

# MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

## Charlie Kirk's Killing Bares Rising Extremism in the US Body Politic

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### **S***ummary*

Charlie Kirk's killing has exposed deep fissures between and within the Republican and Democratic parties and uncovered a grim culture of hate afflicting the US political system. Some experts fear that the present US dispensation might use Kirk's killing as a pretext to muzzle legitimate, non-violent political opposition.

On 10 September 2025, the popular right-wing political activist Charlie Kirk, a close ally of US President Donald Trump, was shot and killed in broad daylight while speaking at a public debate event organised at the Utah Valley University campus. It is ironic that at the time of being shot, the 31-year-old Kirk was beginning to reply to a Utah Valley University undergraduate, Hunter Kozak, who asked: “Do you know how many mass shooters there have been in America over the last 10 years?” In response, Kirk’s last words before being fatally shot in the neck were “Counting or not counting gang violence...”.

There is no denying that in an increasingly polarised US social and political landscape, Kirk was himself a highly controversial figure. One of the most prominent exponents of Trump’s MAGA (‘Make America Great Again’) movement in the Republican Party, Kirk strongly opposed abortion, gun control, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programmes, illegal immigration and LGBT rights. Critical of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Martin Luther King Jr., he is alleged to have sent buses of students to the rally leading to the 6 January US Capitol attack.

## The Widening Wedge

The response to Charlie Kirk’s killing, even before the determination of the identity and motive of the killer, was highly vituperative and divisive across the US political spectrum. US President Trump himself did not take a bipartisan approach, calling on citizens of all political denominations to refrain from hate speech after the tragedy. Instead, he singled out left-wing groups for the growing radicalism and violence in the country.<sup>1</sup> As if on cue, US Vice President J.D. Vance spoke of dismantling what he called “this incredibly destructive movement of left-wing extremism that has grown up over the last few years, and I believe is part of the reason why Charlie was killed by an assassin’s bullet.”<sup>2</sup>

Thereafter, Trump’s MAGA supporters filled the social media with incendiary rhetoric not only against the Democratic left-wing, but also directed against the ethnically diverse immigrant population, with some going to the extent of claiming that the country was in a state of war. Thus, former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon said on his War Room podcast: “Charlie Kirk is a casualty of war. We are at war in this country. We are!!!”<sup>3</sup>

For their part, the opposition Democratic Party members objected to presuming that Kirk’s killer is a Leftist, way before a precise determination of the sniper’s identity was made. The question of double standards was raised as threats of violence against

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<sup>1</sup> [“BREAKING: Trump Answers Questions on the Killing of Charlie Kirk”](#), *Sky News channel*, YouTube, 12 September 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Crawley, [“Trump Vows to Dismantle ‘Radical Left’ Groups in Wake of Charlie Kirk Killing”](#), *CBC News*, 17 September 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [“The Martyrdom of Charlie Kirk: Journalist Chris Hedges on the Weaponization of Kirk’s Killing”](#), *Democracy Now*, 15 September 2025.

Left-wing activists on the Internet, even against members of the Democratic Party, were ignored, and the blame for a recent spate of political violence across the country was placed squarely at the door of one side of the political divide.

When Trump was questioned by a journalist over his order to fly the US flag at half-staff in honour of Charlie Kirk, even though the same honour was not accorded to assassinated Democratic speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives Melissa Hortman and her husband in June 2025, the President replied: “I wouldn’t have thought of that, but I would’ve, if somebody had asked me.” He then continued: “People make requests for the lowering of the flag, and oftentimes you have to say no, because it would be a lot of lowering.”<sup>4</sup>

After a two-day manhunt, law enforcement authorities eventually apprehended and then formally charged a 22-year-old youth, Tyler James Robinson, for the murder of Charlie Kirk. The motive for the attack has been alleged as political, given the suspect’s romantic involvement with his roommate, who the charge sheet describes as “a biological male who was transitioning genders”.<sup>5</sup>

## Self-Sustaining Loop of Polarised Violence

Political violence in the US has increased in recent times, starting from two assassination attempts on Trump in 2024, followed by the firebombing of the residence of Governor Josh Shapiro in Pennsylvania early in 2025, the killing of aforementioned Minnesota legislator Melissa Hortman and her husband and the shooting down of Trump supporter Charlie Kirk.

According to University of Massachusetts Lowell scholar on political extremism, Arie Perliger, political assassinations in democracies are dangerous as they come in waves. In a recent interview with *PBS News*, he stated, “Political assassinations create a process of escalation that encourages others on the extreme political spectrum to feel the need to retaliate.”<sup>6</sup>

Speaking about the political polarisation in US in the past, the scholar observed that earlier the divide was around a specific issue like race relations and civil rights in the 1960s and the Vietnam War. However, he believed, “this time there is no specific issue that we can say, ‘If we solve this, we solve the political polarisation’. The problem is that there’s no space for convergence from both sides.” He then makes a grim prognostication about the impact of Kirk’s assassination on the US: “This will not end here.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lauren Gambino, “[Trump at first says he is ‘not familiar’ with Minnesota Democrat’s assassination](#)”, *The Guardian*, 16 September 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Cooper, “[Court Documents Reveal How Charlie Kirk Shooting Suspect Tyler Robinson Allegedly Confessed](#)”, *ABC News*, 17 September 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Arie Perliger and Alfonso Serrano, “[Analysis: Why Charlie Kirk’s Killing Could Embolden More Political Violence](#)”, *The Conversation*, *PBS News*, 14 September 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Splinter in the MAGA movement

It is also curious to note that fissures are developing within the Republican Party, even inside Trump’s MAGA movement. Trump came to power on the backing of paleo-conservatives within the far-right Republican constituency, who largely view the US more as a constitutional republic and suspect majoritarian democratic rule, which they believe could potentially override individual liberties.

Unlike neo-conservative or the so-called ‘Neocons’, the ‘paleo-conservatives’ promote a Southern states’ traditionalist worldview that is averse to a modern, secular and more permissive lifestyle, which makes them critical of the neocon support for globalisation and the growing influence of foreign lobbies in US politics, even Israel’s alleged role in influencing US foreign policy.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, many of President Trump’s policies correspond with the precepts of the paleo-conservative playbook, namely the preservation of White Christian heritage, opposition to immigration from non-Western developing countries, support for free market capitalism at home but imposition of protectionist measures like high tariffs, denunciation of feminist and gay rights, enjoining of traditional family and gender roles, and general aversion to globalist ideals and institutions.

The terms ‘neoconservative’ (in short ‘Neocon’) and ‘paleoconservative’ are said to have risen following a divide in the US Republican Party during the Vietnam War. Those Republicans who supported that war became known as the neoconservatives or interventionists, while the earlier ‘nationalists’ were rebranded as ‘paleo-conservatives’ or ‘isolationists’. Before Trump, Pat Buchanan and Ron Paul were said to be associated with paleo-conservatism and US right-wing libertarian politics.

However, many paleo-conservative supporters of Trump’s MAGA movement have increasingly expressed their disbelief, if not an outright sense of betrayal, with the Trump presidency’s failure at resolving the Russia–Ukraine war as well as the Israel–Iran war in West Asia. Many erstwhile members of Trump’s MAGA base felt slighted following the President’s decision to close the Epstein case, after having earlier promised to his supporters that he would make public all information on Epstein’s blackmailing of some high-profile figures. Airing his frustration, US Senator Thom Tillis from the Republican Party said: “Look, I’m where I’ve been every time you ask me this question ... Release the files.”<sup>9</sup>

Many of Trump’s previous die-hard media and online influencers, like Steve Bannon, Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones, Joe Rogan, Benny Johnson and Candace Owens, openly expressed their anguish after Trump castigated them for demanding transparency in the Epstein case. In an interview with *ABC News*, the US President called some of

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<sup>8</sup> V. Paul Murphy, [“The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought”](#), University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Wendling, [“How Epstein Case is Tearing Apart MAGA’s Online Conspiracy Wing”](#), *BBC*, 25 July 2025.

his diehard supporters ‘fools’ and ‘stupid’ over the Epstein files issue. Thus, Trump stated:

It was a hoax. It's all been a big hoax. The Democrats perpetrate it, and some *stupid* Republicans and *foolish* Republicans fall into the net. And so they try to do the Democrats' work. The Democrats are good for nothing other than these hoaxes.<sup>10</sup>

Surprisingly, even Charlie Kirk urged the Trump administration to fix the Epstein mess by disclosing more information.<sup>11</sup>

## Rise in Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories

In early September, the House Oversight Committee released 33,000 pages carrying the records related to Jeffrey Epstein, including flight logs, court filings, surveillance footage from the jail where Epstein died, redacted records, depositions and memos. In his statement, the top Democrat on House Oversight, Rep. Robert Garcia, said:

After careful review, Oversight Democrats have found that 97% of the documents received from the Department of Justice were already public. There is no mention of any client list or anything that improves transparency or justice for victims.<sup>12</sup>

However, this disclosure did not silence the anti-deep state and now anti-Trump MAGA members (like Republican politician and businesswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene) from raking up conspiracy theories regarding a ‘possible’ Israeli involvement in the JFK assassination, despite the Trump administration’s release of a large number of unredacted files related to the 1963 assassination of US President John F. Kennedy in March this year.<sup>13</sup>

In his post on X dated 14 June 2025, erstwhile Trump supporter Tucker Carlson called fellow Republicans, who do not follow his ilk, ‘warmongers’, i.e., those who call for US involvement in Israel’s war against Iran. In this category, he names Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Rupert Murdoch, Ike Perlmutter and Miriam Adelson.<sup>14</sup>

In his new docuseries on the 11 September attacks, Carlson ponders whether America’s 9/11 Commission Report was a “cover-up” and claims to cite FBI

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<sup>10</sup> Ivan Pereira and Kelsey Walsh, [“Trump Blasts ‘Stupid’ and ‘Foolish’ Republicans Amid Calls to Reveal More Epstein Files”](#), *ABC News*, 16 July 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Avery Lotz and Marc Caputo, [“Charlie Kirk Talks Epstein, Urges Trump Administration to Act”](#), *Axios*, 15 July 2025.

<sup>12</sup> [“House Oversight Committee Releases Tens of Thousands of Pages of Epstein Files”](#), *CNN*, 2 September 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Cheyanne M. Daniels, [“MTG Suggests a Link between JFK’s Assassination and His Opposition to Israel’s ‘Nuclear Program’”](#), *Inside Congress Live*, *Politico*, 24 June 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker Carlson @TuckerCarlson, [“The Real Divide”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 14 June 2025.

documents, which purport that Israeli intelligence had foreknowledge of the attacks.<sup>15</sup> Curiously, Greta Van Susteren from *Newsmax* asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about many Americans wondering whether Israel was behind the assassination of Charlie Kirk. As expected, the Israeli prime minister called such notions “insane” and then sarcastically added that “Israel also changes the orbit of the moon, Israel pushes the sun.”<sup>16</sup>

## Left-Wing Despair and the ‘Woke’ Unrest

Surprisingly similar to paleoconservative White supremacists, many young Democratic members—such as Ana Kasparian—seem disillusioned with their party’s top leadership and oppose US involvement in costly foreign wars, allegedly fought at the behest of the ‘Israel lobby’.<sup>17</sup> The rise in US politics of the Zohran Mamdani—a young Muslim born in Uganda into an Indian family (with his mother being the famous international director Mira Nair)—running as the Democratic nominee for mayor of New York City in the 2025 elections, seems to have captured the imagination of the young Democratic base.<sup>18</sup> With his socialist campaign hinging on promises of fare-free city buses, public child care, city-owned grocery stores and US\$ 30 minimum wage by 2030, he has won the approval of prominent progressives like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.<sup>19</sup>

However, many Jewish New Yorkers remain sceptical regarding his policies, including his promise to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on his visit to New York City. There is also growing restiveness among young Democratic leaders like Chris Deluzio, who resent “bootlicker politicians”<sup>20</sup> from his party. The re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency and the absence of effective leadership that might challenge Republican rule in the foreseeable future are raising a groundswell of discontent in the left-wing base, particularly among the so-called ‘Woke’ voters.

As a political term, ‘Woke’ is derived from the 1930s African-American slogan ‘Stay Woke’, which refers to racial prejudice and discrimination awareness. By the early 21st century, the term was gradually associated with a broader range of social inequalities, such as sexism and the denial of LGBTQ rights. As the use of the

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<sup>15</sup> [\*\*“Carlson Claims Israel had Foreknowledge of 9/11 and Saw It as Beneficial”\*\*](#), TRT World, YouTube, 9 September 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Lazar Burman, [\*\*“Netanyahu Rejects ‘Insane’ Conspiracy Theories that Israel was Behind Charlie Kirk’s Assassination”\*\*](#), *The Times of Israel*, 12 September 2025.

<sup>17</sup> [\*\*“Netanyahu Wants US to Fight Iran for Israel’: Ana Kasparian & Eylon Levy Clash on Israel-Iran War”\*\*](#), *Al-Arabiya English*, YouTube Channel, 13 June 2025.

<sup>18</sup> [\*\*“NYC Mayor’s Race 2025: The Race to Become New York City’s Next Mayor and Its Candidates”\*\*](#), News Event section, *The New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Haag and Benjamin Oreskes, [\*\*“Free Buses and Billions in New Taxes. Can Mamdani Achieve His Plans?”\*\*](#), *The New York Times*, 28 June 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Allan Smith, [\*\*“Fighters vs Wimps: Swing-state Democratic Rep. Chris Deluzio Sees a New Divide in the Party”\*\*](#), *NBC News*, 6 May 2025.



term *woke* increased, it was adopted even by the White population to show their support for progressive causes.<sup>21</sup>

However, the term ‘Woke’ is now being targeted by Republicans and used as a slur against racial and gender rights in the US and Europe. Many GOP leaders use the word pejoratively in their campaigns, such as Donald Trump, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy, who penned a book, *Woke Inc.: Inside Corporate America’s Social Justice Scam*.<sup>22</sup> Negative propaganda against the term has increased hostility in the US between the predominantly White Christian community and minority groups of Black, Latin American and Asian immigrants, LGBTQs and other minority communities. In fact, the rise of the anti-Woke right-wing movement has given rise to violent acts of extremism on both sides of the political dialectic, and some experts fear that the present US dispensation might use Kirk’s killing as a pretext to muzzle legitimate, non-violent political opposition.<sup>23</sup>

### Concern for the Global South, particularly for India

This is particularly disconcerting as the 2024 Global Terrorism Threat Assessment Report issued by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, shows that “violent far-right perpetrators, such as white supremacists, anti-government extremists and violent misogynists committed most US terrorist attacks in recent years”.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the report states that “violent far-left perpetrators, such as anti-fascist extremists, anarchists and violent environmentalists have also orchestrated a growing percentage of terrorist attacks”.<sup>25</sup>

As the US remains the world's leading superpower, internal political discord could have concomitant implications for the international order and global peace and security. The rise of White supremacist far-right groups in the US should be carefully observed by most countries of the Global South, particularly by India, as the rise of the US administration's radical supremacist orientation may even influence its foreign policy decisions and target the security and economic interests of emerging powers and new geopolitical rivals.

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<sup>21</sup> Aja Romano, “[A History of 'Wokeness'](#)”, *Vox*, 9 October 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Kiara Alfonseca, “[What Does 'Woke' Mean and Why are Some Conservatives Using it?](#)”, *ABC News*, 5 March 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Crawley, “[Trump Vows to Dismantle 'Radical Left' Groups in Wake of Charlie Kirk Killing](#)”, *CBC News*, 17 September 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Catrina Doxsee, Alexander Palmer and Riley McCabe, “[Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 8 February 2024.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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