



THE BIG BET

Rediscovering the Middle

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Introduction

Polarisation and intolerance are on the increase. They define the political and economic landscape. We are in the middle of a war, not of guns, but of populist policy repositioning around questions of identity, brazen scramble for resources, elite capture and the further disempowerment of the majority. In the process, the truth has become compromised. One writer noted, *'...we are living in a 'post-truth' era. The use of the term post-truth increased 2000% in prevalence during the Brexit and U.S presidential debates. In a 'post-truth' era, objective facts appear less influential than appeals to emotion. There is a tolerance for dishonest, inaccurate allegations and outright denial of facts. Political half-truths and blatant lies become routine.'* One may add that those in charge, usually political officeholders, have a new rhetoric around national interest, which at times is a euphemism for selfish greed. The trajectory points towards further intolerance and polarisation. Multilateralism has been severely curtailed. Systems of checks and balances, introduced since the end of the Second World War, are under threat across the world, and we seem to be witnessing a return to the dark ages as far as democracy is concerned. The current path of politics and development is exhausted. It is nothing but destructive, creates antagonistic postures of 'them against us', yet the challenges we face have the potential of an existential threat beyond these narrowly framed divisions. Flooding caused by climate change does not choose who should be affected. Wars caused by greed affect all within and in neighbouring countries. The increase in violent crime caused by the shrinking of employment and livelihood opportunities does not discriminate on who becomes the victim.

Furthermore, citizens' actions, widely seen as a way of public judgment on the situation in a country, have been severely curtailed either through arrests or threats of the same. Social movements and broadly progressive civil society have been put in a chokehold, thanks to funding cuts, new laws and the ongoing privatisation of public service delivery. Could this be the moment to rethink the systems that govern our politics and economies? **In 2026, I am making a big bet on rediscovering the 'middle'.**

A Case for the Middle

The middle is not a physical position. It is a way of thinking, making trade-offs, and uncomfortable changes for the greater good. It is borne out of a realisation that the current dominant frameworks of doing politics, development and accumulation have only led to depletion and concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few.

The imbalance is untenable and is a breeding ground for a new kind of confrontational, uncivil politics. The democracy via elections approach is under threat if nothing is done to rework the formula and accommodate the majority, not only in the redistribution of wealth but in ensuring sustainable pathways for livelihoods, including a recognition of the climate crisis that we all face.

The middle, a space for compromise, trade-offs, consensus-building, hearing different opinions and reaching out to those we disagree with, has been severely compromised. Even that beacon of hope, the United Nations, is under threat. Instead, we have entered a new era or pressed the reset button back to the 'winner takes all' framing of deal-making across politics and business.

We are living in the era of unprecedented greed; many African countries' GDPs are less than the net worth of a few individual billionaires. The new accumulation treadmill around large-scale land investments being promoted under the guise of the carbon credit market, the fights over critical minerals and brazen attempts to take over the running of other countries are but a sign that greed is not relenting but repurposing and, in many instances, in collusion with political power. In all this, Africa has been pushed back to its original position, a spectator of global events and waiting for the breadcrumbs from the master's table. For how long? However, we don't have to look very far for a way out. The global order (albeit with its own moments of disorder) that has sustained human development since 1945 was based on optimism that we have the capacity to co-exist despite our differences.

Despite its challenges (especially biases to favour the West), it was a moment of promise; decolonisation, consensus on human rights (albeit selectively), some form of growth (although uneven) and even recently secured a rare agreement on the climate crisis. However, all these are on the brink of collapse. The quest for the middle (others may equate this with centrism) has been the dominant entry point for international diplomacy and peacekeeping efforts- not taking sides but accommodating different interests, including those with which we do not agree. The 'middle' in many instances elevates deliberation over debate. For debate, by its nature (like many sporting disciplines), is about winning. Yet deliberative approaches bring us closer to hearing each other and accommodate competing interests. The moral courage required to take us out of the current stalemate cannot be overstated- it will not come from an individual but requires a collective approach.

What will 2026 look like? Is there still a place for the middle and its handmaidens' deliberative politics? We surely hope so.

We are placing our big bet on the capacity of many, especially in the global South, to rediscover the importance of the middle, not only as a place but as a set of ideas of compromise and consensus-building and as the embodiment of Ubuntu. Our existence is interconnected. We depend on each other.

The Middle as a Compromise or Utopia

However, the idea of the middle may at worst sound exhausted, out of touch with reality and to others as mere romanticism in the face of entrenched and polarised positions. What is the alternative? Digging in? A new arms race, maybe. The growth of a new radical social movement confronting the excesses of the existing oligarchs. Should we undo multilateralism or seek to build upon it? Others blame us in the Global South for always complaining and insist that we should also develop, instead of waiting for aid. What form has that development taken lately? The existing global race for accumulation, plunder of natural resources and continuing abuse of the weak amongst us. The gains made in transitioning towards constitutional democracies are under threat. Authoritarians who were always wary of America's hand in encouraging (read enforcing) a democratic ideal (or just a neoliberal framework) have been emboldened. The impatience of the youth (especially Gen Zs) is a real threat to the existing model of governance and economic behaviours of the elites.

In the world of business, it's a war of survival. The pursuit of profit at all costs. This has been ongoing for years, and one would have hoped that by now we would have realised the folly of profit at whatever cost. The profit-maximising model has not only made a few rich at the expense of the majority. It has led to the plunder of natural resources and today's climate crisis. It has also led to the capture of power by the minority. There is limited understanding within the capitalist sector, especially in Africa, of the effects of the funding gap created by the departure of big donors such as America's USAID, Sweden's SIDA and broad funding cuts by EU donors. Previously, the funding helped ameliorate what was otherwise an untenable situation when addressing the poverty, livelihoods, social service delivery and environmental crisis panning out across the developing world. The gap created by the departure or flight of aid is yet to be widely felt. 2026 could be the year of reckoning. Is there a middle space for the capitalist sector?

We are making a big bet on the sector, realising the gap and digging deep to innovate solutions beyond profit-making, but re-discovering the middle by creating sustainable social impact. The same applies to the nonprofit sector. There is a need for them to find the middle- a place where they are not only seized with tackling social, economic or political ills in our society but finding ways of securing or generating new revenues to allow for their long-term sustainability.

At SIVIO Institute, we are concerned with what citizens think, where they are, and what they are doing with each other. Elites, whether they're in government, in business, or even in NGOs, never really serve the interests of citizens. The concerns of citizens over the last five years have been around their livelihoods, particularly focusing on economic questions of employment, pricing of goods, affordability of quality healthcare and unchecked abuse of power in appropriating resources for a few. Elites in governments are concerned about preserving power at whatever cost. NGOs will soon be consumed by achieving sustainability at whatever cost. But the challenge we face is that we have not achieved the goal or aligned with the goals of citizens.

How do we develop a middle-of-the-road approach to acknowledge that, across all activities of the three sectors defining society, there is a problem of exclusion?

A middle-of-the-ground approach is not just about balancing interests; it shapes the fundamentals of economic strategy, social policy, and democracy itself. In every consideration we make, even in business strategy, there is a need to ask: what exactly are the interests of society? What are the interests of the ordinary citizens that shape us and that make us profitable?

The goal is to eventually move beyond our standard expert-driven models to a common, authentic voice from the ground up. **Adopting the middle as a value and way of working compels us to re-examine established frameworks for development, business, and governance.** We must start by accommodating this grassroots perspective to truly achieve a sustainable framework of democracy and development.