

DEMOCRACY FACES PERFECT STORM AS THE WORLD BECOMES MORE AUTHORITARIAN

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Many democratic governments are increasingly adopting authoritarian tactics, accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, while autocratic regimes are consolidating their power.

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STOCKHOLM/CANBERRA — The world is becoming more authoritarian as autocratic regimes become even more brazen in their repression. Many democratic governments are backsliding and are adopting authoritarian tactics by restricting free speech and weakening the rule of law, a trend exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are the key findings of the “The Global State of Democracy Report 2021 - Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era”, published on 22 November 2021 by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), an intergovernmental organization based in Stockholm. The global Report will be presented on 22 November 2021, 15:00-17:00 CET during a live-streamed global launch event, including a keynote message from Jutta Urpilainen, the European Commissioner for International Partnerships.

The report comes at a timely moment—ahead of US President Joe Biden’s Summit for Democracy on 9-10 December, when around 100 countries will gather to discuss the challenges facing democracy. The number of backsliding democracies has doubled in the past decade, now accounting for a quarter of the world’s population. This includes established democracies such as the United States, but also EU Member States such as Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. More than two-thirds of the world’s population now live in backsliding democracies or autocratic regimes.

Overall, the number of countries moving in an authoritarian direction in 2020 outnumbered those going in a democratic direction. The world has lost at least four democracies in the last two years, either through flawed elections or military coups. The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indices show that authoritarian regimes have increased their repression, with 2020 being the worst year on record.

The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the trend of democratic deterioration—As of August 2021, 64 percent of countries have taken an action deemed to be disproportionate, unnecessary or illegal to curb the pandemic.

But democratic erosion is not a one-way street. Many democracies have proved resilient, including during the Covid-19 pandemic, by introducing or expanding democratic innovations and adapting their practices and institutions in record time.

“The political flaws and social fault lines revealed by the pandemic will drive more people towards populist and authoritarian leaders that seldom deliver durable solutions for the concerns of citizens”, said International IDEA Secretary-General Kevin Casas-Zamora. “If there is one key message in this Report, it is that this is the time for democracies to be bold, to innovate and revitalize themselves.”

The Report finds that many countries held credible elections in exceedingly difficult conditions created by the pandemic, often by expanding the modalities to exercise suffrage. Nonetheless, International IDEA warns against the grave and looming threat of disinformation and baseless accusations of electoral fraud, as seen in Myanmar, Peru and the United States.

One of the key findings of this research is the remarkable strength of civic activism all over the world. Pro-democracy movements have braved repression in places such as Belarus, Cuba, Eswatini, Myanmar, and Sudan, and global social movements for tackling climate change and fighting racial injustice have thrived.

More than 80 countries have experienced protests and civic action of different kinds during the pandemic despite often harsh government restrictions.

To conclude, the Report recommends a series of policy actions to bolster global democratic renewal by embracing more equitable and sustainable social contracts, reforming existing political institutions, and shoring up defenses against democratic backsliding and authoritarianism.

The Global State of Democracy Report 2021 includes regional reports on Africa and the Middle East; the Americas; Asia and the Pacific and Europe.

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The continent has suffered a wave of growing authoritarianism as crises of various kinds have affected Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Myanmar. Democratic erosion is also widespread, including in India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka with many of them suffering from rising ethnonationalism and the militarization of politics. China’s influence, coupled with its own deepening autocratization, also puts the legitimacy of the democratic model at risk.

“Asia's democratic divide has deepened, with the most dramatic reversals in Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. Despite these challenges, many countries of the region managed the pandemic while also respecting basic democratic principles and freedoms, even coming up with institutional and electoral innovations,” said Leena Rikkila Tamang, Asia and Pacific director for International IDEA. “This report highlights the need to future-proof democratic institutions, while staying nimble and responsive in the face of future, unknown disruptions. The stakes are great. The region faces a year of major elections in 2022 when democracy needs to deliver.”

AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Recent declines in democracy in Africa have undermined remarkable progress made across the continent over the past three decades. The Covid-19 pandemic, though seemingly less damaging to public health than elsewhere in the world, has added pressure on governments to respond to concerns

regarding governance, rights and social inequality.

While regular elections remain the norm, the democratic quality of these elections is on the decline and attempts to evade or remove presidential term limits present a risk to democracy. Moreover, the year has seen four successful military coups in Chad, Guinea-Conakry, Mali and Sudan.

The Middle East's tainted track record on protecting civil liberties was even further strained by the pandemic, with many elections held with the sole aim of keeping existing regimes in power, such as in

Algeria, Egypt and Syria.

THE AMERICAS

Half the democracies in the region have suffered democratic erosion, including notable declines in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and the United States.

Still, most democracies have been resilient to the disruptive effects of the pandemic, with most elections going ahead and parliaments, judiciaries and media managing to exercise their functions of oversight. The Dominican Republic and Ecuador are notable for the considerable progress made in the quality of their democracies.

EUROPE

The pandemic has placed a strain on democracy. In some countries where democratic principles were already under threat, it provided an excuse for governments to weaken democracy further.

Ongoing democratic backsliding intensified in EU Member States Hungary and Poland, while Slovenia joined them as the region's third backsliding democracy in 2020. Europe's non-democratic governments — Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia and Turkey have intensified their already very repressive practices.

EVENTS

International IDEA will host a series of global and regional events in November and December 2021 about the Global State of Democracy Reports. Join the Global Launch beginning 22 November 2021, 15:00-17:00 CET. Browse our events page for more details about all event agendas and our notable speakers: <https://www.idea.int/gsod-events>. Register to join events online or plan to watch live.

More information about the intergovernmental organization International IDEA can be viewed on the International IDEA at a Glance fact sheet: https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/about_us/IDEA_at_a_glance_2021.pdf