



DEFENDING DEMOCRACY IN THE FACE OF 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

On the 18–20 June 2026, the Toda Peace Institute’s Global Challenges to Democracy Working Group held its annual meeting at Charney Manor, in Oxfordshire. Formed in 2024, the working group is comprised of democracy researchers, activists, and peacebuilders from around the world. This year’s conference titled “Defending Democracy in the Face of 21st Century Challenges,” focused primarily on democratic resilience.

Prior to the conference, working group members drafted papers that examined a range of topics including conceptual explorations of democratic resilience and the broader global context. They also reflected on specific obstacles and opportunities in the United States, New Zealand, Brazil, Poland, Hungary, the Philippines, the MENA region, and Gen Z democracy movements in Southeast Asia. These papers, still in draft form, served as the foundation for the discussions throughout the conference. The aim was to deepen our shared understanding of democratic resilience and the questions it raises.

This report summarizes the key discussions and outcomes of the meeting.

Day One: Opening reflections

The conference commenced with the group reflecting on their current concerns for the state of democracy around the world. These reflections offered an interesting perspective about the wide ranging, but interconnected, threats facing democracy globally.

The discussion opened with John Keane from the University of Sydney, reflecting on “the complementarity of differences” that he experienced recently at two conferences on democracy, one in Australia and the other in China. In Australia, there was a discussion about decolonisation—the decolonisation from the British in 1901 and “the need for Australia, if it is to protect its democracy, to rethink the American alliance, a second act of colonisation.” At the conference in China, there was significant discussion about a different form of democracy, called “whole process democracy.” It was argued that “China has a democracy. It does not work like democracies in the West, but it has democratic elements.” Keane mentioned that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has established mechanisms for information gathering, consensus building, and consultation. “The CCP is heavily reliant on public opinion polling. They want to know what people think.” This, the conference in China argued, was beneficial as it “prevents the type of demagoguery seen in the United States.”

Turning to the United States, there was dismay at what was happening to America’s democracy. Robert Kaufman, from Rutgers University, noted that democracy in America was at an inflection point. He argued that “although the US–Israel–Iran war has pushed Trump on the back foot, the democratic system has been badly damaged.” Eileen Babbit, from Tufts University, shared her sadness that “a country that I once believed, perhaps naively, to stand for something, to now not stand for anything has been devastating.” Peter Woodrow, a consultant and former Director of CDA Collaborative, shared that “people in the United States believe that democracy is broken, it is not benefitting people.” The job for democrats he argued, “must be to make democracy deliver.” He cited the recent campaign of Zohran Mamdani as an example of some green shoots coming out of the United States.

Elsewhere, participants drew attention to the dismantling of the welfare state. In New Zealand, Kevin Clements, Honorary Director of the Toda Peace Institute, noted “there has been an unravelling of the social welfare contract. This has created a dysfunctional system.” Following World War Two, New Zealand boasted near full employment. There are now over 100,000 people unemployed in New Zealand. This, Clements argued “has resulted in people being alienated from party politics and has led to greater support for right-wing populist parties.” This was echoed by Debasish Roy Chowdhury, a journalist and author who stated that “the party system is crumbling, and the welfare state is not in a good space. This poses a threat to democracies around the world.”

The rise of the far right was a common thread in the opening reflection. Participants agreed that across the globe the far right is outperforming both leftist and centrist parties. Wolfgang Merkel, Director for Democracy and Democratisation at WZB, shared recent polling showing the far-right AFD to be the most popular party in Germany. Similarly, in Brazil, Flávio Bolsonaro, the son of former right-wing president and convicted felon Jair Bolsonaro, is a leading candidate in the upcoming presidential election. The reason for this, Daniela Campello, from Columbia University, argued was because “the far right is better at mapping problems and communicating.” In Latin America, “the decline of support for democracy is associated with economic decline. People don’t feel equal and they ask, ‘why should we fight for democracy?’”

In the Middle East, Larbi Sadiki, Fellow at Chiba University, argued against the “orientalist proposition that the Middle East and North Africa does not have democracy.” Instead, he proposed that “we should subvert this and say that the West does not want the region to have democracy.” “The state of upheaval has been normalised in the Middle East owing to the West’s re-colonisation of the region.”

***Two overarching questions emerged from these early discussions:
Why is autocracy winning and why should we fight for democracy?***

Stein Tønnesson, Director of the Toda Peace Institute, and Jordan Ryan, a member of Toda Peace Institute’s International Research Advisory Council, shifted the discussion to peacebuilding. Tønnesson cited democratic peace theory and posited that “if there are good democratic arrangements, it is unlikely that people will turn to violence and war is more likely to have backlash in a democracy.” He also offered his hope that in many countries, including Russia and China, there will be some form of re-democratisation.

Underlying these concerns was an agreement that democracy is in trouble. There was a recognition that we need to pursue a democracy that works, one that makes people feel as if the system is working for them. Two overarching questions emerged from these early discussions: Why is autocracy winning and why should we fight for democracy?

THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

The opening session of the conference concluded with the presentation of the group’s first working paper. The paper, by John Keane, titled *The Spirit of Democracy*, sought to clarify the term democracy. “Democracy,” Keane argued “is rarely defined.” The paper attempted to do four things. First, it sought to define democracy. Second, it examined the history of democracy. Third, it analysed why democracy is a good thing. And lastly it challenged the orthodoxy of liberal democracy which Keane claimed is “American-centric.”

The challenge to liberal democracy received significant attention in the ensuing discussion. Wolfgang Merkel disagreed with the claim that “liberal democracy is an oxymoron” and Robert Kaufman argued that “liberal democracy has significant meaning.” Both participants believed that while fruitful, the paper would benefit from a discussion on the messiness of democracy. Kaufman also suggested that although democracy holds many principles including “accountability to majority, individual rights, and dual process” that “these principles are often in conflict.” Daniela Campello then argued that “a different term should be used for South American democracy and Middle Eastern democracy.” This is because unlike in “liberal democracies” there is “no project of equality in these democracies.” In Latin American democracy “there is no party politics, only caudillismo.”

The conference then heard from Wolfgang Merkel on the topic *What is Democratic Resilience?* Merkel defined resilience as “the capacity of a democratic regime to absorb challenges and adapt to changing conditions without undergoing a regime change.” He argued that there are four arenas of democratic resilience: constitutional powers, party system, civil society, and political communities. It is through these arenas that democracies can achieve resilience. He also noted that, for most people, outcomes are more important than the legitimacy of the democratic system. This poses a problem for those in favour of democracy who must

focus on building bridges with various groups to ensure that populist/autocratic challengers are stifled. To ensure resilience, “democracies must support the poor, share the burden during crises, and depolarise conflicts.”

Merkel’s presentation led to a discussion about the merits of the term resilience. Several participants including John Keane and Daniela Campello were unconvinced by the term as they find it too “backward-looking.” Keane stated that “democracy is about what is to come,” and Campello claimed that “resilience implies that we want to analyse existing institutions that are damaged and seek a return.” This raised an important point that formed much of the later discussions: Do we want to return to a system that precipitated this decline or do we need to pursue new forms of democracy that can better meet 21st century challenges? Daniela Campello strongly argued that “what we need is invention, not just innovation.”

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

The next set of working papers focused on democratic resilience around the world. The first presentation, by Robert Kaufman, examined *Democratic Resilience in the United States During the Second Trump Presidency*. The paper provided an assessment of the threats facing democracy and the sources of resilience in the United States. Kaufman argued that the speed at which American democracy has been dismantled is unprecedented in modern history. Trump, he stated, “has centralised personal power and trampled on civil rights,” while ensuring that “universities and business elites conform with his policies.” Although there has been growing opposition to Trump recently, Kaufman argued that the “prospects for long-term recovery of US democracy are limited.” This is because “without a fundamental restructuring of the system, the US would remain vulnerable to a resurgence of destabilising popular protest.”

This presentation prompted lively discussion from the other conference participants. Daniela Campello argued that the paper overstated Trump’s unpopularity. “If the economy was better, he might be more popular.” A loss in the midterm elections, Campello stated, would “not be because of his disregard for democracy but because of the state of the economy.” Debasish Roy Chowdhury pondered whether “Trump is a symptom of a damaged state capacity or if he is the one damaging state capacity.” There was also some discussion about the role of oligarchs in the Trump administration and the power that they hold over decision making. John Keane concluded the discussion by presenting some possible future scenarios for the United States. These included a “slow-motion coup d’etat,” “a diminished form of democracy,” or even “the possibility of civil war.”

After a break, Kevin Clements then presented his paper on *How Democratic Culture is Quietly Eroding in New Zealand*. In New Zealand, the public’s trust in institutions is declining, media networks are fracturing, and parliamentary processes are being ‘short-circuited’. This has led to “a public that once engaged in political institutions beginning to feel that the system is rigged against ordinary people.” The trigger for this erosion, Clements argued, was the Covid-19 pandemic. Violent protests began to emerge and there was a mobilisation of racist groups. This coincided with a period of austerity which resulted in the Labour government being unable to fulfil its election promises. The paper argues that while New Zealand is not facing an existential threat to its democracy, these warning signs must be taken seriously. Clement’s presentation concluded with an important note that “the history of democratic erosion suggests that the most dangerous moment is not when the warnings are most visible, but when they are visible enough to be noticed but not quite urgent enough to demand action.” New Zealand is at this point.

The impacts of Covid and the renewed emphasis on defence were the main topics of this discussion. Peter Woodrow noted that similarly, in the US, the pandemic led to the “re-emergence of tension between individual and communal rights. It magnified the sense that people’s privileges and independence was being undermined.” In New Zealand, Clements stated, this feeling was heightened as “some could not believe that the government had such power to close everything down.” Debasish Roy Chowdhury then asked about New Zealand’s commitment to increasing its defence budget. Clements replied that “New Zealand, like its allies, has agreed to increase its defence budget to three percent, despite being in a period of austerity. This has magnified the idea that New Zealand’s welfare state, established to provide ‘womb-to-tomb security’, is now incapable of delivering essential services.” The discussion concluded with a question from John Keane about the “potential for a renewal and invention scenario that would work in New Zealand.” Clements answered that “a new vision is needed that addresses migration, the economy, and Māori relations. If this is not achieved, then there will be a progressive diminishment of enthusiasm for democracy.”

Following this, Daniela Campello gave her presentation on *Institutional Resilience and Democratic Distortion in Brazil*. Campello argued that despite Jair Bolsonaro being defeated in 2022, the current Brazilian government has continued some of his anti-democratic practices. Bolsonaro's strategy was to "defund, decapitate, and demoralise institutions." He removed the leaders of various institutions and replaced them with loyalists; Bolsonaro "tested all the limits of Brazil's institutions." Campello stated that the current president, Lula Da Silva, "learned from Bolsonaro the limits of Brazilian democracy." Recognising that "certain rules and processes can be ignored," Lula appointed his personal lawyer as a supreme court judge and has challenged congressional power. Campello noted that the Lula administration is "stacked with loyalists meaning that there are no figures who are willing to disagree with him." Despite Bolsonaro no longer being president, the tactics that he employed are now entrenched in the Brazilian political process. This poses a major threat to Brazil's democracy.

The discussion focused on Campello's argument that "it is difficult for a system that has undergone backsliding to recover from it." Robert Kaufman agreed that "once norms are broken opponents of this backsliding often continue to damage the system. They seek to level the playing field." Kaufman then asked whether "there is an alternative to continued institutional damage." Campello answered that "the fact that Bolsonaro was arrested meant something in Brazil. It had an impact on some voters. With backsliding we normalise things that are not normal and therefore to combat this we need to hold people to account." Eileen Babbitt then noted that "these authoritarian leaders are learning from each other. They are teaching each other tactics." She suggested that "democratic leaders around the world must begin to learn from each other. They must share tactics to ensure that the current authoritarian wave is quelled."

In the afternoon session, the conference shifted to other attempts to restore democracy. Wolfgang Merkel commenced with a presentation on *Post-Populist Re-Democratisation in Poland*. The presentation focused on one question: "Can post-populist democratic governments restore the rule of law and democracy while violating exactly those rules in order to accelerate the successful re-democratisation?" Merkel noted how in Poland there exist unique obstacles to re-democratisation. Between 2015 and 2023, the ruling PiS party undermined democratic institutions through "formally legal but illiberal measures." Despite losing its congressional majority in the previous election, PiS still holds the presidency and with it, veto power. This makes overturning these illiberal reforms difficult. Merkel stated that this raises important questions regarding re-democratisation such as: "Should re-democratisers stay legal? And does the moral objective (re-democratisation) justify immoral means (illegal instruments)?" Merkel concluded his presentation with strategies to legally re-democratised in Poland. These included but were not limited to "rebuilding the norms of civic society, reducing polarisation, and reducing state influence in civil society."

The conference was then fortunate to hear from Gábor Harangozó, a former member of Hungary's National Assembly for a presentation titled *Hungary after Orbán, and the Test for Democratic Recovery*. Harangozó stressed that "while regime change has occurred, the re-organisation of democratic pluralism has not." He also noted that although there were similarities between the backsliding in Hungary and Poland, there was a key difference. "Unlike Poland, the Hungarian system does not include a presidential veto, and with a two-third majority, parliament can overturn Orbán's illiberal policies." Harangozó offered three potential paths for Hungary's future: "a self-limiting, pluralist, socially sensitive recovery; a technocratic centre—with no democratic alternative behind it; or a re-organisation of the far-right." He argued that the real test "is not whether the illiberal state can be dismantled—but whether the space for democratic alternatives can be rebuilt." Hungary has an opportunity, Harangozó stated, but there is also danger. If "democratic, social, and progressive forces do not take control sooner or later, then someone else will."

The first day concluded with a presentation from Aries Arugay on the current state of democracy in the Philippines and the complex relationship between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte. The Philippines, one of Asia's oldest democracies, is "currently governed by the children of two famous political dynasties." Marcos Jr. succeeded Sara Duterte's father, Rodrigo, who "despite overseeing a systematic destruction of democracy was hugely popular by the conclusion of his presidency." In 2025, Rodrigo Duterte was arrested by Philippine authorities on an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. This, Arugay stated, was portrayed as "part of Marcos' attempt to espouse democratic norms;" however, to Sara Duterte it was seen as a politically motivated attack aimed at harming her 2028 presidential campaign. As it stands, Sara Duterte remains the leading candidate for the 2028 election.

The conference greatly benefitted from these presentations which gave participants a wide and in-depth insight into the state of democracy around the globe. It also identified a range of potential responses to democratic backsliding. While no single initiative can reverse these trends, knowledge-sharing activities such as this can deepen understanding of the challenges, encourage collaboration across contexts, and inform future research, policy, and practice.

Day Two: The role of political parties in defending democracy

The second day commenced with a presentation from Debasish Roy Chowdhury on the diminished role of political parties in Narendra Modi's India. Chowdhury argued that "private consultancies, not political parties, have become central to Indian democracy." Private consultancies have adopted the roles that political parties used to fulfil. They "build voter databases, advise leaders on polling, and help with election campaigns." This has contributed to elections in India becoming among the most expensive in the world. In the previous national election, 7.2 billion USD was spent. Chowdhury argued that "this has resulted in voters fleeing to the extremities because the major parties now resemble each other, primarily because of their reliance on private consultancies." He also noted that political parties in India are rife with money laundering. "The parties are not considered public organisations and therefore their accounts cannot be examined as public accounts." This has led to a further disenchantment with the major political parties as there "is a recognition that they facilitate considerable corruption."

In response to Chowdhury's presentation, Peter Woodrow asked about the possibility of a campaign, similar to that of Zohran Mamdani's in New York, being replicated in India. Mamdani "created a social movement based around actual political ideas and policies. He was able to excite young people to engage with politics." Chowdhury noted that in India the system is different. "Unlike in the US, Indian parties do not have internal elections." This means that "the choice of the candidate is solely up to the party elite." The discussion then turned to the relationship between inequality and democracy. In India "democracy has not been able to moderate and contain inequality in India." As such, Wolfgang Merkel asked, "How can the political parties programmatically justify their existence if they are not able to overcome such a big problem of democracy?" Chowdhury answered by saying that "in India we are so used to inequality that it is no longer a political issue. Inequality has always and will always be there. I don't foresee an example where a party can convincingly make the case that they can eradicate inequality." The discussion concluded with a question from John Keane who asked, "why is party membership at an all-time low?" Chowdhury answered that "unions are fading, people are not engaging with party politics. Labour is being contractualised. You are not actually participating in politics anymore. You are only participating as a spectator, through television and polling. You are a bystander." Chowdhury ended by stating that "we need to understand why politics has ceased to be vibrant."

The conference then heard from Wolfgang Merkel on 'party bans', a tactic that is being debated in Germany as a means to respond to extremist parties. Merkel commenced with a comparison of two thinkers: Karl Lowenstein who was in favour of party bans and Hans Kelsen who was strictly against them. Both positions, Merkel proposed, created a dilemma. "Lowenstein's objective was to save liberal democracy from extremism, even if this can only be achieved through illiberal means." The result is that some democratic damage is likely to occur but hopefully only minor. Kelsen's objective was to maintain liberal democracy through only democratic means. While this could lead to severe democratic damage, he thought it would be unlikely. Merkel summed up the dilemma as "to act or not to act will dirty the hands," and he argued that this dilemma cannot be solved without cost. "If Germany were to ban the right-wing AfD party then you are taking the votes away from 25 percent of the country." It is a complex dilemma for governments who "must compare democratic costs within the present period of illiberalism."

Merkel's paper prompted much discussion from the group who disagreed on the merits of party bans. Peter Woodrow stated that banning parties "lends them legitimacy and tells supporters that their extremism is justified." Stein Tønnesson agreed that "as long as it is possible to prevent a party from getting to power then they should not be banned." Tønnesson also noted that in Thailand, where party banning is practiced, parties often re-emerge under a different banner. However, other participants believed that party bans could be fruitful, but only under certain circumstances. Robert Kaufman argued that "bans make sense when there is some sort of criminal activity," although it was noted that this was more applicable to individuals. In Latin America, Daniela Campello stated that individuals, like Bolsonaro and Javier Milei, who "deny and rephrase the past" should be banned. Campello argued that "you shouldn't be allowed to deny the past and to promise military dictatorship again." John Keane then stated that this paper addresses "a broader problem in

democracies of banning things.” He then referenced the ban against Palestine Action in the UK, and the trend in India of preventing individuals from participating in elections. Debasish Roy Chowdhury also raised the question of practicality. He asked “who is going to ban BJP, AFD, these parties are too big. By the time the problem becomes visible, you cannot just wish the problem away.” Merkel summarised this concern with a poignant point. “How do you ban such a large group of representatives? You cannot think that they will simply leave. They will mobilise. The pragmatic reason why we shouldn’t ban parties is that this could create a state of violence that the government would need to repress.”

NEW FORMS OF RESILIENCE

The conference then shifted focus to hear about new forms of resilience around the globe. Aries Arugay presented a paper titled *From Memes to Movement*. This paper looked at the recent “Gen Z accountability crusade in Southeast Asia.” Arugay noted that Gen Z “communicates in humour, irony, and pop culture” and that attempts to dismiss these as “mere memes is a mistake.” Memes and other online content are “tools used to voice dissent, to organise, and to spark action.” In the Philippines, which experienced severe democratic backsliding under the Duterte regime, there has been renewed interest in politics amongst Gen Z. In the past year, there have been over 120 protests, most of which have been organised on social media. Arugay argued that “social media platforms are entry points into political engagement” and that in countries such as the Philippines—the so-called “social media capital of the world”—social media is a forum that has the potential to build democratic resilience. It was noted that in the “global North the loudest Gen-Z mobilisation has been a far-right turn among young men;” however in the Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia, it has been used to mobilise pro-democratic movements. This was an important presentation as it provided an insight into the pro-democracy youth movements in South-East Asia, a demographic that had yet to be explored in the conference. Arugay concluded with an important statement that “the valence of digital mobilisation is set not by technology but by the grievances it channels.”

Larbi Sadiki then presented on *Resisting Authoritarianism in the Arab Region*. Sadiki noted that despite “ubiquitous democratic erosion” in the region, there remains “democratic struggles and some resistance against resurgent authoritarianism still exists.” This prompted the paper’s main question: “How, then, can we begin to frame such democratic struggles, identify them, and situate them within a broader regional context of insecurity, dependency and authoritarianism?” Sadiki introduced the group to the term ‘Asabiyyah’, which “remains a fundamental anchor of resilience in the Arab region.” Translated to social cohesion, the “deep-rooted sense of collective identity that is called Asabiyyah enables communities to navigate crises, mobilise support networks, and overcome political adversity.” He then spoke about different forms of resistance in the Arab world including “localised community spheres and neighbourhood Tansiqiyyat.” Sadiki concluded his presentation with an important note that researchers should “re-focus their research lens” to look at “not just the actions of the executive, the military, or external actors” but to recognise that resilience “is not state-led and emerges from the locale, from people’s experiences and responses to their needs.”

NOTES ON EMPIRE AND SYSTEMS MAPPING

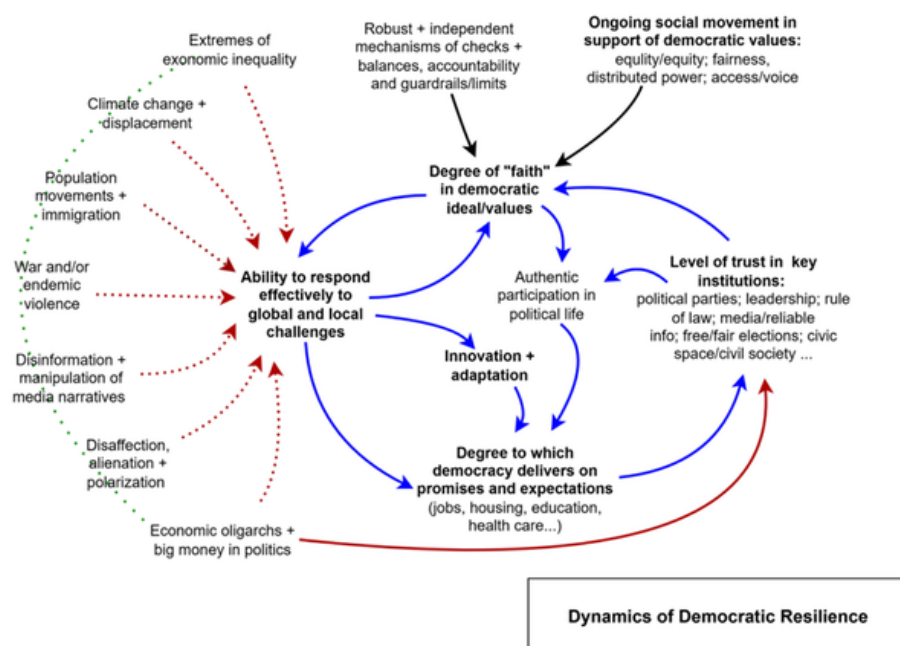
In the afternoon session John Keane discussed his *Notes on Empire, America, and the Decolonisation of Democracy*. The paper “aims to make better sense of the chaotic and contested trends” of the breakdown of the “so-named rules-based international order.” Keane conducted an overview of America’s democratic trends post-1945 and traced the decline of its democracy and its empire. He asked several questions including “what are the chances that democracies, which were once America’s friends, will be able to survive and thrive? Can the democracies once under the thumb of the United States decolonise themselves? And can they come to accept that decolonisation is not a problem confronting the ‘Global South?’” Despite the continued decline facing many democracies, Keane shared some hope that “confronted by Russian-style despotisms, a rising Chinese global empire, and an angry America in retreat and decline, democrats might realise that this is a moment of opportunity, a tipping point for the future of democracy.” He argued that it is imperative that democrats around the world work to convince people that democracy is “an indispensable global virtue, a non-negotiable and basic requirement everywhere of a dignified life for creatures large and small on an endangered planet we call Earth.”

The term ‘decolonisation’ prompted significant discussion from the conference. Jordan Ryan questioned the implications of decolonisation for international institutions such as the UN. Robert Kaufman argued that it would be more appropriate to talk about the breakdown of the American empire rather than “decolonisation.” This led Keane to clarify that he intended decolonisation to mean the need for countries to abandon their dependence on American power and cooperate without American interference with other democracies.

If misinformation, economic inequality, polarisation and disaffection take hold within a democratic society then its resilience will be challenged

Next, Peter Woodrow presented a different way of looking at the dynamics of democratic resilience through systems mapping (see below). Woodrow discussed the importance of faith in democratic ideals and its role in effectively responding to challenges to democracy. He noted that in the US “there has been a decline in civic education” meaning that “there is a need for social movements to support democracy.” Woodrow also highlighted that a crucial element in determining democratic resilience is the level of trust that people have in key institutions. The media, political parties, electoral authorities, and the judiciary all have a role in “reinforcing trust in these institutions.” If misinformation, economic inequality, polarisation and disaffection take hold within a democratic society then its resilience will be challenged. If democratic systems do not adapt to issues such as the decline in young people affiliating with political parties, and growing distrust of the media, then it is possible that these systems will experience democratic decay. Woodrow acknowledged that the systems map is in the draft stage and invited participants to comment and provide suggestions to include for the final model.

There was a strong discussion about what should be included in the final systems map model. Several participants agreed that there was a need for institutions and actors beyond the nation-state to be included. Kevin Clements stated that “civil society groups, activists, and others are often key in responding to global challenges.” John Keane and Debasish Roy Chowdhury argued that faith in democratic ideals should be viewed as foundational rather than just a node on the map. Daniela Campello questioned the applicability of the model to non-western countries including in South America and in the Philippines. It was acknowledged that while there are limitations to systems thinking, it is a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of democratic resilience.



To conclude day two, the conference discussed what they had learned about democratic resilience, both the challenges and opportunities. Participants agreed that there has been a global decline in trust toward political institutions, parties, and government. It was also accepted that democratic resilience has different meanings in different contexts. Strong democracies under threat, backsliding democracies, and democracies recovering from autocracy all have different interpretations of resilience. Participants also noted interesting trends such as in South-East Asia where young people are leaning left whereas in the West many lean right. New terms such as Asabiyyah were also discussed as was the requirement for a new narrative to convince people that democracy is the most desirable form of government. Participants also discussed additional questions that they had after the two days. These included the place of non-violent social movements in democratic resilience, and whether open-accountability democracies are more effective at “addressing wicked problems.” It was also noted that the conference had so far been silent on some issues. Gaza, Iran, Sudan, and the role of Starlink were all acknowledged as deserving more attention.

Day Three

The final day commenced with a discussion about the group’s focus for the upcoming year, including a topic for next year’s conference. It was agreed that a topic that would bring coherence and allow each member to focus on their own interests was needed.

The discussion began with a list of potential topics. These included democracy, peace and war; the alienation of young people from politics; polarisation; and an examination of why states are losing control. Democracy, peace, and war was a strong candidate given that Toda is a peace research institute; however, ultimately it was decided to focus on “Why Democracy?” This topic was chosen as it was a recurring question throughout the conference. It is also a topic that is broad, encompasses various interests, is future oriented, addressed disillusionment and mistrust of democracy, and could encompass ideas for adaptation and innovation. This will be the focus of the group’s discussion throughout the next year.

PROJECT AREAS

In the past year, the Global Challenges to Democracy (GCTD) team has been working on a number of projects that have sought to deepen our collective understanding of the threats facing democracy around the world. The project-leads each gave an update on their progress.

Larbi Sadiki provided an update on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) project and spoke about its link on his initiative to form the Arab Democracy Study Group. The group includes academics from across the Middle East and North Africa and aims to promote democracy and human rights in the Arab world. A successful workshop was recently held in Tunis, and planning is under way for a second conference in Istanbul that will be co-sponsored by Toda. Sadiki encouraged members of the GCTD group to join and participate in the conference, emphasising the enrichment that diverse perspectives bring.

Peter Woodrow then discussed the progress of the systems mapping project. He emphasised that systems mapping is only a tool but could provide useful information about potential strategies to intervene in a democratic system to create positive change. Last year, the Lowy Institute, in collaboration with Toda, published an interactive systems map on democratic erosion. They are currently looking for funding to create one on democratic resilience, again in partnership with Toda. Woodrow stated that there has been some interest developing systems mapping for the MENA region.

Reporting on the Democracy Lighthouse web platform, John Keane noted the new website design and praised its visual appeal. A new project—the Speaker’s Corner—was also announced and a plan for its launch was discussed. There was an acknowledgment that greater engagement with partner organisations is needed. There was also an update on the uptake of the monthly newsletter, the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, and a proposal for a new social media strategy aimed at reaching a younger audience and increasing the visibility of the Democracy Lighthouse.

ZOOM SESSION WITH MENA GROUP

After the project updates, the conference was then joined online by Toda's MENA group for a discussion on war and democracy in the MENA region. The conference benefited from the groups contributions which gave an interesting insight into the many democratic challenges facing the Arab world.

Khalil Osman presented first on the impact of the US–Israel–Iran war on democracy in Iraq. Osman stated that “democratic backsliding has been an ongoing process in Iraq” but that “the war has created dynamics that have accelerated this process.” This is because the conflict has undermined the sovereignty of the Iraqi state. Iraq has been unable to prevent “its territory from being transformed into an active battleground” and the presence of armed non-state actors has presented an image of the state as “being unable to assert control over its territory.” The war has also had an impact on Iraq's oil revenue which exacerbated the country's existing financial crisis. Another development has been the external pressure from the United States on Iraq. “Recently, President Trump warned Iraq against reinstalling Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister saying that if al-Maliki were appointed the US would withdraw its assistance to Iraq.” These external pressures have reinforced institutional imbalances in Iraq and made any advancement in democracy more difficult.

Moving onto Syria, Layla Saleh, stated that the situation is different. “Since the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, the Middle East has been experiencing a genocide in Gaza, a war in Lebanon and in Iran.” Saleh noted that this is a problem for democracy in Syria because in the Middle East “security takes precedence over democratisation.” The fragile security situation in Syria and its surrounds has meant that the current government is likely to be in power for “at least five years before elections may be held.” The expansion of Israel's occupation in the Golan Heights has also made a democratic transition more difficult. “As it stands, parliament continues to hold little power, the country is deeply divided and owing to the civil war, there remain issues regarding freedom of speech and civil society organisations.” Saleh shared that this is unlikely to change soon.

The conference then heard from Dania Koleilat Khatib on the war in Lebanon. In an already polarised society, the war in Lebanon has “challenged the country's political stability.” The destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of people, and the interference of external actors in Lebanon are having an impact on the country's political structure. The presentation discussed the “scorched earth” tactics being used by Israel to “ensure that people don't have anything to go back to.” These tactics are used to allow Israel to first declare a “military zone, then a buffer zone, and finally then new settlements can move in.” Khatib also discussed the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon's political structure. After anti-government protests in 2019, which Hezbollah helped stifle, the group “increased its grip on the state” through its “protection of a corrupt political class.” The US and Israel are now trying to “disarm Hezbollah through force” which only serves to create more political unrest in Lebanon. Khatib noted that groups like the AKK and IRA only disarmed after a political agreement. The presentation concluded with a warning that “there is a danger. A danger not just from the war with Israel and the US but “an internal danger of having a new civil war, or domestic confrontation.”

Khatib was then asked about the prospects for democracy in Lebanon. “It is very unrealistic,” she responded. This is because “in Lebanon we have a sectarian system where the government is formed by different parties. These parties then use government facilities to profit. That is not really a democracy.” John Keane then asked whether there was hope that a regional agreement where Hezbollah is disarmed would be possible. Khatib answered that “with this current government there is little possibility for a deal as Hezbollah does not serve to benefit and the Lebanese government holds no leverage. Only with a change of government would such a deal be possible.”

The war in Gaza and the complex nature of governance in Palestine was then examined by Hanan Kaoud who questioned “whether democratisation can exist under conditions of war.” The collapse of Gaza's economy, the destruction of public places, and the social impact of war, it was stated, all have implications for the future of Palestinian governance. Kaoud also noted the collapse of civil society and the influence of external actors as other challenges facing Palestinian democracy. External actors have failed to protect Palestinian people and therefore if democratic processes are to succeed, Kaoud argued, then “sovereignty and self-determination are necessary.”

The conference also heard from Nabil Al-Bukiri on war and democracy in Yemen. Prior to the outbreak of war in 2014 Yemen “had a genuine opportunity to develop a democratic system.” Periodic elections were held, there were active political parties, and a strong civil society. However, after 2014 “the war halted the democratic transition and weakened state institutions.” Elections were halted, civil society eroded, and state institutions became fragmented. It was concluded that “peace and rebuilding the state are fundamental prerequisites for establishing democracy in Yemen.”

To conclude the MENA discussion, Ahmedou Menna reported on the state of democracy in Mauritania. Mauritania has experienced a steady decline in its democracy according to several indicators. There have been increasing restrictions on political freedoms and a declining trust in political institutions. In recent years, the country has witnessed attempts to introduce constitutional amendments allowing the extension of presidential terms, changes to electoral laws that have restricted the participation of opposition parties, as well as restrictions on the media and suppression of civil society organizations. Menna argued that “to halt this democratic regression, it is essential to implement a comprehensive set of reform policies aimed at strengthening electoral integrity, safeguarding civil rights, and strengthening civil society.”

Closing discussion

Reflecting on the discussions over the previous three days, the conference concluded with some final thoughts and a discussion about the future of the working group. It was suggested that to make this group truly global, expanding the group into sub-Saharan Africa and Northeast Asia would be required. Peter Woodrow suggested taking a different approach to democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. “We should pull people together who are democracy activists in the region and learn about their experiences, and how this reflects what we’ve been discussing in other parts of the world.” Woodrow also suggested that it would be interesting to bring together some young people “who have been involved in movements in Nepal and Bangladesh to exchange their experiences with each other.” This went to another concern among some participants about the impact of the working group. There was some discussion about seeking a publisher to produce a collection of essays on democracy or facilitating a meeting with activists to exchange their different experiences and tactics when defending democracy in their country. It was agreed that there would be further discussion at a later date about ways that the group could continue to evolve.

The final session concluded with shared gratitude for the Toda Peace Institute for facilitating the conference, particularly in a period where Zoom is being increasingly favoured over in-person meetings. Although democratic resilience remains an important area of research, the papers presented and ensuing discussions also highlighted the need to rethink some of the field’s underlying assumptions. As democratic decline continues in many countries, participants emphasized the importance of investigating why democracy matters and how its value can be more effectively articulated. Such research may contribute to broader efforts to strengthen democratic resilience.



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