DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

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About the Author

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Abstract

This report summarizes the key discussions and outcomes of the 2025 annual meeting of the Toda Peace Institute's Global Challenges to Democracy Working Group, held in Geneva on 5–6 June in collaboration with the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), Geneva Graduate Institute. The meeting centred on three main themes: the democratic threats posed by Trump's second presidency, strategies for strengthening democratic resilience, and the Toda Peace Institute's contributions to this effort —particularly through the Democracy Lighthouse platform. The report captures the group's shared concerns over democratic backsliding and outlines ongoing initiatives, including a systems map of democratic erosion, research on democratic resilience, and case studies on India and the MENA region.

Introduction

On 5–6 June 2025, the Toda Peace Institute's Global Challenges to Democracy Working Group held its third annual meeting in Geneva, in partnership with the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

This year's meeting focused on three core themes:
1. The threat Trump's second presidency poses to democracy;
2. Strategies for strengthening democratic resilience;
3. Toda Peace Institute's role in defending democracy.

Launched in 2021 in response to the global democratic backslide, the Working Group brings together leading scholars and practitioners from around the globe, committed to confronting the rise of authoritarianism. Its members share a deep concern: democratic institutions, values, and the rule of law are being deliberately eroded. Electoral processes are increasingly manipulated to entrench autocratic power, while fear-driven politics foster division, exclusion, and xenophobia.

In this context, the Working Group has sought to identify where and how Toda can make a difference. Its initiatives include a systems mapping project to trace the drivers of democratic decline and identify points of intervention; a study group on India's democratic crisis; the Democracy Lighthouse, a growing resource hub for actors defending democracy worldwide; and a research cluster on strategies for building democratic resilience. The group has also hosted public dialogues with global democracy defenders and produced a range of reports and policy briefs.

This report presents key insights and debates from the 2025 meeting and highlights how the Working Group shapes informed responses to the global democratic crisis.

At the frontlines of democratic erosion:
Shared reflections

Before turning to the discussion of working papers, the group took a moment to reflect on their most pressing concerns in today's political landscape. The diversity of perspectives among participants greatly enriched the conversation, offering a wide-ranging yet interconnected view of the challenges facing democracy around the world.

The discussion opened with a stark appraisal of the state of democracy in the Middle East, where it was described as deeply alarming. The war in Gaza has shattered faith in democratic ideals: many now view democratic states as complicit in a genocide, standing by while civilians starve and atrocities unfold. The repression of campus protests was seen as further evidence of democratic backsliding and the narrowing of spaces for dissent.

Elsewhere, participants drew attention to the widening gap between democracy and governance, particularly in parts of East Asia. In some cases, political succession is increasingly controlled by entrenched family dynasties. Can such systems truly be called democratic? Are these dynasties serving as functional substitutes for political parties – or merely performing democracy while hollowing it out from within? And if it is all a performance, how long can it remain convincing?

In Latin America, the concerns resonated in similar tones. Participants noted the rise of violence and the growing willingness of citizens to trade civil liberties for the promise of order. This opens dangerous pathways to authoritarianism. The return of the military and religion to political centre stage was cited as another sign of a region drifting away from democratic norms.

Turning to the United States, one participant reflected: "This didn't come out of nowhere. American society created Trump." The idea that the American empire is in decline was framed as both a reckoning and, potentially, a relief. "We've done a lot of harm in the name of democracy," they said. "But what worries me now is the kind of influence we're projecting. Trump's transactional politics have stripped away any sense of shared humanitarian ideals. Lawless cruelty is becoming state policy—and people are becoming numb to it." Still, they held onto a sense of hope: when systems fall apart, new possibilities can emerge. "It feels like tectonic plates are shifting. There's no solid ground beneath our feet, but that doesn't mean we can't find direction."

Another voice summed it up succinctly: "Trump is systematically killing kindness." Others expressed a broader disillusionment with the performance of democracy itself: it has not delivered for many, and that sense of failure is fuelling despair.

"What troubles me most," added another participant, "is the normalization of the abnormal. That's what we're seeing in the US." No one around the table romanticized the so-called rules-based international order; its flaws were well known. But at least it once aspired to ideals like liberty, justice, and empathy. "Now, even that aspirational plane is being dismantled." The shift in the US was seen as mirroring developments in South Asia under Modi's rule. India once served as an inspiration in a region with few democratic models, but no longer, and what is happening is not isolated. The unraveling of democratic ideals is a global trend, with setbacks in one country encouraging reactionary forces elsewhere. "This isn't classical fascism," one speaker noted. "It's fascism with a friendly face." Others pointed to the increasing militarization of political discourse and the blurring of civil and military spheres.

Underlying all these concerns was a common thread: the role of exclusion in fuelling conflict. "The number one cause of conflict is exclusion," said one speaker. "That's why inclusive systems are essential." Yet the emotional toll is heavy. Many participants acknowledged feeling overwhelmed by fear, sadness, and pessimism. These feelings are understandable, but also paralyzing. As core values are eroded and institutions are replaced by systems that fuel division and conflict, a deep sense of hopelessness can set in. This second presidency of Donald Trump is upending American democracy even more than the first one, but it is also having ripple effects on democratic resilience in the US and around the world. The Working Group's research cluster, which was formed in December 2024, presented working papers on the impacts of Trump 2.0 on their countries or regions of focus as well as examples of democratic resilience.

The United States in democratic decline: Trump's role and beyond

A first group of Working Papers focused on Trump's threat to US democracy, situating it within the broader context of global democratic backsliding. Speakers identified a feedback loop in which domestic decline both mirrors and reinforces international trends: rising polarization, weakened centrist actors, and the rise of populist, anti-democratic leadership.

One speaker emphasized the erosion of US democratic institutions, describing a dynamic shaped by three key forces: intensifying polarization, Trump's election, and the Republican Party's alignment with efforts to weaken institutional checks and balances. Democratic backsliding is often subtle, masked by the formal continuity of democratic norms. Yet the speaker underlined that Trump's current behaviour exacerbates the violations from his first term: "Trump 2.0 begins where he left off." While the trend is deeply concerning, some constraints remain. The judiciary continues to provide limited resistance; internal divisions are emerging within Trump's coalition; and economic fallout may erode public support. These factors, however fragile, offer space for renewed Democratic and civil society mobilization. Removing Trump alone would not resolve the systemic problems, but it could open a window for rebuilding a more resilient democratic order.

> *While plutocratic features have long marked US politics, Trump's style of governance signals a further shift toward emotional, personalized rule, where fear, loyalty, and spectacle displace institutional logic and bureaucratic accountability.*

A second presentation introduced the concept of "sultanization," drawing from Max Weber's theory of sultanism—a form of personal, non-rational, patrimonial rule marked by loyalty over merit, discretionary power, and blurred lines between state and private interests. The speaker placed this within ongoing debates about whether the US should be understood today as a flawed democracy, a plutocracy, or a form of competitive authoritarianism. While plutocratic features have long marked US politics, Trump's style of governance signals a further shift toward emotional, personalized rule, where fear, loyalty, and spectacle displace institutional logic and bureaucratic accountability. Emotions, though understudied, are crucial to this phenomenon. This challenges traditional assumptions about the durability of democratic checks and balances and raises deeper concerns about electoral legitimacy. Elections are insufficient to safeguard democratic norms.

A third paper challenged the dominant view that Trump and the MAGA movement aim to reassert American global dominance. Instead, it argued that they reflect the decline of the American empire. Indicators of this decline include the loss of post-1945 legitimacy, the weakening of the dollar-based financial order, prolonged military entanglements without strategic victories, and the rise of competing global powers such as China. Historically, rising empires expand and often act with relative openness, while declining empires grow increasingly anxious, repressive, and self-referential, as seen in Britain's decolonization period. Trumpism, through this lens, is not a project of resurgence but a symptom of imperial decay—one that undermines both global stability and domestic democratic governance. The US, once proclaimed as the guardian of global democracy, now struggles to maintain its own democratic credibility.

The impact of Trump's second presidency on other parts of the world

The next set of Working Papers focused on the impact of Trump's second term on other parts of the World in particular: Latin America; Aotearoa-New Zealand; India; the Philippines; and the Middle East. Internationally, Trump's approach is characterized by an overhaul of trade and monetary systems, a transactional and business-centred foreign policy, retreat from global leadership, alliances with autocratic regimes, and active environmental deregulation.

Regarding US–Latin America relations, the speaker emphasized the longstanding perception in Latin America that the region "has never mattered" significantly to the US, a dynamic unchanged by Trump. The relationship remains focused on negative issues like immigration and drug trafficking, with South America increasingly sidelined and no coherent US vision for economic integration or nearshoring. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed this absence of US engagement, deepening Latin America's economic crisis without meaningful support or policy guidance. Economically, China emerges as a major influence, increasingly supplanting the US as a trading partner and investor, especially in green industries such as renewable energy and semiconductors in countries like Brazil. This shift is accompanied by a cultural and political reorientation within the region, with growing polarization domestically and regionally, attacks on democratic norms and institutions, and a complex discourse around democracy, oscillating between respect for institutions and executive freedom to pursue popular agendas. "With Trump, Latin America will be closer to China – where will the push for democracy come from?"

The erosion of rule of law, attacks on judicial independence, and dismantling of multilateral institutions shocked New Zealanders and destabilized long-held assumptions about the reliability of allied democracies.

Trump's presidency profoundly unsettled New Zealand, as it observed the undermining of core values of democratic governance, international cooperation, and egalitarian politics that define New Zealand's identity. The erosion of rule of law, attacks on judicial independence, and dismantling of multilateral institutions shocked New Zealanders and destabilized long-held assumptions about the reliability of allied democracies. Trump's tariffs hurt New Zealand's export-driven economy and triggered market instability. His rollback of foreign aid undercut vital international development programs and led to similar cuts by other donor countries. Domestically, his climate denialism and harsh immigration policies encouraged right-wing agendas and weakened environmental and legal standards. Beyond policy, Trump's global media dominance has had a corrosive effect on political discourse in New Zealand, spreading what some see as a moral and rhetorical contagion even 12,000 kilometres away.

"To understand how Trump affected India, we need to ask ourselves: what changed with his presidency? Did India's democratic decline shift in any way, or did it continue along the same path? And how did the new American president approach India?" The speaker highlighted the consistent bipartisan US foreign policy approach toward India, which prioritizes strategic interests, particularly countering China, over concerns about India's democratic decline. Despite significant democratic backsliding under Modi, especially during the Biden administration, US officials have refrained from public criticism. Since the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union and India's liberalization, US–India relations have steadily warmed, culminating in strategic cooperation and military alignments without a formal treaty. The speaker criticizes the uncritical acceptance of Modi as part of a broader US pattern of engaging strongmen in democracies while ignoring rights violations. Trump's second term could push India closer to China, reducing Modi's incentive to uphold democratic norms by offering an alternative alliance unconcerned with democratic backsliding.

Trump second presidency could also significantly shape the Philippines' alliances, politics, and economy. During his first term, the US expanded military access to the country, viewing it as a strategic outpost in efforts to counter China and defend Taiwan, an approach now likely to intensify. At the same time, Trump-era immigration policies, including threats to blacklist the Philippines, strained ties with the large Filipino diaspora and risked fuelling anti-Western, pro-China sentiment among the country's elites. Although China's growing influence remains limited by broken infrastructure promises and challenges navigating the Philippines' fragmented and often corrupt bureaucracy, a lack of meaningful Western economic engagement could prompt elites to turn further toward Beijing. On the domestic front, these geopolitical dynamics unfold alongside entrenched dynastic politics and authoritarian legacies. President Marcos Jr. is under pressure to rhetorically distance himself from Duterte's violent drug war, even as both families continue to dominate through regional power bases and tightly knit elite networks.

The final speaker addressing Trump's impact focused on the Middle East. Trump's presidency marked a clear shift toward transactional alliances, sidelining democratic values in favour of strengthening ties with authoritarian Gulf monarchies. His recent visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, deliberately bypassing more populous states like Egypt, symbolized this strategic realignment. Some leaders were rebranded as visionary partners despite serious human rights abuses. Trump's approach, characterized by bilateralism, short-term gains, and zero-sum logic, legitimized these Gulf rulers in exchange for economic and strategic cooperation. This policy represented a form of reverse democracy promotion, reinforcing authoritarian regimes and shielding them from international pressure.

Democratic resilience in global contexts: By institutions and grassroot efforts

The next presentations examined how democratic resilience manifests across different political contexts both through the endurance of institutional frameworks and through grassroots efforts that resist authoritarian drift. While resilience is often tested by powerful populist actors and systemic crises, it can also be actively cultivated—whether from the top down through courts and elections or from the bottom up through social movements and everyday practices of solidarity.

In the Brazilian case, the speaker traced democratic backsliding to the post-2014 crisis, showing how Bolsonaro capitalized on public distrust and mobilized a base of evangelicals, neoliberals, and law-and-order voters. Once in office, Bolsonaro weakened oversight institutions, politicized appointments, and empowered violent actors such as militias. Yet despite the attempted coup following his 2022 defeat, Brazil's democracy held, thanks in large part to the assertiveness of the Supreme Court and figures like Justice Moraes. Still, resilience is precarious. Lula's return to power has been shaped by structural constraints: a fragmented Congress, a powerful judiciary, and limited executive reach. Elected on a platform of 'Union and Reconstruction', Lula has had to compromise with conservative forces, notably in agribusiness, and has even maintained continuity with some of Bolsonaro's extractive policies, including drilling in the Amazon. The case reveals that institutional survival does not necessarily signal a return to democratic deepening; it may instead usher in a constrained, negotiated form of governance.

The US case focused on a similar tension between institutional durability and democratic erosion. Despite severe damage under Trump, including to the federal bureaucracy, trust in media, and international alliances, resilience has stemmed from structural buffers like judicial independence, federalism, and term limits. Yet the risks remain high, and the speaker raised two critical questions: Will US democracy endure, and what shape might it take afterward? A moderate path may stabilize institutions but leave polarization unresolved; a more ambitious reform agenda could alienate key constituencies. In either scenario, the proceduralist assumption that democracies self-correct was challenged.

As one speaker noted, once democratic norms and institutions are broken, there is no simple reversion to a prior equilibrium; what's lost may not be easily recovered.

> *"[...] This is the idea of path dependence: once it's broken, things don't simply revert to the mean. This challenges the proceduralist idea of just "letting them get into power." Once certain norms or institutions are dismantled, you can't just swing the pendulum back to where it was. Some things get destroyed." Another speaker adds: "You don't go back to the status quo. The damage done – to institutions, norms, and expectations – creates a new reality."*

The debate that followed this discussion focused on how best to restore democracy and rebuild public trust. One participant noted that the situation is dire, not only because governments or bureaucracies struggle to deliver, but also due to decades of hyper-globalization and large-scale tax evasion by multinational corporations. These forces have hollowed out public finances, leaving governments unable to fund the kinds of programs that genuinely improve lives and cultivate loyalty to democratic institutions. "This is a long-term structural problem – a 40-year project, not a one-election fix." Moreover, even when governments do deliver, this is not always recognized, as another participant emphasized: "During COVID, the government did deliver – massive stimulus, infrastructure projects, public services. The issue is that a false narrative took hold, telling people they were being screwed, often by the very institutions helping them. This disjuncture between what the government does and what people believe is fuelled by deeper grievances [...]. That's why attacks on DEI or immigrants resonate. The idea that government fails is a myth, one perpetuated by misinformation and by the absence of effective counter-narratives from the democratic opposition. We need to get better at communicating – at playing the game – because right now, we're losing it."

The presentation on grassroots peacebuilding in India emphasized that democratic resilience is not solely institutional; it is also deeply social. The case centred on an initiative in Kankinara, West Bengal, where a local NGO responded to sectarian riots with a gender-centred model of community rebuilding. By creating safe spaces where women from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds engage in vocational training, cultural dialogue, and everyday interaction, the initiative fosters interfaith trust and shared civic identity. These localized efforts disrupt polarizing narratives by nurturing solidarity from below. The case illustrates how democratic resilience can be cultivated through daily practices of coexistence, highlighting the often-overlooked role of women and community leadership in sustaining democratic life in contexts of violence and division.

The discussion then turned to the Philippines, where democratic erosion under Duterte, marked by authoritarian tactics and weakened institutions, sparked fears that democracy was irreversibly damaged. However, the 2022 elections and popular sentiment complicate this narrative. While elite institutions have struggled to counter authoritarian drift, public perceptions suggest a different story: many Filipinos continue to view democracy as the best system, express high trust in elected offices and NGOs, and report material improvements in their lives. Crucially, trust is stronger in institutions seen as accessible and responsive, rather than hierarchical ones like the military or courts. These findings point to an often-overlooked axis of resilience: public confidence in democratic institutions can persist even when formal indicators decline, offering strategic openings for renewal from within. Understanding which institutions enjoy greater popular trust offers strategic insight into where to focus efforts to nurture and strengthen democratic resilience going forward.

Finally, a regional overview of the Middle East and North Africa offered a sobering yet hopeful perspective. The speaker underscored how state-led repression, intensified by surveillance technologies and neoliberal securitization, has stifled democratic movements. Yet resistance persists in diffuse and decentralized forms: among football ultras, student groups, trade unionists, artists, and imprisoned activists across Tunisia, Egypt, and Palestine. These actors contest official historical narratives and keep alternative imaginaries of democracy alive. While authoritarian regimes maintain surface stability, the Arab Spring's unfinished legacy shows that democratic aspirations still exist. The lesson here is that resilience is not always visible in formal politics: it often resides in cultural resistance, memory, and everyday acts of defiance.

Together, these cases reveal that democratic resilience is not a static condition but a dynamic process—one shaped by institutional configurations, historical legacies, and the power of grassroots agency. Whether expressed through courts, elections, community organizing, or cultural resistance, resilience is contingent and uneven, but always possible.

Re-imagining democracy for the 21st century

Democratic resilience is not only a matter of institutions or grassroots mobilization, it also requires confronting philosophical questions: What exactly is democracy defending, and how far can it go in doing so without betraying itself? This section explores the tensions between defending democratic values and preserving democratic procedures, drawing on historical insights and contemporary debates.

One speaker revisited the concept of 'militant democracy', focusing on current efforts in Germany to consider banning the far-right AfD, a party now polling at 20 per cent. This debate echoes postwar reflections by Karl Löwenstein, who argued that democracies might need to deploy undemocratic means, such as legal bans or party prohibitions, to guard against their own destruction. In contrast, legal theorist Hans Kelsen warned that such measures risk undermining the procedural foundations of democracy, especially when they target actors with substantial popular support. The speaker emphasized that this dilemma is not new: tools once used against the far left are now considered in response to the far right. But the deeper issue remains constant: how to balance democratic inclusion with democratic protection.

These questions sparked a lively debate. Should courts be empowered to disqualify anti-democratic candidates? Does banning extremist parties prevent democratic erosion? Some participants warned that prohibition might backfire, advocating instead for political marginalization through democratic discourse. Others pointed to Latin America's post-dictatorship transitions to argue that democratic resilience ultimately depends less on law than on political culture and civic norms. As one participant put it, "courts cannot tell the demos who they should vote for," distilling the central tension between majority rule and democratic survival.

> *Reimagining democracy in the 21st century is thus both a normative and political challenge. It means grappling with democracy's paradoxes, learning from its past reinventions, and insisting that its legitimacy depends not just on rules, but on its ability to deliver and inspire.*

To deepen the conversation, another speaker offered historical reflections on how democracy has been imagined and reimagined over time. They identified three major transformations. The first occurred in ancient Greece, where male citizens gathered in assemblies to deliberate and decide, marking a radical shift from divine authority to human self-government. The second emerged in the late 18th century with the rise of representative democracy, grounded in elections and political pluralism, and designed to operate on a much larger scale. The third took shape after 1945, as the horrors of fascism forced a reckoning with democracy's vulnerabilities. Intellectuals across the globe began rethinking democracy not as a simple matter of voting, but as a broader system of accountability. This is the idea beneath "monitory democracy." In this vision, democracy expands beyond the ballot box and the state, taking root in courts, human rights organizations, anti-corruption bodies, participatory budgeting processes, and even ecological representation. These mechanisms help prevent abuses of power and address structural issues like inequality, gender-based violence, and environmental destruction. What holds democratic projects together, they argued, is not merely institutional architecture but a shared ethical and imaginative commitment to justice, dignity, and accountability.

Reimagining democracy in the 21st century is thus both a normative and political challenge. It means grappling with democracy's paradoxes, learning from its past reinventions, and insisting that its legitimacy depends not just on rules, but on its ability to deliver and inspire. Participants also highlighted the political economy behind these transformations. Although it wasn't a major focus of the discussions, the economic roots of these crises are critical in every case. One participant also stressed the need to rethink our understanding of violence. In the digital age, violence should not be the only threshold for banning someone. Disinformation, harassment, and manipulation all have serious consequences and matter.

From insight to action:
Tools for strengthening democracy

Building on the theoretical and historical reflections earlier in the meeting, the final section focused on practical efforts to counter democratic backsliding. Participants shared emerging tools and strategies designed not only to understand the dynamics of democratic erosion but also to pinpoint where targeted interventions might foster resilience.

One of the most promising initiatives presented was the development of an interactive systems map of democratic erosion, created in partnership between the Toda Peace Institute and the Lowy Institute. This map represents both a conceptual breakthrough and a practical resource: a tool that visualizes the complexity of democratic decline and identifies strategic points for action.

The map is based on the understanding that democratic erosion does not stem from a single event or actor, but from a web of interrelated factors such as rising polarization, executive overreach, economic inequality, weakened institutions, and disinformation. These factors reinforce each other through feedback loops. For example, one loop illustrates how anti-democratic actors gain power and then undermine institutional checks, leading to repression and growing public distrust. Another loop shows how media manipulation deepens societal divisions and erodes faith in democratic processes. Users can interactively explore these dynamics, clicking on elements like "ineffective governance" or "polarization" to examine their causes and consequences. The map also identifies various actors, including political parties, civil society groups, and individual citizens, and their potential roles as either drivers of erosion or agents of democratic resilience. By visualizing these complex interdependencies, the map serves both as an educational resource for non-experts and as a strategic planning tool for policymakers and practitioners aiming to disrupt negative cycles and strengthen democratic recovery. A speaker noted that such mapping has been used in the peacebuilding field for over twenty years, and has proven effective in enhancing the impact of these programs.

The meeting also included a presentation on recent updates to the Democracy Lighthouse web platform, which currently features over 300 democracy institutes from around the world. The platform is set to expand its capabilities by supporting a variety of content formats and evolving into a dynamic forum for exchange among those dedicated to defending democracy amid the global rise of authoritarianism. The vision for the platform is to create a vibrant, interactive space serving researchers, activists, students, and practitioners alike. This means enabling two-way engagement: not only allowing users to publish content but also to reference and share valuable resources. The presentation concluded with a call for increased contributions from the global democracy community to enrich this shared space.

The discussion then shifted to updates on two key research streams focused on India and the Middle East. A recent conversation between Americans in the Working Group and Indian colleagues was inspiring, as the Indian activists shared insights on how to maintain engagement despite ongoing challenges. Their emphasis remains on staying prepared for change and keeping the idea of democracy alive.

One participant reflected, "The idea of democracy being alive connects back to our earlier conversation about the spirit of democracy and what it truly means. For these colleagues, it means that they have lived democracy, built democracy, and now want to keep that idea alive. One way they do this is by bearing witness – through writing, speaking, and other forms of expression. Another key strategy is resisting whenever and however possible. And the third is keeping hope alive. Although it may sound trite, it really centres on engaging with young people and ensuring the idea of democracy remains present in as many lives as possible. This also reminds me of a point raised yesterday about connecting these 'islands' of resistance and hope across national boundaries. That's what I hope the Lighthouse is facilitating. The networks we are building with India and the Middle East are incredibly important – they sustain each other both intellectually and personally. Because this is not a sprint; it's a marathon."

Looking ahead, plans for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) group include a series of policy briefs under the tentative title, "The Arab Spring Rollback: Varieties of Arab De-democratization."

Conclusion

"I was particularly struck – and I didn't realize this before – that democracies can never really go back. This leads me to question: what do we really mean by resilience? In other social sciences, like geography, resilience means accepting that, for example, in the Philippines they get hit by 20 typhoons every year. You can't eliminate all typhoons, so resilience means learning to live with them. Applying this to democracy, it means that democratic backsliding, threats, and deliberate assaults on institutions and norms might become the norm. The question becomes: how do we live with that? How do we go on? How do we avoid being totally damaged or becoming victims? In disaster studies, resilience is about how people get less traumatized, evacuate quickly, and prepare effectively. Similarly, democratic resilience should start with identifying flags, instigators, early markers – signifiers or alarms – so democratic actors can prepare. If we're truly resilient, democracy can survive or even thrive despite these looming threats that likely won't disappear anytime soon."

Reflecting on the rich discussions throughout the meeting, from participants' diverse concerns about the current political climate, through analyses of democratic decline in the United States and its global repercussions, to explorations of democratic resilience and innovative tools for strengthening democracy, it becomes clear that we are confronting unprecedented challenges. Yet, these challenges invite us to rethink what democracy means in the 21st century and how it can endure. This perspective calls for a shift from a defensive mindset toward one of adaptive endurance; recognizing that democratic erosion may be ongoing but not inevitable or irreversible. It emphasizes the need for constant vigilance, strategic preparedness, and proactive interventions, supported by both robust institutions and grassroots movements.

Looking forward, the group remains deeply committed to sustaining collaboration through regular dialogue, joint research, and policy engagement. The development of innovative tools, such as the interactive systems map of democratic erosion and the expanding Democracy Lighthouse platform, embodies this commitment to translating insight into action. While the broader context remains marked by uncertainty and challenges —from threats to academia and judicial independence to widespread disinformation—the participants underscored the vital importance of solidarity, resilience, and hope.

Ultimately, the meeting closed on a hopeful and determined note: democratic resilience is not merely about survival but about continuously reimagining and strengthening democracy in ways that reflect its evolving realities. By fostering shared understanding, building networks across borders, and supporting diverse actors in this effort, the community represented here affirms its resolve to defend democracy's promise for generations to come.

"We're really looking for connections across regions, because that's what democracy truly is. It doesn't come from a single mind, nor does it belong to one region. What we want to do is reconnect this struggle within existing struggles – the legacies of freedom and liberation. That's really the idea."

THE TODA PEACE INSTITUTE

The Toda Peace Institute is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

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