YACOOB ABBA OMAR | The morbid symptoms of our geopolitical moment

Global elections highlight rising fragmentation and contested legitimacy



Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva celebrates his re-election. The writer says anti-incumbency is selective, as seen in voters punishing reckless or failing governments such as in Israel and the US, and rewarding Lula for being a bulwark against a Bolsonaro restoration. Picture: Brian Snyder

Between October 4 and today, Brazil, Israel, the US and South Africa will all have gone to the polls. Read together, these votes could describe a world the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci called an interregnum, in which the old order is dying, the new one cannot yet be born and in the gap “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”.

Yesterday’s local government elections were important at various levels. They will be examined to see what they say about the government of national unity (GNU). They will test whether fragmentation of competing parties can still produce functioning local governments and what that

portends for the 2029 general elections. Importantly, the result could determine South Africa's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, as seen by its exclusion from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa) on the eve of the elections.

A pattern seems to be emerging from the other three elections that have taken place internationally. The very notion of legitimacy is being more widely contested, with the losing side's first move often being to dispute the count. No camp is winning decisively; majorities are thin, coalitions are improvised and repeat elections loom. Finally, anti-incumbency is selective, as seen in voters punishing reckless or failing governments such as in Israel and the US, and in the case of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva being rewarded for being a bulwark against a Bolsonaro restoration.

Is this a unique moment, or can it be compared to any other instant in history? Writing in the June edition of Foreign Policy, Jo Inge Bekkevold pointed out that today's nationalist turn resembles the protectionist reaction to the first globalisation of the 1890s, ending in World War 1.

Other analysts suggest that today more closely parallels the 1930s, which saw voters turning to authoritarian-leaning populists after liberal elites failed to deliver. This led to fascism, Nazism, world wars, the holocaust and even the deployment of the most destructive weapons humanity has devised.

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Today, the bypassing of the UN echoes the decade before the outbreak of World War 2, when powers tested whether the League of Nations, created in the aftermath of World War 1, could enforce anything.

The possibility of humanity being wiped out by AI technology, as nuclear weapons wiped out entire cities, must fill us with dread. So too should the prospect of the world being drawn into the vortices of the Middle East or Ukraine.

The 1970s is the more hopeful analogy and the most relevant to the Global South. Marked by international solidarity for anticolonial struggles and graphically represented by the resistance of the Vietnamese people, it was

a period when the Non-Aligned Movement emerged and resulted in pressure for a new international economic order.

The Brics bloc and its expansion are today's equivalents. The possibility of US-EU estrangement continuing after President Donald Trump's term ends may be a test of whether the architecture around bodies such as the G20 can hold.

Bekkevold has argued previously that the world has already entered a second Cold War, with some variations in the alignments that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

South Africa's leverage in a multipolar world has always rested on moral authority and functioning institutions. Moral authority still has it, on Palestine and on multilateralism. However, a middle power whose governance structures are weak will struggle to be heard at the G20 Summit in Miami, Brasília or Beijing.

Bekkevold argues that 2026 combines a 1890s politics (backlash against globalisation), a 1930s risk profile (great power force and institutional decay), a 1970s energy and confidence shock, and a Cold War power structure. The Gramscian interregnum captures that combination better than any single date, which could end either with a new settlement or with ever fiercer and wider wars.

For South Africa the local government elections are a small but real part of that larger choice. If fragmented councils can be turned into stable, competent coalitions and the government of national unity survives to 2029, the country strengthens its claim to speak for a rules-based, multipolar order. If not, it becomes another case study in the morbid symptoms of the age.

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