



CONVERSATIONS
A Global Forum

Moisés Naím

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

Democracy | Markets | Development

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To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020 CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa on important questions on democracy, business, markets, and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This was the 23rd event in the series.

Ann Bernstein: My guest today is Moisés Naím, former Cabinet Minister in Venezuela, acclaimed editor and columnist in the world's leading newspapers, and author of many important books.

His most recent book, published in 2022, is called *The Revenge of Power: How autocrats are reinventing politics for the 21st century*. Why did you write this book?

Dr Moisés Naím: Ten years ago I wrote *The End of Power*, in which I observed that in every human activity where power matters, power remained important, but it was waning. It had also become easier to acquire, but harder to use and easier to lose.

In the 10 years since I published that book, democracy has gone into decline. People with power have used new strategies to side-step, contain and dilute the forces weakening their power. They employed the three P's: populism, polarisation and 'post-truth', all of which acquired new potency in the 21st century. The developments in this century that have most influenced these processes are globalisation, new technologies, and the explosion of social media.

Ann Bernstein: You have asserted that democratic government is in crisis on a scale not seen since the rise of fascism across Europe in the 1930s. Why are you going this far in your view of recent trends?

Dr Moisés Naím: I have the numbers to back up my argument. There is an organisation called Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) that operates out of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. They measure the global balance between democracy and autocracy. Their most recent report (2023) shows:

- Global advances of democracy over the last 35 years have been wiped out.
- 5,7 billion people, 72 percent of the world's population, find themselves living in autocracies in 2022.
- Global levels of democracy are down to levels last seen in 1986.
- In the Asia Pacific region, levels have returned to where they were in 1978.
- Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have returned to where they were at the end of the cold war.

The central story is that over two thirds of global citizens live in countries where their freedoms and civil liberties are curtailed or do not exist.

Ann Bernstein: Is India still on the democratic side in those tables?

Dr Moisés Naím: The report has a very sophisticated methodology to put countries in different categories. India is complicated. It is still the largest democracy in the world, but in recent years many of the checks and balances that define a democracy have been under attack there.

Ann Bernstein: What exactly is different about the new autocrats? How do you see this?

Dr Moisés Naím: Many of the new leaders have strong anti-democratic propensities that they are good at concealing. They know how to play the game, to use social media and rapidly changing economic trends to appear democratic when they are in fact drifting towards autocracy.

In the past, if you wanted to create an autocracy you got a general, gave him dark glasses to wear and put him on television to say: "my tanks are on the streets, and my fighter planes are in the sky. I am in charge!"

What we see now, instead, is the sophisticated use of double talk, manipulation and propaganda, which conceal the reality that autocrats are undermining checks and balances from within. Many of them came to power through elections, but, once in government, they start diluting the independence of the central court, buying members of parliament, and generally co-opting, cajoling, recruiting, and perversely incentivising those who operate the institutions that provide the essential checks and balances in a democracy.

Ann Bernstein: I like your line where you said, "we have less democracy, but more elections".

Dr Moisés Naím: Elections are booming as we speak. I am sure that right now, somewhere in the world there is an election taking place. Voting seems to be fashionable at the same time that democracy is under attack and shrinking.

Ann Bernstein: Why are populist autocrats so popular? Why do so many people in so many different countries like them so much? Has democracy really failed them?

Dr Moisés Naím: People are experiencing challenges relating to globalisation and technological change, but autocrats also know how to play the game, to make promises that they usually do not keep, and then they fall back on the three Ps.

What is happening worldwide is that the performance of government has declined; governments are failing to deliver. To draw attention away from that, politicians see the advantages of polarising the country while seeking control over the electoral process and bypassing democratic processes.

Ann Bernstein: Is it true that societies are more polarised now, and what is the role of the internet in this?

Dr Moisés Naím: The three Ps have always existed. Populism and polarisation have certainly always been there, and 'post-truth' used to be called propaganda.

What is really different is the way the new technologies allow those who are ready to promote populism and exploit polarisation to amplify their messages through the use of new technologies, thereby creating chaos, doubt, disappointment and resentment. They then turn that into a coalition to get themselves to the presidential palace.

Ann Bernstein: Would you be in favour of curbing the internet and freedom of expression with stronger rules?

Dr Moisés Naím: I am a democrat, and I am for more freedom rather than less. However, in the wake of the industrial revolution, countries started creating consumer protection agencies to protect citizens from malpractices and defective products. In the wake of the information revolution, we consume digital products all day, every day, yet we do not have protections against abuses in this sphere.

In the future we will need to develop tools that will allow people like you and I to defend ourselves against the manipulation we are subjected to daily.

Ann Bernstein: Let us dig a bit deeper into 'post-truth', which you said is not about the spread of lies per se, but rather about destroying the very possibility of truth in public life. Tell us about that.

Dr Moisés Naím: In the past, propaganda was an institutionalised way, usually employed by governments, to persuade as many people as possible of a particular viewpoint. The much more amplified and diversified messages being distributed through social media now, are not really concerned with persuading many people. They are much more concerned to create confusion, intolerance, and even hatred, thereby greatly amplifying polarisation and making reasonable debate increasingly difficult. This is certainly a strategy employed by the Kremlin to negatively influence politics around the world.

Ann Bernstein: You have thought a lot about corruption and international crime syndicates. Tell us about Russia and international crime. What do we need to know as citizens of another country?

Dr Moisés Naím: There is a global trend, not confined only to Russia, of organised crime infiltrating and taking over governments. International criminal networks are being used as an instrument of the state to punish rivals, eliminate threats and concentrate power.

This is taking corruption and state condoned criminality to another level.

Ann Bernstein: Many people assert that a lot of the people one is engaging with on social media are actually bots from Russia or China. Is this true? Are there factories manufacturing bots, influencing public discussion in Europe, America, South Africa?

Dr Moisés Naím: You can bet that wherever there is an election someone is operating social media and bots to influence the outcome. With new developments in artificial intelligence this will become even more prevalent.

Ann Bernstein: I have always been puzzled as to why in a country like Italy, with loads of corruption and the place that birthed the mafia, the highways are terrific. In other countries, in many parts of Africa for example, they also have corruption, but the highway never gets built. How does this work? You distinguished between normal corruption and kleptocracy. Does that distinction help us to understand these different outcomes?

Dr Moisés Naím: Not all the highways in Italy are terrific. There was a bridge in Genoa that collapsed, which was linked to corruption and the short cuts taken in the construction of the bridge.

Nevertheless, normal corruption has always existed and is transactional. For example, a traffic officer who is willing not to give you a ticket in exchange for a bribe, or a minister who collects 10 percent of the cost of building a highway as a kickback. Usually this consists of public servants interacting with people in the private sector, which leads to the public servant receiving money and the private sector person receiving some kind of benefit.

Kleptocratic activities, by contrast do not lead to an outcome like a highway or any broader benefit. They just consist of kleptocrats raiding public funds to enrich themselves, their families, their cronies, the military. There is not a specific transaction. Kleptocrats use their power and control over resources to ensure a large chunk of funds flow into their coffers, without feeling the need to deliver anything in return.

Ann Bernstein: You mentioned a former Intelligence chief in Bulgaria, who said that "other countries have the mafia, in Bulgaria the mafia has the country". What is a mafia state, and once you become one, how do you come back from that?

Dr Moisés Naím: In some countries the mafia no longer needs to find ways of influencing those in government, because they have actually become the government. There are no silver bullets to turn that kind of situation around, and this not something an individual can do alone. Combatting this kind of corruption must become a national purpose based on a broad based understanding that living like this is not acceptable or sustainable. The private sector, the military, churches, universities, media, civil society, must come together and form a national coalition dedicated to overcoming this evil.

Colombia, for example, is a place where big inroads have been made into the influence narco-traffickers had over government. They did it by creating a coalition. This is not to say problems in Colombia have disappeared, but the situation has improved dramatically.

Ann Bernstein: Let us turn to America. In your view, to what extent did Russia promote Trump, or help Trump get elected?

Dr Moisés Naím: There is strong evidence of this. Seventeen US intelligence agencies produced a document that supported the view that Russia had a major influence on the 2016 US elections. No one has shown that conclusion to be false. In addition, the fact that so many different agencies came together and reached the same conclusion, something that almost never happens, points to the existence of very powerful data showing Russia intervening in American elections.

We have similar findings for Mexico and for Spain, during the tussle over Catalonian independence, showing that foreign powers were intervening and shaping elections.

It has become quite difficult to have elections without any external interference, although a lot of public funding in the US has gone towards developing protections and safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process. The consensus is that there was much less interference in the 2020 elections than in 2016.

Ann Bernstein: I am turning to a completely different subject. As a Venezuelan, you were involved in the government before Chavez took over. There are some people in South Africa who admire Chavez. Tell us the story of Venezuela as you experienced it, and how the country has been decimated.

Dr Moisés Naím: I wrote a novel about this because I feel it was such a complex and painful process that I needed the tools of fiction to make sense of it. The novel is called: Two spies in Caracas. One of the spies is a female CIA agent, the other is from Cuba, and they are both trying to contain the influence of each other's countries in Venezuela. That is an important part of the story. It is wrong to explain what happened in Venezuela purely in terms of the conditions in the country. Venezuela is an oil country, and that is one reason why it imploded, but that cannot be the main explanation because very few oil countries have experience the scale of the collapse that the entire Venezuelan nation experienced. Seven million Venezuelans have literally walked across borders to leave the horrors of living in Venezuela behind.

Government has collapsed and essentially just controls the army, the intelligence service and the oil industry. It cannot provide public services to its citizens. The Cuban government, especially the Castro brothers, forged a close relationship with Hugo Chávez, and he, in turn, opened the door to the Cuban intelligence services. They

are very active and make very important decisions in Venezuela. In some ways we should think of Venezuela as an occupied state. Cuba has veto power in Venezuela and has benefited immensely from looting the country over which it has gained substantial control.

Ann Bernstein: On a more positive note, since you did the research for your book it seems a lot has happened that we could interpret positively. Trump was defeated and democracy held in the US, Bolsonaro was defeated in Brazil, and many democracies have united in opposition to the invasion of Ukraine. Are you more optimistic than you were at the beginning of writing your book? Can we see some signs of hope for democracy in recent events?

Dr Moisés Naím: Yes and no. While the overall trends remain largely negative, there have been some positive trends. For example, 8 of the top 10 democratising countries, which were moving towards democracy during the last decade, are now fully-blown democracies.

Ann Bernstein: Do you think Putin made a big mistake in invading Ukraine, or is it too soon to tell?

Dr Moisés Naím: It is too soon to tell, but there are a number of indications that he has made a mistake. It seems that he thought it would be easy. The Russians would go straight to Kiev without encountering obstacles and take over a nation that was incapable of defending itself, he thought. He totally underestimated the determination of Ukrainians to prevent a brutal dictator from taking over any part of their country. The Ukrainians have put up a determined resistance and have revealed themselves to be better, more effective fighters than the Russians.

Putin also inspired Europe to act together in unexpected ways and to provide, together with the United States, the weapons and technologies that the Ukrainians need to defend themselves. Putin's idea that the invasion would stop the advance of NATO, has also backfired. NATO has become more permanent and important and new countries are joining regularly.

The Russian economy is facing serious strain, and Russia's reputation has plummeted as details emerge about the horrors of this war. Thousands of Ukrainian children have been taken from their families and sent to Russia, a war crime that is totally unacceptable. The future of Russia as a superpower is in doubt.

Ann Bernstein: You are critical of the elites and citizens who have essentially ignored the attacks on democracy in their countries. They have failed to respond to this effectively, in your view. Can you talk about that?

Dr Moisés Naím: The world has a leadership problem. For some reason leaders have fallen short around the world. But there is a deeper problem with followership. Followers have made themselves vulnerable to manipulation because they believe anything they see on their screens. The fight against 'post-truth' must start with people becoming much more sceptical about everything that is disseminated through the internet.

A crucial issue is the weakening of political parties. They are essential for democracy, but they are in disrepute: they are no longer attractive organisations. If you ask a young idealist who wants to change her city, she will never think of going to a political party. She would much rather join some kind of movement or non-governmental organisation.

Political parties have lost the capacity to attract, retain and develop political talent. They are no longer the home of idealists, and have become dominated by opportunists, careerists, the people in it for the money. We need to bring political parties back, either by modernising them or by declaring them intellectually and morally bankrupt and replacing them with new, better organisations.

Moisés Naím in conversation with Ann Bernstein on 23 March 2023

Ann Bernstein: I have always thought political parties are crucial for training people in the rules and procedures of democracy with those internal processes helping to inform larger national democratic politics.

Dr Moisés Naím: That is a crucial function that political parties have to perform. They must train the public servants and the government leaders to tackle the problems that we currently face. But most parties around the world are no longer doing that in an impactful way.

Ann Bernstein: Thank you for giving us this time and for sharing your views on a range of important and fascinating topics. While some of what you say is sobering it also contains a call to action, to be alert to what is going on, and for citizens and their leaders to stand up for freedom and democracy.

Dr Moisés Naím: Thank you very much.

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Published in April 2023 by The Centre for Development and Enterprise
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