresent enemy of the American people, Bray started receiving death threats, to the point where he decided to flee the country. When he turned up at the airport to catch his flight the reservation was mysteriously cancelled. When he turned up the next day he was interrogated by government agents, then allowed to board the flight. He is now in Spain, one of the centres of fascism for much of the twentieth century.

I am reminded of Ian McEwan’s short novel, *The Cockroach* (2019). It starts with a cockroach making its way from the Houses of Parliament to number 10 Downing Street, climbing upstairs to the sleeping Prime Minister, entering his body, taking over his mind. Other cockroaches have been doing the same to the other cabinet ministers. Next day the cabinet meets as scheduled. The cockroach-ministers put their plan in motion. They declare to the nation the dawn of a golden age, based on a wholesale economic revolution. All economic exchanges are to go in reverse. Instead of you paying the grocer for your groceries, the grocer pays you to buy them. This reversal will bring

untold prosperity, the cabinet tells the nation. In private they know full well this will be a disaster for the human population, but a golden age for their kind.

Yet the puzzle is that the Trump administration is intensifying the evisceration of the government, even as polls suggest the president is not approved of by the majority of the American electorate.

A recent poll suggests 42% of respondents approve of what his government is doing, 58% disapprove, a 16% negative. A Harvard CAPS/Harris poll in October suggests 46% approval; which would be slightly above Obama and Biden at the same time in their presidencies. What is strange is that Trump's approval has remained fairly constant for months, despite all the upheaval, despite rising inflation and unemployment, despite health insurance costs per month that will probably soon shoot up by three times and more, despite the desperation US farmers no longer able to access low-cost loans from the closed-down Department of Agriculture and whose crops are no longer being bought by China. Perhaps the government is relying on the campaign against "enemies within" and the "de-wokeification" of the federal government to solidify the MAGA base by enough to keep control of the House and the Senate in the mid-term elections. One has to hope that the judiciary will remain independent enough to block the government's more egregious extra-legal moves to punish "enemies" (including the Democrats with their "terrorist wing"), and block the sending of the military into Democrat-governed cities. Watch out for what happens on the "No Kings" march on October 18th, or the "Hate America" march as Trump circles call it.

And watch out for what happens to US economic growth if subsequent administrations do not substantially reverse Trump's push towards not just autocratic rule, but personalistic autocratic rule. Machiavelli warned that rule by princes was more prone to tyranny and wickedness than rule by more institutionalised oligarchies and republican elites. A new study confirms that personalistic autocracies have substantially worse economic growth performance than both institutionalised autocracies and democracies (Blattman et al. 2025).

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Blue, White, Red, and Yellow Abstract Painting via [Pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com/).

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