Kakistocracy Has No Borders: What the Government Progress Index measures from Washington, San Juan, and Caracas

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Kakistocracy: A word that comes from a deep history

You're probably wondering just what all this is about; let me therefore provide an explanation and some background information.

The word kakistocracy consists of two Greek elements: kakistos, the superlative of kakos, 'bad', meaning 'the worst', and kratos, which means 'power' or 'rule' and is the same ending as in aristocracy and democracy. Etymologists have traced kakos back even further to a Proto-Indo-European root, kaka-, which was associated with defecation, the same root that in turn gave rise to the English words poppycock and cacophony. When the word was first created, it was intended to sound as unpleasant as its meaning; it did not merely mean 'bad government', but described a form of government carried out by the worst sort of person that a society could offer, all expressed in the same grammatical form as aristocracy, which is rule by the best. I should also mention that I have a brother whom we call Kaki, short for Carlos, and he is one of the best Explosive Engineers in the Caribbean Region, so the column's context has nothing to do with him.

The word first appeared in English on August 9, 1644, at the height of the English Civil War. In the church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, a clergyman called Paul Gosnold delivered a sermon to members of Parliament who had backed the King on a day when the congregation was fasting. At that time the Cavalier and Roundhead armies were murdering one another throughout the country. Gosnold condemned those, as he said, who had brought fire down from heaven in order to set their country on fire and who had feigned religiosity in order to carry out a most wicked rebellion. In order to describe to himself what he feared was going to take the place of England's established monarchy—something which was not tyranny nor anarchy but a mad kind of kakistocracy—he invented the word on the spot from Greek. This is, by a wide margin, the earliest instance that scholars and the Oxford English Dictionary have found.

As soon as a monster had been named, the word did the thing that most made-up words do: it became silent. It reappeared in 1797, when the Italian playwright Vittorio Alfieri coined the Italian version, kakistocrazia, a sarcastic twist on aristocracy, as a means of mourning Napoleon's seizure of power in the Republic of Venice. The term reappeared among French critics who were condemning Robespierre's Terror, and the German mathematician Abraham Gotthelf Kästner used it in 1800 to refer to a similar concept of rule by the unworthy. It was the English satirist Thomas Love Peacock who gave the word its current, deliberate definition, restoring it in his 1829 novel The Misfortunes of Elphin, where he defined it as the exact linguistic opposite of aristocracy. Since aristos means 'best', a form of government by the worst should have a name that is constructed in the same way.

The most frequently cited quotation was put forward by an American, and it is worth remembering the circumstances in question. By 1876, James Russell Lowell, who was both a poet and a diplomat, had come to see the Grant administration as a well-known case of patronage and corruption. That year William Belknap, who had been Secretary of War, resigned in disgrace a minute before the House was due to vote to impeach him because he had been caught taking kickbacks from the sale of the Army's frontier trading-post licenses. The House proceeded with the impeachment anyway, thereby making it the only instance in American history when the Senate tried a former cabinet officer as a private citizen. It was also the year of the Whiskey Ring, in which Grant's personal secretary was accused of stealing the federal liquor taxes. On becoming aware of these events, Lowell wrote to a friend: "Is ours a government of the people, by the people, for the people, or is it rather a kakistocracy, to the benefit of knaves at the expense of fools?" Lowell was not saying that Grant had stolen; what he was doing was highlighting a tendency, namely a president who surrounded himself with loyal friends rather than with capable administrators, and who, according to all the accounts, was the last man in Washington to believe the worst about them.

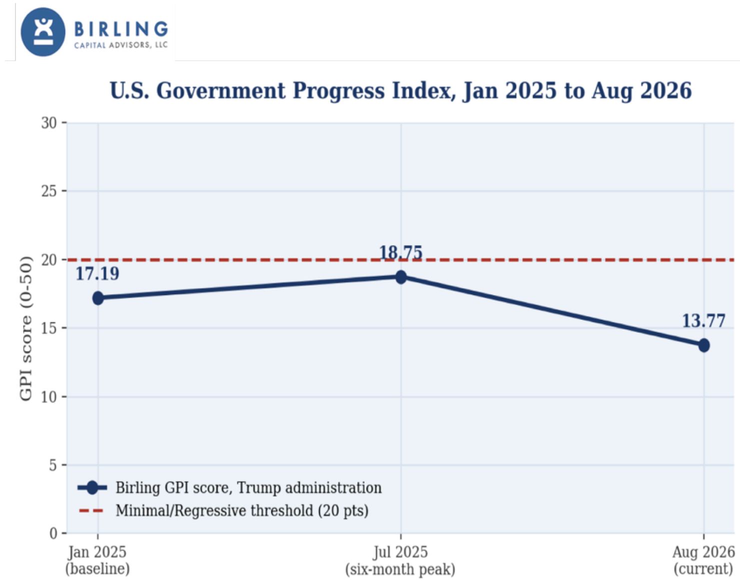
The word reappeared after Lowell and then experienced a revival in 1921, when President Warren Harding appointed Albert B. Fall, a New Mexican, as his Secretary of the Interior. Although Fall was in principle qualified since he had previously been a senator and did know something about land in the West, during his time in office he arranged secret leases with the executives of private oil companies for the Navy's oil reserves at Teapot Dome in Wyoming and at Elk Hills in California in return for personal bribes amounting to more than $400,000. He was convicted in 1929 and became the first person ever to go to prison for a crime committed while serving in a president's cabinet. Harding did not live to see the scandal fully come to light; he died while in office in 1923 and, as had been reported, had told a journalist that he could deal with his enemies but that it was his friends who kept him up at night.

For most of the twentieth century the term was nothing more than a curiosity and was only from time to time used by critics of one administration or another, until after the 2024 U.S. election, The Economist chose it as its word of the year, and since then it has started to be used in everyday language in the English-speaking press. The word had been waiting for almost four centuries for such an opportunity to be put to the test. The Government Progress Index was, in fact, meant to be just that: a nonpartisan scoreboard that evaluates governments on the basis of outcomes, not adjectives, in any country, under any administration, and in any language.

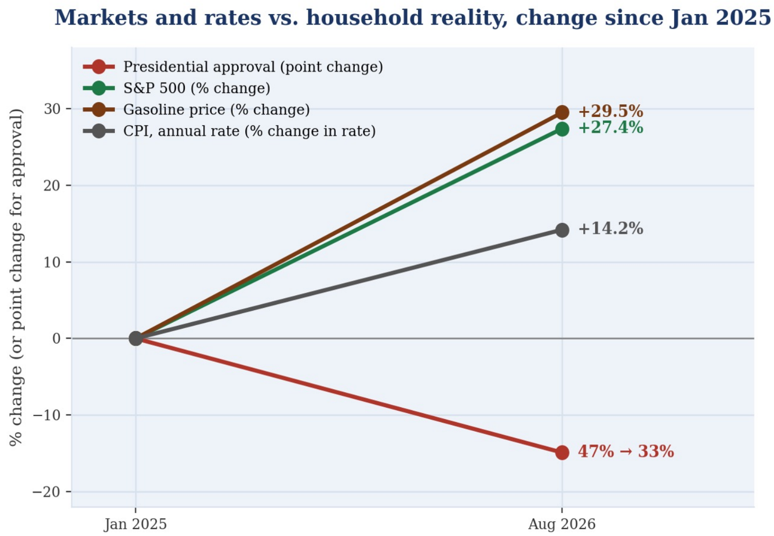
A word built to describe a pattern, not a party

On August 24, in the article 'The Government Progress Index Measures President Trump's Nineteen Months of the False Golden Age of 'Merica', we applied Birling's Government Progress Index (GPI) to assess the current White House's economic record on the basis of actual results rather than just rhetoric. Earlier, on August 3, in 'Puerto Rico's Progress, Measure by Measure', we used the same index to examine Puerto Rico's government year by year since 2018. When these two analyses are compared side by side, they do do raise a reasonable question: if the term kakistocracy and the index associated with it are useful for evaluating two governments separately, are they also useful when comparing them and others as well, side by side, using the one Greek word which has just been used to describe rule by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous people available since the seventeenth century? This column provides the answer. It applies the same standard in three cases: to Washington, to San Juan, and to two foreign governments which have already experienced kakistocracy right through to its logical conclusion. The aim here is not to declare a winner in a contest that no one wants to win. It is to demonstrate that the pattern described by the word and the pattern that the GPI was designed to measure are the same wherever this pattern occurs, no matter what language is used in the country in question.

Case one: Washington, A Cabinet by the Numbers



By the 19th month of the second Trump term, the GPI had fallen from its baseline figure of 17.19 (January 20, 2025) to a six-month high of 18.75 and then dropped to 13.77 by August 20, 2026, amounting to a 19.9 percent decrease from the baseline and a 26.6 percent fall from the six-month peak. This has caused the administration to be placed in the Minimal/Regressive category, the lowest of the four categories of the GPI, as we set out in our August 24 release, "The Government Progress Index Measures President Trump's Nineteen Months of the False Golden Age of 'Merica". The decline has occurred at the same time as a cabinet marked by heavy turnover and serious doubts about the credibility of its members, across a wide range of departments. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, whose confirmation was contested since he had denied a number of allegations, has since carried out a major purge of senior military officials, including the removal of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations, and the Coast Guard Commandant, has blocked promotions for an increasing number of officers, and saw Army Secretary Dan Driscoll resign in September—a record which led Republican Senator Thom Tillis to say in early September that he had never seen such bad management of the people who serve the country and to publicly call for Hegseth to be removed. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, who faced pressure from both parties to be dismissed because of a $200 million self-promotional advertising campaign and a shutdown at her own agency, was dismissed in March 2026 and replaced by Senator Markwayne Mullin. Attorney General Pam Bondi, who drew widespread criticism from Congress, was fired the following month and replaced by Todd Blanche, the president's former personal attorney, whose own confirmation narrowly passed the Senate 50-49 in August even though there were bipartisan objections to a $1.8 billion 'anti-weaponization' fund and a tax-immunity arrangement that benefits the president's family. The decisions taken by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on vaccines and public health led to strong criticism, as a result of which the White House took steps to restrict his public statements, and FHFA Director Bill Pulte, who was appointed acting Director of National Intelligence in June while still serving as chair of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, attracted criticism from lawmakers of both parties for being unqualified for the role and is now the subject of a Government Accountability Office investigation into whether he misused his position to target the president's political opponents. None of the officials mentioned has been found guilty of a crime while in office, and several allegations have been denied and never settled; what the GPI shows is not a legal finding but the cumulative effect on public approval, sentiment, and institutional confidence, all of which have declined by 29.8 per cent and 25.4 per cent respectively since January 2025, even though equity markets have continued to rise, a divergence between markets and households being the key feature of this administration's performance record.

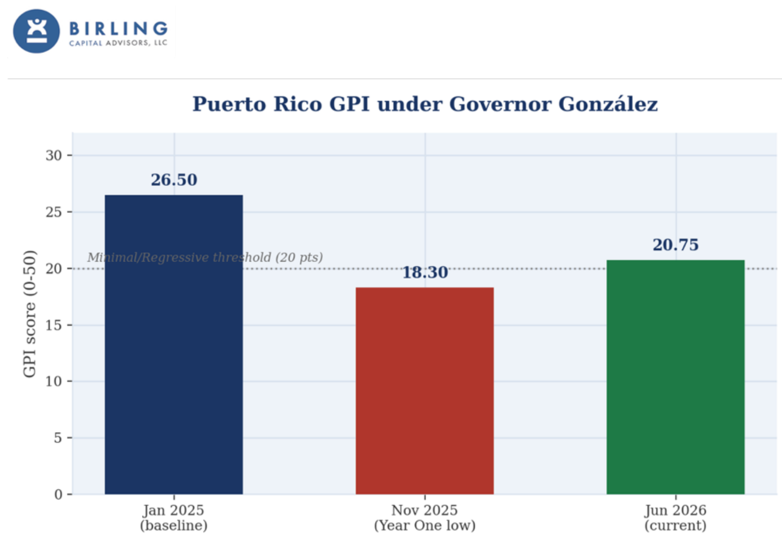


Case two: Puerto Rico, kakistocracy by architecture

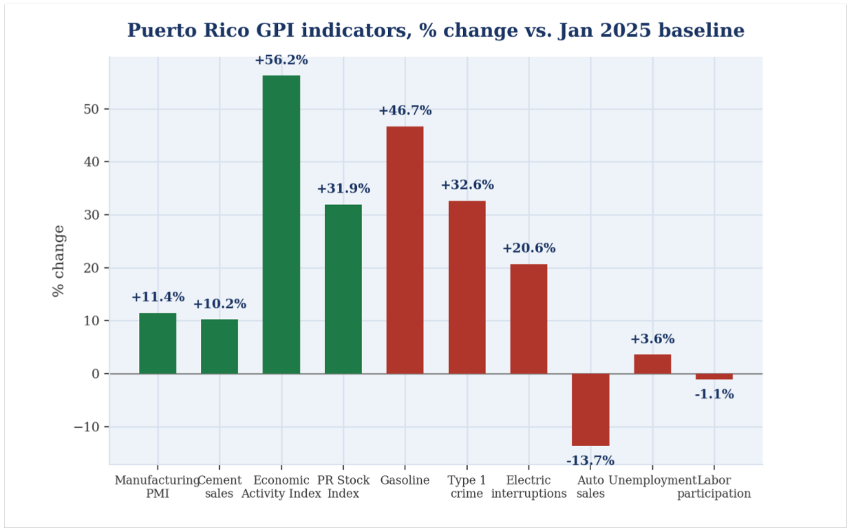
The only point under consideration is that Puerto Rico's example of this pattern does not include a cabinet marred by scandals. The island does have cases involving a personal interpretation of the term in question: in 2019 a private group chat between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his most trusted aides was leaked, the messages containing homophobic and misogynistic language as well as mockery of hurricane victims, leading to weeks of the biggest street protests in the island's more recent history and eventually resulting in his resignation, which is a clear and well-documented instance of officials who had been chosen for their loyalty rather than their judgment having lost the public's confidence in a real-time manner. It is, nevertheless, not the fact that one governor has been dismissed that has kept Puerto Rico's GPI within a range of 13 to 26 points on a 50-point scale over four different governors and all the administrations since 2018, none of whom has ever achieved Strong Momentum, let alone Transformational Progress.

The ceiling is not a personal characteristic but a structural one; for four years running, the Fraser Institute has placed Puerto Rico 51st out of the 51 U.S. jurisdictions in terms of economic freedom, since the island has the lowest scores nationwide in the areas of government spending, taxation, and freedom in the labor market. It now has thirteen occupations—ranging from health educator to public-event promoter—that are not at all regulated by any other U.S. state or territory, and with respect to a number of other occupations it requires licensing even though fewer than five of the other jurisdictions go to the trouble of requiring such licensing. Government is divided among 144 separate executive departments, public corporations, and independent authorities, each with its own procedures, queue, and point of friction for an entrepreneur seeking a permit. Whatever official is in charge at La Fortaleza cannot raise the GPI score because the official has no control over the rules and can only act within them.

The scorecard which Governor Jennifer González herself prepared shows this clearly. As we pointed out in our article dated August 3, entitled “Puerto Rico's Progress, Measure by Measure”, the GPI was at 26.5 when her term started in January 2025 and was already classified in the Moderate Progress category; it then reached a high of 29.0 in April 2025, dropped to 18.3 by November 2025—this amounts to a decline of 8.2 points and 30.94 per cent and thus brings the figure below the Minimal/Regressive level—and has since increased by 2.45 points, or 13.38 per cent, reaching 20.75 by June 2026, thus bringing it back to the Moderate Progress category. When each individual indicator is examined in comparison with the January 2025 baseline, five have improved and all of these are connected with capital: the manufacturing PMI has increased by 11.45 per cent, cement sales have gone up by 10.18 per cent, the Economic Activity Index has improved by 56.25 per cent, the Birling Puerto Rico Stock Index has risen by 31.90 per cent, and market access has changed from none to limited. Eight indicators have worsened, and all of them are at the street level: gasoline prices have risen by 46.67 per cent, Type 1 crime has increased by 32.61 per cent, the number of electric-system interruptions has risen by 20.65 per cent, auto sales have decreased by 13.69 per cent, unemployment has gone up by 3.57 per cent, labor participation has declined by 1.12 per cent, and GDP growth has collapsed by 450 per cent on a relative basis, falling from 2.20 per cent to 0.40 per cent. Four other indicators have not changed by a single percentage point over the last eighteen months: the homeownership rate, per capita income, government bond debt, and the credit rating, which still remains D.



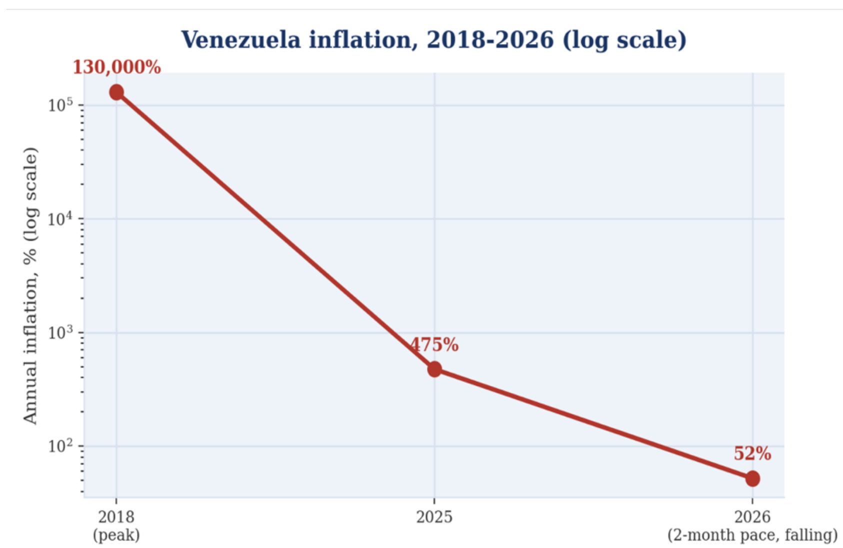
A government that displays such a division—five up, eight down, and four completely unchanged—is not one being run by people who do not have the qualifications that Birling considers necessary in the Belknap or Fall sense; on the contrary, it is being run under rules which make effective management appear, to the average household paying for gasoline and experiencing blackouts, no different from ineffective management. In fact, it is precisely the Puerto Rico 2030 agenda that Birling put forward—a twelve-point, seventy-billion-dollar reform program focused on occupational licensing, permitting, and agency consolidation—that exists because the GPI demonstrates that a legislature can pass such reforms without having to rely on any one administration to do so through the exercise of personal influence.



Case three: When Kakistocracy runs its course

The figures from the GPI indicate that both Puerto Rico and the United States are undergoing a relapse rather than a collapse; both remain democracies operating within their historical ranges. According to the GPI's own data, both Puerto Rico and the United States are going through a relapse rather than a collapse and are still functioning as democracies within their historical range. Other governments provide an example of the outcome when that identical pattern is allowed to continue unchecked for several years rather than merely for a few months.

Venezuela is the best example of this. While Nicolás Maduro was in office,, the economy dropped by about 80 percent from the level it had in 2013, inflation hit a record high of 130,000 percent in 2018, and, according to some estimates, nearly a quarter of the population—that is, almost eight million people—left the country. On 3 January 2026, U.S. special forces carried out a raid on Caracas and captured Maduro, thereby ending a period which international observers had generally described as one characterized by deep-seated corruption and the systematic weakening of the independent courts, the electoral authority and the legislature. Under her successor, Delcy Rodríguez, inflation has fallen from 475 percent in 2025 to a still high but much lower rate in 2026, and the IMF expects the GDP to start growing again, which shows that it is possible to reverse a kakistocracy more quickly once those in charge have changed than during the years of decline that came before it. Yet the economy is still about a third of what it was in 2013.



Sri Lanka is the clearest recent example of the kind of family-patronage kakistocracy that the term means in its classical sense. By 2022,, members of the Rajapaksa family had, at the same time, taken on the posts of president, prime minister, and a number of important cabinet positions, which meant that the concentration of appointments based on loyalty left very few independent voices in the government when the foreign-currency reserves were exhausted. As a result, there were widespread shortages of fuel and medicine, and queues for cooking gas stretched for months until the protesters eventually broke into the presidential palace, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to leave the country and resign in July 2022. The fact that Sri Lanka has since carried out a debt restructuring and has returned to modest GDP growth under a reform government elected in 2024 shows the same lesson as is indicated by Venezuela's current data: kakistocracies do not correct themselves from within, but countries can recover once the pattern of appointments has finally ended.

What the numbers have in common

Government	GPI-style reading	Signature pattern
United States	**13.77 / 50 — Minimal/Regressive**	**Equity markets up double digits while approval, sentiment, and growth all fall; a cabinet with simultaneous, unrelated credibility questions across eight departments.**
Puerto Rico	**20.75 / 50 — Moderate Progress**	**Capital-facing indicators improving while street-level indicators worsen; a 144-agency structure that caps every administration inside the same 13-to-26 band since 2018.**
Venezuela (2013–2026)	**Not GPI-scored; illustrative extreme**	**Eighty percent GDP collapse, 130,000 percent peak inflation, and a captured president; recovery beginning only after the personnel changed.**
Sri Lanka (2019–2022)	**Not GPI-scored; illustrative extreme**	**A single family holding the presidency, premiership, and cabinet; reserves exhausted; a president who fled the country.**

If you compare the four cases, they have one feature in common with all the others: the signs which reach a trading desk, a bond investor, or a foreign chancellery tend to improve, or at least stay steady, before the signs that reach ordinary households. In any situation where loyalty is given greater weight than competence when choosing the people who manage departments, ministries, or agencies, the gap between the economy that deals with capital and the everyday economy that acts as the leading indicator is the leading indicator, not the equity rally or the approval poll. Both the Government Progress Index, which has been calculated for the United States and Puerto Rico, and the simple historical record for Venezuela and Sri Lanka demonstrate this fundamental point: how long a government can maintain the first economy's growth. On the other hand, the second economy declines before the general public, or in the cases of Venezuela and Sri Lanka, even before the foreign government does, leading to a change in personnel.

The Final Word: Nations Do not Progress By Accident

A term which was created in an Oxford church in 1644 to denote a kingdom destroying itself has survived beyond every government for which it has ever been used, and that is precisely the point: the pattern continues because the fundamental motivation—choosing loyalty over competence—reappears in monarchies, republics, territories and petrostates as well. The Government Progress Index cannot indicate whether any particular administration merits the term; character cannot be treated as a separate entry. What it can do, however, in Washington, in San Juan, and in the two governments overseas that have already experienced the term to its conclusion, is to ensure that judgments are based on the record rather than on rhetoric and on outcomes that real households experience rather than on an index that only a trading desk would read.

The warning is by no means hypothetical as Washington approaches the midterms. The administration is currently engaged in a war in Iran which has now gone beyond its six-month period, fuel and grocery prices which have failed to keep their promise during the campaign, and a president who, over the summer, has built a granite helipad on the South Lawn, accepted a luxury jet worth $400 million from Qatar, recoated the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, laid the foundation for a 250-foot triumphal arch, closed the Kennedy Center for a two-year renovation costing $257 million, announced an order for 250 Cadillac Escalades to be added to the White House fleet, and had his own image put on a circulating $1 coin. None of these actions have affected the GPI. All of them are in the context of a Financial Times/Focaldata poll which has placed his approval at a record low of 33 percent this week, just as the Financial Times/Focaldata poll shows the gap between the households the index takes into account and the monuments a president chooses to spend his political capital on – a gap that is the very one for which the term kakistocracy was invented.

The strain in question reached Puerto Rico earlier and came from a different source. In July the Governor, González, declared a state of emergency because of a drought which left San Juan and six adjacent municipalities subject to 48-hour water rationing cycles, the driest July that San Juan has seen in over 120 years, while this situation was worsened by a break in the old Superaqueducto in June and also by a strike by the unionised workers of PRASA over wages of $10.50 an hour. The power grid also produced a poor figure during that period: SAIDI, the industry's standard figure showing how many minutes a year the average customer experiences a power cut, is at 1,706 minutes, 37 percent above the regulator's own baseline and the worst reading in decades. Instead of presenting a united front against either crisis, González has been engaged all summer in an open disagreement with Thomas Rivera Schatz, the Senate president of her own party, who has made formal requests for information regarding a temporary power-generation contract and has pressed for the resignations of two of her senior gubernatorial aides who have been referred to ethics investigators. Although none of this appears as an item in the GPI, access to clean water, reliable grid power, and a governing party at peace with itself are precisely the kinds of everyday realities that a 20.75 score cannot restore.

"Nations do not progress by accident; they progress when their people decide that potential is no longer enough. What every kakistocracy has in common, from Oxford to Caracas, is a government that mistook loyalty for competence — and a public that eventually stopped believing the difference didn't matter."
— Francisco Rodríguez-Castro

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