Climate COP Heading Towards Challenged Cooperation

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Vincent Sipeer



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The 29th Conference of the Parties (COP) in Baku concluded in sore disappointment. Apart from the adoption of a new climate finance goal, dubious trade-offs between COP's legitimacy and the public image of the host Azerbaijan came to the forefront. Once again, this raises questions about the procedural legitimacy of UN Climate Change Conferences. In the light of a credibility problem of COP29 this blog article examines whether a new

legitimacy crisis under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is starting to develop.

Ending Greenwashing Of Authoritarian Petrostates

Branding oil and gas a "**gift from God**" Azerbaijan's authoritarian leader hosts the UN Climate Change Conference as the third petrostate in a row. The COP29 in Azerbaijan, one of the most **corrupt** and **repressive** states in the world, has followed COP28 in the United Arab Emirates, and COP27 in Egypt. This trend is alarming as these states aspire to slow down energy transition and demonstrate disregard for international law.

Fourteen months before COP29 started, Azerbaijan waged **ethnic cleansing** of over 100,000 Karabakh Armenians and intensified **domestic repressive measures**. The Caucasus state is also planning to increase its **gas production** by a third in the next decade while nominally pledging commitment to renewable energy. Its proposed summit agenda even omitted discussions on **phasing out fossil fuels**, aggravating the global thermo-industrial catastrophe.

Apparently, Azerbaijan misused COP29 for its own purposes, which is whitewashing and greenwashing its global image. This can undermine the credibility of climate diplomacy. Thus, only Parties that comply with human rights, support the green transition, and uphold ambitious climate goals should be selected to take up COP's presidency according to the rotation rules.

Past Climate Summit's Crises of Legitimacy

Challenges to COP's legitimacy such as the greenwashing of petrostates are no isolated incidents. Throughout the history of the last three decades of COP negotiations, states have repetitively faced **failures and successes** that are linked with waves of **legitimacy crises**.

The first legitimacy crisis of the UNFCCC was marked by United States unilateral disengagement from the negotiations. After the EU-US dispute on the operational details of the market-based mechanisms at COP6 in The Hague (2000) the Bush administration unprecedentedly withdrew from the treaty in 2001. The failure of COP6 to broker a compromise is due to poor commitment of some Parties, an inadequate mandate given to the EU, and the inability of the multilateral COP process to deal with aspects of complex implementation. However, this crisis was a stress test for elite decision-making processes and, ultimately, reduced the Kyoto Protocol to a symbolic treaty making compliance a cheap deal.

Despite Obama's renewed support for the negotiations of the Copenhagen Accord around COP15 in late 2009, the UNFCCC underwent another wave of challenges. Thousands of people filled the streets of Copenhagen flanked by NGOs and civil disobedience groups. Many criticised democratic and transparency deficits of the COP negotiations and the inadequacy of

the outcomes such as unequitable burden sharing. Skepticism of procedural fairness was fueled by an unconventional style of leadership shown by the presidency and **disruptive behavior by China and India**. Unlike the first legitimacy crisis, the second crisis was characterised by heterogeneous audiences signaling both, public and elite contestation.

Upcoming Third Crisis Of Legitimacy

Fifteen years after the chaos in Copenhagen in an **open letter** illustrious senior figures including former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon state that COPs are "no longer fit for purpose". This criticism resonates with evidence of an upcoming crisis of procedural legitimacy centered around strained cooperation. Climate diplomacy faces signs of lower recognition by Parties that previously displayed leadership. Besides that, demands for sufficient inclusiveness of financial instruments are expressed in times of high power dynamics under the UNFCCC.

First, the thinly veiled failure of COP29 in Baku was marked by the **absence of leaders** from parties such as the US, China, India, Canada, Japan, France, and Germany. Such low participation can be partially attributed to the blatant partisanship of the host Azerbaijan. The absence of EU Commission President was deemed "**a fatal signal"** for Europe's commitment. Negotiators of the Alliance of 39 small island states (AOSIS) and the 45 least developing countries (LDC) have even **staged a walkout** pushing the summit to the brink of collapse.

Second, insufficient market mechanisms and open access to climate finance remain challenges among many developing countries. Their **marginalisation in the global landscape of climate finance** and in international financial institutions is unfair and inefficient. In response to this, the **Baku Finance Goal (BFG)** agreement gives states outside the G20 greater leverage to mobilise finance. Interestingly, COP positions itself as a negotiating forum of the distribution of climate funding besides institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Third, the power-legitimacy dynamic is in a state of upheaval. Five days before the opened Donald J. Trump won the US election on a campaign promising to **roll back climate action** and takes his country out of the game again as he did in 2017. If the world's second-largest polluter withdrew from the Paris Accord, its delegation could still participate in summits for one year under Art. 25(2) UNFCCC and act destructively. The repercussions of such a decision could delegitalise the regime and be a signal empowering opponents of global climate action.

Looking Ahead To COP30 in Brazil

While UNFCCC climate summits are widely recognised, they face challenges to its legitimacy due to clear signs of public and elite contestation of COPs, and strained cooperation for urgent transformative action. It should

be acknowledged that green- and whitewashing harm the summits credibility as states act as political entrepreneurs, misusing them opportunistically to legitimise climate inaction. Connecting to this, insufficient leadership, distributional injustice, and rising power dynamics challenge the legitimacy of COPs. Looking ahead in 2025, Brazil, a key player in a multipolar world order, will chair both the COP30 and the 17th BRICS summit. For this anniversary, rebuilding global collaboration, consolidating joint leadership, and restoring mutual trust are key missions to prevent COP's legitimacy to decrease.

Author

Vincent Sipeer is pursuing an M.A. in National and International Administration and Policy at the University of Potsdam, Germany. His research focuses on climate diplomacy and intergovernmental cooperation. Currently, he assists the Chief Executive Director of the Association of German Cities and prepares his participation in Model United Nations conferences. Vincent aims to align local and regional interests with the climate discourse.

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