

Sanders Speech at SAIS: Building A Global Democratic Movement to Counter Authoritarianism » Senator Bernie Sanders

20-26 minutes

Thank you so much Dean Nasr for your introduction, to Johns Hopkins for inviting me here, and for all of you joining me here today, as well of those of you watching online.

In the United States, we pay a whole lot of attention to issues impacting the economy, healthcare, education, environment, criminal justice, immigration and, as we have recently seen, Supreme Court nominees. These are all enormously important issues.

With the exception of immediate and dramatic crises, however, foreign policy is not something that usually gets a whole lot of attention or debate. In fact, some political analysts have suggested that by and large we have a one-party foreign policy, where the basic elements of our approach are not often debated or challenged.

We spend \$700 billion a year on the military, more than the next 10 nations combined. We have been at war in Afghanistan for 17 years, war in Iraq for 15 years, and we are currently involved militarily in Yemen – where a humanitarian crisis is taking place.

Meanwhile, 30 million people have no health insurance, our infrastructure is collapsing, and hundreds of thousands of bright young people cannot afford to go to college every year.

The time is long overdue for a vigorous discussion about our foreign policy, and how it needs to change in this new era.

Today, I want to say a few words about a troubling trend in global affairs that gets far too little attention. There is currently a struggle of enormous consequence taking place in the United States and throughout the world. In it we see two competing visions. On one hand, we see a growing worldwide movement toward authoritarianism, oligarchy, and kleptocracy. On the other side, we see a movement toward strengthening democracy, egalitarianism, and economic, social, racial, and environmental justice.

This struggle has consequences for the entire future of the planet — economically, socially, and environmentally.

In terms of the global economy, we see today massive and growing wealth and income inequality, where the world's top one percent now owns more wealth than the bottom 99%, where a small number of huge financial institutions exert enormous impact over the lives of billions of people.

Further, many people in industrialized countries are questioning whether democracy can actually deliver for them. They are working longer hours for lower wages than they used to. They see big money buying elections, and they see a political and economic elite growing wealthier, even as their own children's future grows dimmer.

In these countries, we often have political leaders who exploit these fears by amplifying resentments, stoking intolerance and fanning ethnic and racial hatreds among those who are struggling. We see this very clearly in our own country. It is coming from the highest level of our government.

It should be clear by now that Donald Trump and the right-wing movement that supports him is not a phenomenon unique to the United States. All around the world, in Europe, in Russia, in the Middle East, in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere we are seeing movements led by demagogues who exploit people's fears, prejudices and grievances to gain and hold on to power.

Just this past weekend, in Brazil's presidential election, right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro, who has been called "The Donald Trump of Brazil," made a very strong showing in the first round of voting, coming up just short of an outright victory. Bolsonaro has a long record of attacks against immigrants, against minorities, against women, against LGBT people. Bolsonaro, who has said [he loves Donald Trump](#), has praised Brazil's former military dictatorship, and has said, among other things, that in order to deal with crime, police should simply be allowed to shoot more criminals. This is the person who may soon lead the world's fifth most populous country, and its ninth largest economy.

Meanwhile, Brazil's most popular politician, the former president Lula da Silva, is imprisoned on highly questionable charges, and prevented from running again.

Bolsonaro in Brazil is one example, there are others which I will discuss. But I think it is important that we understand that what we are seeing now in the world is the rise of a new authoritarian axis.

While the leaders who make up this axis may differ in some respects, they share key attributes: intolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities, hostility toward democratic norms, antagonism toward a free press, constant paranoia about foreign plots, and a belief that the leaders of government should be able use their positions of power to serve their own selfish financial interests.

Interestingly, many of these leaders are also deeply connected to a network of multi-billionaire oligarchs who see the world as their economic plaything.

Those of us who believe in democracy, who believe that a government must be accountable to its people and not the other way around, must understand the scope of this challenge if we are to confront it effectively. We need to counter oligarchic authoritarianism with a strong global progressive movement that speaks to the needs of working people, that recognizes that many of the problems we are faced with are the product of a failed status quo. We need a movement that unites people all over the world who don't just seek to return to a romanticized past, a past that did not work for so many, but who strive for something better.

While this authoritarian trend certainly did not begin with Donald Trump, there's no question that other authoritarian leaders around the world have drawn inspiration from the fact that the president of the world's oldest and most powerful democracy is shattering democratic norms, is viciously attack an independent media and an independent judiciary, and is scapegoating the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society.

For example, Saudi Arabia is a country clearly inspired by Trump. This is a despotic dictatorship that does not tolerate dissent, that treats women as third-class citizens, and has spent the last several decades exporting a very extreme form of Islam around the world. Saudi Arabia is currently devastating the country of Yemen in a catastrophic war in alliance with the United States.

I would like to take a moment to note the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of the Saudi government who was last seen entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, last Tuesday. Over the weekend, Turkish authorities told reporters that they now believe Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate, and his body disposed of elsewhere. We need to know what happened here. If this is true, if the Saudi regime murdered a journalist critic in their own consulate, there must be accountability, and there must be an unequivocal condemnation by the United States. But it seems clear that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman feels emboldened by the Trump administration's unquestioning support.

Further, it is hard to imagine that a country like Saudi Arabia would have chosen to start a fight this past summer with Canada over a relatively mild human rights criticism if Muhammad bin Salman – who is very close with Presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner – did not believe that the United States would stay silent. Three years ago, who would have imagined that the United States would refuse to take sides between Canada, our democratic neighbor and second largest trading partner, and Saudi Arabia on an issue of human rights – but that is exactly what happened.

It's also hard to imagine that Israel's Netanyahu government would have taken a number of steps – including passing the recent "Nation State law," which essentially codifies the second-class status of Israel's non-Jewish citizens, aggressively undermining the longstanding goal of a two-state solution, and ignoring the economic catastrophe in Gaza — if Netanyahu wasn't confident that Trump would support him.

And then there is Trump's cozy relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose intervention in our 2016 presidential election Trump still fails to fully admit. We face an unprecedented situation of an American president who for whatever reason refuses to acknowledge this attack on American democracy. Why is that? I am not sure what the answer is. Either he really doesn't understand what has happened, or he is under Russian influence because of compromising information they may have on him, or because he is ultimately more sympathetic to Russia's strongman form of government than he is to American democracy.

Even as he draws closer to authoritarian leaders like Putin, like Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines, and North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Trump is needlessly increasing tensions with our democratic European allies over issues like trade, like NATO, like the Iran nuclear agreement. Let me be clear, these are important issues. But the way Trump has gratuitously disrespected these allies is not only ineffective deal-

making, it will have enormous negative long-term consequences for the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Further, Trump's ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, several months ago made clear the administration's support for right-wing extremist parties across Europe. In other words, the U.S. administration is openly siding with the very forces challenging the democratic foundations of our longtime allies.

We need to understand that the struggle for democracy is bound up with the struggle against kleptocracy and corruption. That is true here in the United States as well as abroad. In addition to Trump's hostility toward democratic institutions here in the United States, we have a billionaire president who, according to a recent report in the New York Times, acquired his wealth through illegal means, and now, as president, in an unprecedented way, has blatantly embedded his own economic interests and those of his cronies into the policies of government.

One of the consistent themes of reports coming out of the investigation into the Trump campaign is the effort of wealthy foreign interests seeking influence and access with Trump and his organization, and with close Trump associates seeking to trade that access for the promise of even more wealth. While the characters involved in these reports are particularly blatant and clumsy in their efforts, the details of these stories are not unique.

Never before have we seen the power of big money over governmental policy so clearly. Whether we're talking about the Koch brothers spending hundreds of millions of dollars to dismantle environmental regulations that protect Americans' health, or authoritarian monarchies like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar spending millions in fossil fuel wealth in Washington to advance the interests of their undemocratic regimes, or giant corporations supporting think tanks in order to produce policy recommendations that serve their own financial interests, the theme is the same. Powerful special interests use their wealth to influence government for their own selfish interests.

During the Congressional fight over the Republicans' massive tax giveaway to the wealthy, some of my colleagues were very open this. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was very frank: If Republicans failed to pass the bill, he said "the financial contributions will stop." This, he went on, "will be the end of us as a party." I applaud Senator Graham for his honesty.

This corruption is so blatant, it's no longer seen as remarkable. Just the other day, the lead sentence in a New York Times story about Republican mega-donor Sheldon Adelson was this: "The return on investment for many of the Republican Party's biggest political patrons has been less than impressive this year."

Let me repeat that: "The return on investment was less than impressive." The idea that political donors expect a specific policy result in exchange for their contributions – a quid pro quo, the definition of corruption – is right out there in the open. It is no longer even seen as scandalous.

This sort of corruption is common among authoritarian regimes. In Russia, it is impossible to tell where the decisions of government end and the interests of Putin and his circle of multi-billionaire oligarchs begin. They operate as one unit. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, there is no debate about separation because the natural resources of the state, valued at trillions of dollars, belong to the Saudi royal family.

In Hungary, far-right authoritarian-nationalist leader Victor Orban models himself after Putin in Russia, saying in a January interview that, "Putin has made his country great again." Like Putin, Orban has risen to power by exploiting paranoia and intolerance of minorities, including outrageous anti-Semitic attacks on George Soros, but at the same time has managed to enrich his political allies and himself. In February, the Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International ranked Hungary as the second most corrupt EU country.

We must understand that these authoritarians are part of a common front. They are in close contact with each other, share tactics and, as in the case of European and American right-wing movements, even share some of the same funders. For example, the Mercer family, supporters of the infamous Cambridge Analytica, have also been key backers of Donald Trump and of Breitbart news, which operates in Europe, the United States and Israel to advance the same anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim agenda. Sheldon Adelson gives generously to the Republican Party and right-wing causes in both the United States and Israel, promoting a shared agenda of intolerance and bigotry in both countries.

The truth is, however, that to effectively oppose right-wing authoritarianism, we cannot simply be on the defensive. We need to be proactive and understand that just defending the failed status quo of the last several decades is not good enough. In fact, we need to recognize that the challenges we face today are a product of that status quo.

What do I mean by that?

Here in the United States, in the UK, in France, and in many other countries around the world, people are working longer hours for stagnating wages, and worry that their children will have a lower standard of living than they do.

So our job is not to accept the status quo, not to accept massive levels of wealth and income inequality where the top 1% of the world's population own half the planet's wealth, while the bottom 70% of the working age population account for just 2.7% of global wealth. It is not to accept a declining standard of living for many workers around the world, not to accept a reality of 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty where millions of children die of easily preventable illnesses.

Our job is to fight for a future in which public policy and new technology and innovation work to benefit all of the people, not just the few.

Our job is to support governments around the world that will end the absurdity of the rich and multinational corporations stashing over \$21 trillion dollars in offshore bank accounts to avoid paying their fair share of taxes, and then demanding that their respective governments impose an austerity agenda on their working families.

Our job is to rally the entire planet to stand up to the fossil fuel industry which continues to make huge profits while their carbon emissions destroy the planet for our children and grandchildren.

The scientific community is virtually unanimous in telling us that climate change is real, climate change is caused by human activity, and climate change is already causing devastating harm throughout the world. Further, what the scientists tell us is that if we do not act boldly to address the climate crisis, this planet will see more drought, more floods, more extreme weather disturbances, more acidification of the ocean, more rising sea levels, and, as a result of mass migrations, there will be more threats to global stability and security.

A new report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released just yesterday warns that we only have about twelve years to take urgent and unprecedented action to prevent a rise in the planet's temperature that would cause irreversible damage.

The threat of climate change is a very clear example of where American leadership can make a difference. Europe can't do it alone, China can't do it alone, and the United States can't do it alone. This is a crisis that calls out for strong international cooperation if we are to leave our children and grandchildren a planet that is healthy and habitable. American leadership — the economic and scientific advantages and incentives that only America can offer — is hugely important for facilitating this effort.

In the struggle to preserve and expand democracy, our job is to fight back against the coordinated effort, strongly supported by the president and funded by oligarchs like the Koch brothers, to make it harder for American citizens — often people of color, poor people, and young people — to vote. Not only do oligarchs want to buy elections, but voter suppression is a key element of their plan to maintain power.

Our job is to push for trade policies that don't just benefit large multinational corporations and hurt working people throughout the world as they are written out of public view.

Our job is to fight back against brutal immigration policies that require separating migrant families when they are detained at the border, and require children to be put in cages. Migrants and refugees should be treated with compassion and respect when they reach Europe or the United States. Yes, we need better international cooperation to address the flow of migrants across borders, but the solution is not to build walls and amplify the cruelty toward those fleeing impossible conditions as a deterrence strategy.

Our job is to make sure that we commit more resources to taking care of people than we do on weapons designed to kill them. It is not acceptable that, with the Cold War long behind us, countries around the world spend over a trillion dollars a year on weapons of destruction, while millions of children die of easily treatable diseases.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, countries around the world spend a total of \$1.7 trillion a year on the military. \$1.7 trillion. Think of what we could accomplish if even a fraction of this amount were redirected to more peaceful ends? The head of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has said we could end the global food crisis for \$30 billion a year. That's less than two percent of what we spend on weapons.

Columbia University's Jeffrey Sachs, one of the world's leading experts on economic development and the fight against poverty, has estimated that the cost to end world poverty is \$175 billion per year for 20 years, about ten percent of what the world spends on weapons.

Donald Trump thinks we should spend more on these weapons. I think we should spend less.

Let us remember what President Dwight D. Eisenhower said in 1953, just a few months after taking office. "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."

And just as he was about to leave office in 1961, Eisenhower was so concerned the growing power of the weapons industry that he issued this warning: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." We have seen that potential more than fulfilled over the past decades. It is time for us to stand up and say: There is a better way to use our wealth.

In closing, let me simply that in order to effectively combat the forces of global oligarchy and authoritarianism, we need an international movement that mobilizes behind a vision of shared prosperity, security and dignity for all people, and that addresses the massive global inequality that exists, not only in wealth but in political power.

Such a movement must be willing to think creatively and boldly about the world that we would like to see. While the authoritarian axis is committed to tearing down a post-World War II global order that they see as limiting their access to power and wealth, it is not enough for us to simply defend that order as it exists.

We must look honestly at how that order has failed to deliver on many of its promises, and how authoritarians have adeptly exploited those failures in order to build support for their agenda. We must take the opportunity to reconceptualize a global order based on human solidarity, an order that recognizes that every person on this planet shares a common humanity, that we all want our children to grow up healthy, to have a good education, have decent jobs, drink clean water, breathe clean air and to live in peace. Our job is to reach out to those in every corner of the world who shares these values, and who are fighting for a better world.

Authoritarians seek power by promoting division and hatred. We will promote unity and inclusion.

In a time of exploding wealth and technology, we have the potential to create a decent life for all people. Our job is to build on our common humanity and do everything that we can to oppose all of the forces, whether unaccountable government power or unaccountable corporate power, who try to divide us up and set us against each other. We know that those forces work together across borders. We must do the same.

Thank you very much.