POLICY BRIEF

Deepening democracy through diversity: Improving cooperation with India and non-Western democracies

Dhruva Jaishankar

Addressing global challenges to democracy will only be possible with greater recognition that democracy has been successful in an array of countries beyond the West.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The policy literature on democracy often overlooks a number of factors that have important implications for democracy's future. First, it frequently exaggerates the decline of democracy globally, often by conflating reverses in liberalism with reversals in democracy. Second, it continues to imply ownership of democracy by the Western world when in fact over two-thirds of those living under democratic systems today are in non-Western and developing countries. Third, it often fails to recognize important differences between democracies, especially concerning their attitudes toward identity. There are significant differences in particular between nation-states, immigrant-heavy states, and post-colonial states. At the same time, all democracies today face similar challenges that include four "i's": identity, inequality, information, and interference. Working to address these challenges at a global level will require recognizing the diversity of democratic architectures and ensuring greater cooperation with democracies in the developing world, both in protecting democratic institutions at home and in bolstering cooperation in third countries.

INTRODUCTION

A rich vein of policy literature exists on the future of democracy.[1] Much of it is inherently pessimistic, and that pessimism has grown following a number of crises that have afflicted the European Union after 2008, democratic reversals in countries such as Russia and Turkey, and the election of populist leaders, not least Donald Trump in the United States. But this literature suffers from several shortcomings. First, it often exaggerates the scope and scale

of democratic decline, frequently by conflating reversals in democracy with reversals in liberalism. In fact, the progress of democracy globally suggests a rather more mixed picture. Second, it downplays the success of democracy in the non-Western world, and prioritizes Western leadership in an era when the vast majority of those who live in democratic societies are now outside the West. This risks overlooking opportunities to collaborate with the non-Western world to strengthen democracy globally. Third, it fails to differentiate between democracies, particularly in terms of their relations with collective identity. This means that differences between democracies often erode areas of convergence or cooperation.

Today, democracy is stagnant globally, deepening in some countries and receding in others. It faces new challenges in the form of an alternative single-party model of governance in China; resurgent authoritarianism in places like Russia and Turkey; non-state violent extremism in the form of certain Islamist movements; and the undermining of institutions from within. All democracies today confront challenges related to identity, inequality, information dissemination, and external interference. If democracy is to be strengthened at a global level, cooperation between Western and non-Western democracies will be necessary, both for deriving important lessons about securing democracy at home and for cooperation in third countries. This will require respecting democratic variation, including among post-colonial states where liberal democracy may not exhibit exactly the same characteristics as in many Western traditions.

ASSESSING THE CHALLENGE: GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC STANDSTILL

Judging from news headlines today, the democratic world is in complete disarray. The elections of political populists in the United States and their surging popularity in Europe have had inordinate effects on perceptions of democracy. In Russia, Turkey, and Hungary, charismatic leaders have been eroding institutions in a bid to centralize power, suggesting a rise in strongman politics. Far-right and far-left political parties have won elections or are part of ruling coalitions in a number of European parliamentary democracies. Meanwhile, despite initial hope around the Arab Spring, attempts at democratization in such countries as Egypt, Afghanistan, and Iraq have turned sour.

Of course, democracy is about more than the exercise of free and fair elections. It is about checks and balances on authority, the rule of law, the openness of societies, equality of political rights, and impersonal but effective governance. But by whatever definition used, the global picture of democracy is more mixed—and certainly less dire—than the headlines sometimes make them out to be. Over the past two decades since 1998, the proportion of "free" countries according to Freedom House has hovered at between 44-47 percent and the percentage of "partially free" countries has also remained resilient between 28-32 percent, while the share of "not free" countries remains between 22-26 percent.[2] Although no major gains have been made, neither has there been a precipitous backsliding in the number of democratic states around the world.

What about the quality of democracy? On average, countries' civil liberty scores according to Freedom House have declined over the past decade from 37.5 to 36.1 out of 60. The decline has been least pronounced in very liberal democracies, and most recognizable among those already rated low. Still, the picture is more mixed than many presume: for every well-publicized story of democratic decline such as Turkey, Hungary, or Russia, there is a story of another country opening up: Tunisia, Myanmar, or Bhutan. Similar trends can be seen in assessments of political rights. There has been a slight decline in average over the past decade from 24.4 to 23.8 out of 40, with an accelerated decline over the last five years. But again, for every egregious example of backsliding on political rights—Burundi, Yemen, or Venezuela—there is a successful example such as Fiji, Nigeria, and Nepal moving in a positive direction.[3]

Public satisfaction in democracy also presents a diverse picture. In the developed world, surveys suggest a strong degree of satisfaction with how democracy is working in Germany, Sweden, and Canada, but paint a much more pessimistic picture in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Southern Europe. In Asia, developing democracies such as India, Indonesia, and the Philippines reflect much higher satisfaction with democracy than more developed countries such as Japan and South Korea. In the rest of the world, African countries such as Tanzania, Senegal, and Ghana are more upbeat about democracy than those in the Middle East and Latin America such as Jordan, Lebanon, Brazil, and Mexico. The popularity of democracy is closely correlated to high rates of economic growth, optimism about future prospects, and trust in the government.[4] There is also divergence in attitudes toward democracy among age groups. While younger citizens in most Western democracies believe living in a democracy is far less essential than their older counterparts, the picture emerging in Asia is more mixed.[5] Younger respondents to a 2017 survey in India, Indonesia, and South Korea expressed about the same value in living in democracy as older respondents.[6]

Democracy around the world is certainly confronting significant challenges—occasional reversals, public dissatisfaction, and stagnant growth—but it is not yet in crisis. In part, this may be due to the absence of clear alternatives. Although China's economic performance has far outstripped any precedent in terms of speed and scale, there have been few attempts at exactly replicating its system of governance: a single-party state.[7] The most notorious recent cases of democratic backsliding—such as Russia, Turkey, or Hungary—have been linked instead to the consolidation of power by individual leaders within a nominally multi-party framework.

Perhaps the most curious feature of this overview of global democratic trends is the rise of non-Western democracies. Indeed, in addition to the frequent conflation of democracy with liberalism, it is important to appreciate the degree to which the democratic world is increasingly non-Western. Today, about two-thirds of those living under electoral democracies live outside the developed democracies of North America and Europe. With the inordinate focus on democratic backsliding in certain countries in the European periphery, successful cases of democratic consolidation in Africa and Asia are frequently overlooked. Indeed, Asians and Africans living under developing democracy generally express more favorable views about democracy, and youth in Asia are more optimistic than their Western counterparts.

Moreover, little noticed by many in the West is the degree to which non-Western democracies have already begun contributing to global democratic institution-building and norms. Such efforts include India's capacity-building efforts, electoral support, and infrastructure financing initiatives from the Gambia to the Maldives; Brazil's growing institutional and developmental role in Africa; and signature Indonesian efforts such as the Bali Democracy Forum. These are the kinds of initiatives that Western proponents of democracy could take greater note of, and could support further.

IDENTIFYING VARIATIONS AMONG DEMOCRACIES

If democratic retrenchment is frequently overstated and democracy's adoption by the non-Western world is frequently overlooked, a further shortcoming is the inability to distinguish between different democratic architectures. The fact is that not all democracies are cut from the same cloth, and it is possible to distinguish between three distinct types of democracy. Today's oldest constitutional democracy—the United States of America—was an experiment that arose in the intellectual cauldron of the European Enlightenment.[8] The United States was, at the outset, an immigrant-heavy society, a characteristic it shared subsequently with the likes of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where

mass immigration led to more fluid conceptions of identities. In the United States' experience, it resulted in a much stronger emphasis on individualism. Ethnic identity—the notion of the United States as a "white" country—became somewhat less pronounced following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which ended over four decades of immigration quotas to control the ethnic make-up of the American population.

In Europe, the nature of democracy was violently disputed between 1789 and 1945, and remained seriously contested until 1989. Democracy took root and spread alongside the creation of nation-states from the Reformation and French Revolution to the aftermath of World War II. The result was strong states with distinct national identities based on linguistic (e.g., French, Romanian, Italian) or religious attributes (e.g., Catholicism in Austria, Belgium, and Croatia). This process, which unfolded over four centuries, was accompanied by frequent warfare and ethnic cleansing.[9] Indeed, questions of minority identity continue to confound these states, resulting in continued calls for separatism, whether in Catalonia, Flanders, or Scotland. Beyond Europe, similar trends also played out in Japan and Korea in the 19th and 20th centuries, resulting in mostly homogenous populations that remain resistant to large-scale immigration.[10]

Beyond North America and Europe, much of the rest of the world, including most of Africa and Asia, was shaped by the experiences of colonialism and decolonization. The likes of India, Indonesia, and Nigeria became home to an improbable diversity of linguistic, cultural, and religious groups, while many large ethnic groups did not emerge with a distinct and exclusive home state. These circumstances resulted in numerous civil and interstate wars—from Katanga and Biafra to Aceh and Kurdistan—but by and large the decolonized world managed to preserve as cohesive, pluralistic entities. (Other than successful cases of separatism, state boundaries in Asia and Africa have changed very little from the era of decolonization.) Not all decolonizing countries transitioned into democracies and many remain authoritarian. However, those that did democratize had to adopt a very different approach from the United States or a relatively homogenous European nation-state. India represented among the first, and arguably the most ambitious, of such experiments. The task of agreeing upon and attempting to impose popular representation, fundamental rights, and checks and balances in post-colonial societies was infinitely more difficult than it was in either the United States (where democracy initially applied only to land-owning white males) or in Europe (which was by and large composed of much more homogenous political entities).

To illustrate the challenges of addressing collective identity in post-colonial democracies, consider the extraordinary case of the Jarawa. There are only about 250 to 400 Jarawa tribespeople left on India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a remote archipelago that is geographically closer to Thailand and Indonesia than to the Indian mainland. Until 1998, the Jarawa's links with the outside world were virtually non-existent. After that point, the Indian government discouraged contact, fearing depopulation as a result of infectious diseases. But this understanding was complicated in 2015, when a five-month-old Jarawa baby of mixed parentage was found dead, evidently drowned by a tribesman. A local social worker filed murder charges, but because the Jarawa enjoy special status in India as a vulnerable tribal group, the jurisdiction of Indian police in an otherwise clear-cut homicide case prevented the arrest of the perpetrator.[11] This incident of murder among the Jarawa is perhaps an extreme example of a characteristic that remains an essential hallmark of Indian democracy. While individuals have fundamental rights under India's constitution, as they do in other democratic societies, a host of special exemptions, laws, and policies have been created for various ethnic, religious, and caste groups. In the Indian Constitution—which came into effect in 1950—Part III on fundamental rights draws upon American traditions of equality and citizenship, but also makes significant efforts

to protect minorities through measures that have subsequently been strengthened by constitutional amendments, legislative changes, judicial rulings, and policy decisions.[12]

A more widespread and contentious example of group rights in India relates to Muslim personal law. Derived from Sharia, special laws determine marriage, adoption, and inheritance policies among India's 180 million-strong Muslim minority. The idea of collective rights also plays out on the issue of reservations for historically disadvantaged groups—Dalits (formerly referred to as "untouchables" but legally described as Scheduled Castes), indigenous groups (Scheduled Tribes), and other backward castes (OBCs)—in parliament, bureaucracy, and public universities. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes account for about a quarter of India's population, and together with OBCs these groups comprise some two-thirds of all Indians. For many people in India, personal laws, reservations, and other such policies derived from collective identities are cornerstones of Indian secularism, which—contrary to American values of the separation of church and state or French notions of *laïcité*—celebrates and protects religious and ethnic pluralism.

These features of Indian democracy—in which identity is a central factor, even at the risk of eroding individual rights—would be anathema to common Western conceptions of liberal democracy, but they are by no means unique to India.[13] In fact, this Indian experience of pluralistic democracy shares certain features with most other post-colonial states. For example, Indonesian law mandates that every citizen's identity card identify them with one of six religions, making atheism technically illegal. In Bangladesh, 5 percent of the civil service is reserved for indigenous people. In Lebanon, a National Pact allocates political offices along religious lines, with the president customarily a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shiite. And in South Africa, the government has encouraged positive discrimination of blacks in private companies, public service, universities, and sports teams. Such policies might appear illiberal or undemocratic in many Western democracies; imagine, if you will, a religious European country such as Poland declaring atheism illegal, a policy mandating that the prime minister of Australia be Protestant, or non-ethnic Germans being exempted from military service in Germany. But in many post-colonial and pluralistic democracies, such policies have been designed to buttress democracy by preserving a delicate balance between a variety of religious, linguistic, or ethnic groups.

The distinguishing features of post-colonial democracies manifest themselves in some important but tangible ways. For example, some of the opposition to absolute freedom of expression in places like India and Indonesia—including in the online sphere—actually comes from ethnic or religious minorities who are fearful of majoritarian hate speech. In India, a uniform civil code that would replace religion-specific personal laws with common policies governing marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance is opposed by political liberals on similar grounds. Thus, freedom of expression and freedom of religion—both fundamental rights in Western liberal democracies—find themselves in opposition to each other in many post-colonial democratic societies. The preservation of pluralistic entities also goes some way toward explaining these countries' national sensitivities about sovereignty and their concerns about perceived foreign interference in domestic social affairs. Such considerations have put a country like India at odds with the West on the question of the responsibility to protect (R2P) and even on religious freedom. On these issues too, India's concerns are echoed by other democratic countries, including quite notably Indonesia, whose government places stringent restrictions on religion despite an increasingly liberal polity.[14]

Understanding the opportunities and challenges of democracy in the post-colonial world is of particular importance today. While in certain respects the

challenges facing non-Western democracies will be similar to those in Europe or North America, in other respects they will be fundamentally different. While these states might share superficial attributes with immigrant-heavy democracies such as the United States, including an obligation of pluralism, they will also reflect commonalities with the nation-states of Europe in falling back on hoary notions of linguistic and ethnic indigeneity. For example, nationalist movements in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar will be projected, accurately or otherwise, as "defensive projects" with the objective of preserving a delicate status quo among different groups.[15]

SHARED CHALLENGES: THE FOUR "I'S"

While acknowledging the distinguishing features of post-colonial democracies amid a period of democratic standstill at the global level, it is important to recognize some of the shared challenges that all democracies—nation-states, post-colonial entities, and immigrant-heavy societies—are facing.[16]

The first is the continuing relevance of **identity**. The United States, France, and India have very different starting points when it comes to identity politics, but the deepening of identity in all these polities is nonetheless pronounced, despite prior expectations that globalization would lead to great cosmopolitanism and the dilution of strong group identities. In the United States and Europe, the question of identity is largely grounded in debates about immigration. In India—or for that matter Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Kenya—identity politics has deeper roots, and relates to the distribution of power among various subnational groups. Nonetheless, a shared challenge that all democracies will have to face is how to negotiate political pluralism in a globalized world.

A second shared challenge relates to **inequality**, especially real and perceived inequality of opportunity. Despite consistent economic growth in many parts of the world and improvements in human development indicators among most developing economies, the perception of growing inequality has tested the functioning of democracy.[17] Populist nationalism is consequently interspersed with populist economic policies. Economic malaise among youth or aspirational voters is also exploited by populists. Finding ways to improve even the semblance of equality of opportunity will be a common challenge among both developed and developing democracies, particularly with the advent of new technologies that could contribute to productivity increases and capital gains (that will disproportionately benefit the rich) at the expense of employment opportunities for the poor and middle class. In India too, the paucity of job opportunities risks voters' faith in democratic governance.

The third shared challenge is the new **information** environment. Although the availability of information via digital telecommunications had been expected to promote democracy, it has also paradoxically resulted in the undermining of democratic functioning. This appears to be the result of a number of factors, including online political echo chambers, misinformation ("fake news"), and increased political theater. Digital democracy has recreated elements of direct democracy, undermining mechanisms for compromise that are necessary for representative democracy to function. In India, for example, online propaganda has become a major battleground for democratic politics, but has compromised informed decisionmaking, one of the essential criteria of a functioning democracy.[18]

Finally, while less uniform, all democracies remain vulnerable to **interference** by external actors. This has become a particularly contentious issue in the United States and Europe. While India has so far been relatively immune to external interference in its political processes, this phenomenon has started to be well documented in other more vulnerable countries in its region. In Sri Lanka, for example, a Chinese port construction firm made large payments to the re-election campaign of President Mahinda Rajapaksa (who narrowly lost in 2015). Rajapaksa had earlier approved onerous Chinese lending terms for an unprofitable but strategically located port, and

China offered to waive the resulting debt in exchange for equity in the project. Similar financial interference has been documented in other democracies in the region.[19]

CONCLUSION

What does all of this mean for the future of governance, democratic cooperation, and the international order? First, it is important to underscore that democracy—despite its many challenges—is not yet in crisis. While democratic institutions are being tested, there is little yet to suggest that they are, with some notable exceptions, necessarily breaking. The lack of alternative systems of governance is apparent, as are the constraints that are being imposed on elected populists in almost every durable democracy.

Second, there are shared challenges to modern governance, which democracies can best address by learning more from each other's experiences. This will require casting a wider net beyond the traditional trans-Atlantic community. Adapting conventional democratic features—such as fundamental rights and checks and balances—for newer realms, such as the online sphere, may provide partial solutions to some of the more pressing challenges. Furthermore, addressing inequality will require a better understanding of each other's social welfare, educational, and entrepreneurship policies. There is also a lot that democracies can learn from each other about hardening their political systems against external influence.

Third, the logic of democratic cooperation on matters of foreign policy remains strong. Amid challenges to the prevailing international order—notably the manner of China's rise, the threat of violent extremist movements, and counter-globalization impulses—democracies of all stripes share some basic common interests in how to order the world so as to preserve peace and stability, generate sustainable and equitable global growth, and govern the global commons. However, improved democratic cooperation that incorporates—rather than stigmatizes—democracies in the developing world will require some acknowledgment of differences in attitudes and approaches if such collaboration is to be effective.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognize that successful models of post-colonial democracy are very different from Western democracies. Issues of collective identity—whether religious, linguistic, cultural, or otherwise—particularly as enshrined in a country's constitution, should not be a basis for limiting cooperation among democracies, as long as other elements of democratic institutions such as political representation, fundamental rights, the rule of law, and checks and balances are respected.

- Develop a better understanding of efforts underway in the non-Western democratic world to strengthen democracy at home. This could extend to sharing best practices when it comes to dealing with the dissemination of fake news, addressing inequality, or countering external interference.

- Enhance efforts at cooperating with non-Western democracies in third countries. This might include cooperation in development efforts, improving electoral procedures, and capacity-building to strengthen bureaucracies, judiciaries, and civil society organizations. For example, Western governments providing financial and technical assistance to development initiatives led by non-Western democracies could help promote sustainability, transparency, and accountability in Asia and Africa. Similar efforts can be made to finance existing training programs conducted by democracies in the developing world for election authorities, government ombudsmen, legislative staff, and civil society groups from transitional states.

REFERENCES

1 See for example Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is In Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present – Revised Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

2 "Freedom in the World," Freedom House, 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

3 Based on Freedom House ratings for sovereign states recognized by the United Nations. Dependent territories (such as Hong Kong), disputed territories (such as Nagorno-Karabakh), and new countries (such as South Sudan) are not included.

4 Richard Wike, Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Janell Fetterolf, "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," *Pew Research Center*, October 16, 2017, http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/.

5 Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 5-17. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/danger-deconsolidation-democratic-disconnect.

6 Simon Jackman, Gordon Flake et al., "The Asian Research Network: Survey on America's role in the Indo-Pacific," (Sydney and Perth: United States Study Centre at the University of Sydney and Perth US-Asia Centre at the University of Western Australia, May 2017), http://perthusasia.edu.au/getattachment/Our-Work/America-s-Role-in-the-Indo-Pacific/PU-20-ARIP-BOOK-WEB-(1).pdf.aspx?lang=en-AU.

7 The only other examples today of formal single-party states are Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, Cuba, and Eritrea.

8 Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), xiv-xv.

9 John Hutchinson, *Nationalism and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Kenan Malik, "The Failure of Multiculturalism," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015.

10 Gary P. Freeman, Randall Hansen, and David L. Leal, eds., *Immigration and Public Opinion in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

11 Ellen Barry and Hari Kumar, "Baby's Killing Tests India's Protection of Aboriginal Culture," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/asia/india-jarawas-child-murder.html.

12 Madhav Khosla, *The Indian Constitution* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

13 Gideon Rachman, "Donald Trump Leads a Global Revival of Nationalism," *Financial Times*, June 25, 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/59a37a38-7857-11e8-8e67-1e1a0846c475.

14 "Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend," *Pew Research Center*, April 11, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-in-2015-reversing-downward-trend/.

15 Paul Staniland, "Threat Perception among Hindu and Buddhist Nationalists," *paulstaniland.com*, April 10, 2018, https://paulstaniland.com/2018/04/10/threat-perception-among-hindu-and-buddhist-nationalists/.

16 Some of these observations are paralleled in Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*.

17 Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 13 (2018): 1667-1693, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0010414018789490.

18 Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

19 Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html; Chan Xin Ying, "China-Malaysia Relations: The Three Dilemmas of Malaysian Chinese," (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, August 21, 2017), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co17152-china-malaysia-relations-the-three-dilemmas-of-malaysian-chinese/; John Garnaut, "Australia's China Reset," *The Monthly*, August 2018, https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/john-garnaut/australia-s-china-reset.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dhruva Jaishankar is a fellow in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings India in New Delhi.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to several colleagues—including Torrey Tausig, Constantino Xavier, and Anthony Yazaki—and especially to an anonymous reviewer, for their immensely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this policy brief.