

# DeSantis is antithesis of a leader in a rule-of-law system

Gov. Ron DeSantis is like a thief who escapes punishment — chances are, that thief will strike again. On Aug. 9, DeSantis suspended State Attorney Monique Worrell claiming she didn't enforce the state's criminal laws. This was the second time in just over a year that DeSantis removed a duly elected (and Democratic) state attorney from office.

Florida's 20 state attorneys are elected through a partisan political process, but once in office, state attorneys serve their constituencies by making communities safer — a decidedly nonpartisan role. That mission involves preventing crime, balancing punishment with thoughtful diversion initiatives, prosecuting offenders and exercising discretion about where and how to commit the limited resources of the office. The state attorney arguably is the single most powerful enforcement position in Florida.

In the 2020 election cycle, Worrell ran as a reformist candidate for state attorney in the Ninth Judicial Circuit. That circuit includes Orange and Osceola counties, with a total population of almost 2 million. She won the general election with 67% of the vote. She is in the third year of her first term as the state attorney.

Notably, the governor didn't engage with Worrell prior to holding a press conference to announce her suspension, ostensibly for not enforcing the law. He didn't ask questions or provide any warning that he, as governor, viewed her actions as constitutionally deficient. The glaring lack of any interaction is damning. In fact, it's confessional in its own way. DeSantis wasn't interested in how Worrell ran her office; he merely needed a prop for a stage performance.

Since Florida's constitution of 1968, as amended, created the modern office of the state attorney, no Democratic or Republican governor has interfered with the state attorney function and powers by removing the officeholder for such transparently politicized purposes. During times of acrimony, legislatures — with the support or at the direction of sitting governors — have cut budgets or gutted programs of specific state attorneys, but the targeting and suspension of individual state attorneys hasn't been done until now.

DeSantis is a flailing presidential primary candidate. His platform essentially is to tell anyone who will listen to look to his job as Florida governor. His beefy posturing about “wokeness” drew attention with an ongoing fight with Disney; moved on to education with censorship of books, teaching methods and even topics; and now has surfaced again in a one-dimensional rendition of what criminal justice means.

One doesn't need to support Worrell's policies to acknowledge and respect that she is the elected prosecutor of the Ninth



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Circuit. Her evident aversion to blindly charging counts that carry mandatory minimum sentences isn't malfeasance any more than a craftsman choosing one tool over another. State attorneys do (or did) set the criminal justice agenda within their jurisdictions. There is ample room to debate, criticize and judge policies and practices in the criminal justice system. Suspending prosecutors over

disagreements isn't a legitimate part of that public process. It is a reckless maneuver designed to intimidate state attorneys into enforcement homogeneity. This imposed uniformity ignores the everyday reality that state attorneys conduct their duties in vastly different communities.

The governor's press announcement cited three cases (out of tens of thousands) to support his suspension of Worrell. Of course, his office didn't seek explanations from her about the cases, nor did the governor address proof or any case-based factors that might play into a prosecutorial decision in any individual matter. And the stunt ended with a sheriff from another county holding a cartoon up as some sort of personal insult. Such performative theatrics reflect the lack of any credibility in the whole affair.

A U.S. district judge held that DeSantis violated the U.S. Constitution in suspending 13th Circuit (Hillsborough County) State Attorney Andrew Warren last year. The court also ruled it had no authority to reinstate him. Warren was wronged and has no legal remedy. In Worrell's case, her legal counsel should act quickly in both state and federal courts to seek judicial review of DeSantis' actions. The court ruling in the Warren case that DeSantis violated the law is a powerful sign that his follow-up suspension of Worrell is more of the same.

The theft of power isn't just from the suspended state attorneys. The commandeering is more basic and troubling. DeSantis doesn't respect the will of the voters. He strips titles from individuals, but he also usurps the decisions of hundreds of thousands of voters who elected those candidates to serve in specific roles in communities. It is not merely disrespectful to cavalierly replace those incumbents; it is the cynical behavior of a political bully. Our governor leads our state with surprise acts of intimidation. He's the antithesis of a leader in a rule-of-law system. Voters across the country should look at what is happening in Florida and reject DeSantis' agenda.

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