
THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY 2021

Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era



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Text editing: Accuracy Matters Ltd
Cover design and illustration: Phoenix Design Aid
Design and layout: Phoenix Design Aid
ISBN: 978-91-7671-479-9 (Print)
ISBN: 978-91-7671-478-2 (PDF)
DOI: <



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Foreword

The year 2020 has seen the world besieged by a pandemic that has claimed millions of lives. The stability that most of the world enjoyed after the Cold War has perhaps been permanently disrupted, and all nations are struggling to adjust to these abrupt changes.

When the new millennium dawned, the 21st century was hailed optimistically as the century of democracy. The future looked bright, as many erstwhile authoritarian and hybrid regimes, such as Armenia, the Gambia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Tunisia, became democracies. The will of the people as the only legitimate form of authority seemed to be a popular and rapidly spreading ideal. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated a trend of increasing authoritarianism, across the globe, with many countries sliding back down the democratic scale.

Myanmar, which had been a fledgling democracy just beginning to recover from decades of military rule, fell victim to a military coup, the leaders of which even cited faulty elections as the justification for their course of action. Perhaps the greatest blow to democratic ideals was the fall of the people's government in Afghanistan, which has seen war being waged for the sake of preserving democratic principles. Significantly, the United States, the bastion of global democracy, fell victim to authoritarian tendencies itself, and was knocked down a significant number of steps on the democratic scale.

Amid such geopolitical upheaval, the pandemic has raged on. Repeated outbreaks in different parts of the world simultaneously have made the disease all the more difficult to fight, and the toll it has taken has been grievous.

However, even in this hour of despair, hope remains. Countries across the world have come together to fight this disease, and this has ushered in a period of unprecedented global cooperation. Popular protests for better government in countries like Sudan and Chile have led to important reforms. In Malawi, a landmark decision to annul fraudulent election results set an

important precedent, one representing the victory of democratic, independent institutions over government pressure. Successful elections in Montenegro and Bolivia, as well as protests against government corruption in Bulgaria, are further examples of the resilience of democracy.

The global urge for democratic governance thus clearly remains strong. However, the pandemic has emboldened several governments to double down on popular expression, and push for more direct control. An example of this tendency is Hungary, which passed several ordinances limiting citizens' rights and giving more power to Viktor Orbán's government—under the pretext of bringing the pandemic under control.

In this time of crisis, International IDEA's The Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD) is a vital enterprise. The analysis and accompanying report, based on a robust methodology and a broad, multi-dimensional understanding of democracy, offers a critical assessment of the global context and seeks to galvanize the countries of the world to strive for better governance. The GSoD legitimizes an expanding purview of democracy, which is now no longer limited to just elections and political rights. The report analyses how countries are faring in terms of upholding democratic principles, including factors such as Basic Welfare, the Absence of Corruption and Social Group Equality.

As the former Chief Election Commissioner of my own country, India, I have personally been witness to the changing times of global democracy. Despite India falling in the democracy ranks, I can personally attest that the spirit of democracy among the Indian people remains strong. Difficult times undoubtedly lie ahead. Democracy is on the back foot, and more countries are moving towards authoritarianism than at any other point since 1995. However, I am confident that democracy's resilience, perhaps its greatest asset, will allow it ultimately to triumph.

Dr S. Y. Quraishi

Former Chief Election Commissioner of India

Preface

Two years ago, when International IDEA published the second iteration of its Global State of Democracy Report, there was a clear sense that the headwinds that democracy was facing all over the world were severe and growing. Nonetheless, it was still relatively simple to point to positive examples that suggested that democracy's remarkable global expansion of the past 70 years had not come to a screeching halt. The number of polities able to hold credible and competitive elections had continue to grow, and countries like Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Sudan, to name a few cases, were still undergoing vulnerable but real processes of political opening. The report made a case for the urgency of leveraging those green offshoots to revive the democratic promise.

Little did we know that only a few months later democracies around the world would be subject to the most severe stress test imaginable. As in many other aspects of life, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated and magnified pre-existing political trends while adding a whole new plethora of unprecedented challenges to democracies that were already under pressure. Virtually overnight, all democratic systems found themselves dealing with enormous obstacles to hold minimally adequate elections and secure the functioning of legislative and judicial institutions. More importantly, executives all over the world felt compelled—and also tempted—to deploy wide-ranging emergency powers to confront the calamity that had befallen the world. Unsurprisingly, the results have been problematic. The two years since our last report have not been good for democracy. The monumental human victory achieved when democracy became the predominant form of governance now hangs in the balance like never before.

This report documents the myriad signs of this story. It is not simply that the number of democracies has gone down from the peak of two years ago, but that some of the worst reversals have happened precisely in places like Myanmar, which had appeared as beacons of hope until recently. Moreover, the quality of democracy continues to travel a very visible downward path across the board. In the context of the pandemic, many democratic governments have adopted questionable

restrictions to fundamental freedoms that, in many cases, mimic the practices of authoritarian regimes. Democratic backsliding, namely the sustained and deliberate process of subversion of basic democratic tenets by political actors and governments, is threatening to become a different kind of pandemic—it now afflicts very large and influential democracies that account for a quarter of the world's population. And all this is happening while authoritarian systems intensify their repressive practices and engage in ever more brazen attempts to silence their critics and distort the workings of democracies.

The drivers of all these phenomena are complex and, in some cases, barely understood. This is a story in which democracies are being weakened because the underlying polis—without which no set of democratic institutions is durable—is being rent asunder by different forces, from the polarization nurtured by social media and disinformation to grotesque levels of economic inequality. It is also a tale in which democracies are hollowed out by the citizens' loss of faith in the ability of democratic institutions to respond to social demands and solve problems, as well as by the toxic disease of corruption, which demolishes any semblance of trust. Add to this the credibility-sapping blunders performed by leading democratic powers over the past two decades—from the invasion of Iraq to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and to the violently contested elections in the United States—and the simultaneous emergence of credible alternative models of governance, and we have the equivalent of a witches' brew for the global health of democracy. The pandemic has simply made that brew thicker and more poisonous.

While it is clear that the effects of this global crisis will take many years, if not decades, to sediment, we have accrued sufficient information over the past nearly two years to gauge some of the initial consequences and identify many of the dangers and opportunities for democracy that come with them. This is the exercise that readers have before them—a health check of democracy in the age of Covid-19. It is an examination that aspires to be comprehensive, rigorous, nuanced, and constructive.

As with our previous reports, this one is based on a comprehensive conceptual framework that unpacks and dissects the many facets of the democratic construct, including the workings of representative institutions, the protection of fundamental rights, the robustness of checks and balances, and the vibrancy of popular participation. Twenty-nine attributes and sub-attributes are examined in total. And they are examined in a rigorous manner, by resorting to a mass of empirical evidence that encompasses 116 indicators, covering 165 countries, with data going back to 1975 for every year until 2020. Indeed, our report is based on our Global State of Democracy Indices, a freely available database, updated yearly. This information is complemented by the analytical capacities that come with keeping a close ear to the ground in all major regions of the world, where we operate and deal on a daily basis with the actors that give life to democracy. Our work is not simply desk research—it reflects International IDEA’s nature as a think- and do-thank.

Crucially, we want our analysis to be nuanced, to go beyond the relentless negativity of the most recent headlines about democracy and lend visibility to the positive happenings, to the promising trends and the successful struggles happening around the world. In a conscious way, we are trying to avoid the click-baiting and the ephemeral attraction that often comes with merely gloating about the travails of democracy. We analyze the evidence without fear or favor, going always where it takes us, but with an eye open for the possibilities and the promises. Always predicting a bear market for democracy is easy. It is also inaccurate and unhelpful. And help democracy we must. Hence our insistence in being constructive, namely marrying our analysis with policy recommendations to guide and inspire those working in the trenches of democracy, from election management bodies to legislators, party officials, and civil society organizations.

With this report we hope to convey a sense of urgency about the global plight of democracy but also of opportunity. We want to use this report, born in the dark days of Covid-19, to press upon our audiences the message that this is the best time for democratic actors to be bold. This is the time to rethink wholesale the connection between citizens and institutions, to experiment with new institutional designs and forms of deliberation, to leverage digital technologies to enhance

participation, transparency, and accountability, to place the ability of democratic institutions to respond to citizens’ demands at the heart of policy agendas. This is the time to revitalize the democratic project in order to prepare it for the even sterner challenges that lie ahead, including those posed by the climate crisis. If we don’t do that now, when the fault lines tearing apart our societies have been laid bare by the pandemic, we will never do it. Democracies will then be doomed to leading a dangerous life, where the lure of authoritarianism will only grow. The best way to defend the democratic project is to go on the offense, revitalize it, and make it live up to its promise.

In the process of doing that, we should never forget why this work matters. This is about more than safeguarding abstract principles or winning geopolitical battles—it is about protecting the dignity of real human beings, which democracy does better than any other political arrangement. Every democratic reversal is not a geopolitical battle lost—it is a constellation of lives that goes dark. As we are witnessing in Afghanistan today, it is a group of human beings that lose their opportunity to fulfill their potential and dreams. And that is also our loss.

This report is our small contribution to this global struggle. It is very small compared to the deeds that are performed on a daily basis by the brave young pro-democracy activists in Myanmar, by the women that refused to be cowed by fanatics in Afghanistan, by the citizens that have not withdrawn their umbrellas in Hong Kong, by the jailed opposition leaders in Nicaragua, by the dissidents that are daring to say out loud what the rest of society whispers in Cuba—that no amount of repression can hide that their absolute rulers are naked and lost.

Each of these acts of defiance is a triumph of the human spirit that deserves our homage and recommitment to the democratic project. In these pages is our small tribute and our sincere pledge—that we will use the knowledge we gather and the experience we accrue to help reformers improve democracy where it exists, to support those who fight for it where it doesn’t exist, and to inspire the million others that need to join this cause if democracy is to endure and prevail.

Kevin Casas-Zamora
Secretary-General, International IDEA

Acknowledgements

This report was conceptualized and written by Annika Silva-Leander, with inputs from Elisenda Balleste Buxo, Alberto Fernandez Gibaja, Alexander Hudson, Miguel Angel Lara Otaola and Seema Shah, under the supervision of Kevin Casas-Zamora and Massimo Tommasoli. It was edited by Alistair Scrutton and Seema Shah, with assistance from Jeremy Gaunt. Feedback and inputs on the report draft were provided by external peer reviewers: Birgitta Ohlsson (NDI), Kristen Sample (NDI), Carlos Santiso (CAF), Jeffrey Thindwa (World Bank) and members of International IDEA's Board of Advisers, including Christian Leffler. International IDEA staff and consultants who provided feedback to draft versions were Olufunto Akinduro, Sead Alihodžić, Elisenda Balleste Buxo, Alberto Fernandez Gibaja, Erin Houlihan, Alexander Hudson,

Nana Kalandadze, Therese Pearce Laanela, Laura Mancilla, Jonathan Murphy, Miguel Angel Lara Otaola, Tomas Quesada, Mark Salter, Maria Santillana, Leena Rikkila Tamang, Laura Thornton, Adina Trunk and Robin Watts. Alexander Hudson and Joseph Noonan produced all the graphs in the report. Many thanks to Clara Alm, Megan Bequette, Benjamin Gelman, Gentiana Gola, Miriam Ekvall Halila, Maud Kuijpers, Maria Santillana and Rixte Schermerhorn for their invaluable fact-checking.

Notwithstanding all the generous advice, help and comments received from external partners, International IDEA takes sole responsibility for the content in this report.

Introduction

Democracy is at risk. Its survival is endangered by a perfect storm of threats, both from within and from a rising tide of authoritarianism. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these threats through the imposition of states of emergency, the spread of disinformation, and crackdowns on independent media and freedom of expression.

The Global State of Democracy 2021 shows that more countries than ever are suffering from ‘democratic erosion’ (decline in democratic quality), including in established democracies. The number of countries undergoing ‘democratic backsliding’ (a more severe and deliberate kind of democratic erosion) has never been as high as in the last decade, and includes regional geopolitical and economic powers such as Brazil, India and the United States.

More than a quarter of the world’s population now live in democratically backsliding countries. Together with those living in outright non-democratic regimes, they make up more than two-thirds of the world’s population.

Fully fledged authoritarian regimes are also growing in number, and their leaders are acting ever more brazenly. The pandemic provides additional tools and justification for repressive tactics and silencing of dissent in countries as diverse as Belarus, Cuba, Myanmar, Nicaragua and Venezuela. These regimes are buoyed by a lack of sufficient geopolitical pressures and support from other autocratic powers. Some of them thrive on the narrative that authoritarian governance is more effective for economic prosperity and pandemic management.

Worryingly, many democratically elected governments are also adopting time-honoured authoritarian tactics, often with popular support. The pandemic has made it easier to justify this behaviour, including the politicization of judiciaries, the manipulation of media, restrictions on civil liberties and minority rights, and the weakening of civil society.

The pandemic has preyed more on weaker democracies and fragile states while political systems with strong rule of law and separation of powers have proved more resilient.

Yet, the pandemic has also evinced democracy’s resilience in key ways. It has fuelled pro-democracy movements to challenge this authoritarian tide from Belarus to Myanmar. Protests over climate change and racial inequality have gone global, despite restrictions on assembly in most countries during the pandemic. Many states have adhered to democratic principles during the public health crisis, thanks to transparent and innovative governance. Some studies point to a reinvigoration of democratic values globally, particularly among younger generations.¹

Some governments have provided crucial democratic innovation during the pandemic by accelerating the adoption of new democratic practices such as digital voting. There are tentative signs of new geopolitical alliances in which some countries—for example, Sweden, and recently the USA—are making democracy a foreign policy priority. The Summit for Democracy, the first of which will be held in December 2021, will provide an important opportunity to reassert a multilateral world order based on democratic norms.

Many democracies that were seduced into years of complacency during stable times have managed to reform themselves during this crisis. This resilience and revitalizing zeal are more important than ever if democracies are to survive the pressing global challenges ahead.

This report offers lessons and recommendations that governments, political and civic actors, and international democracy assistance providers should consider in order to counter the worrying erosion of democracy and instead foster its resilience and deepening. The report documents global trends, but it should be read in conjunction with its accompanying four regional reports (Africa and the Middle East, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe) and three thematic papers. The latter explore lessons learned from the pandemic regarding electoral processes, the use of emergency powers, and pandemic-related responses in democracies versus other regime types.

The conceptual framework on which this report is based is International IDEA’s expansive and inclusive definition of democracy: popular control over public

decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. These principles are operationalized through an analysis of five core attributes of democracy: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. Each of these attributes is broken down into multiple subattributes. This report does not detail

the findings for every subattribute; it focuses only on the most important and urgent findings.

It closes with a three-point agenda to harness the energy for democratic reform, which can be used as a framework to unite policymakers, civil society and global leaders, and to exploit democracy's capacity for self-correction.

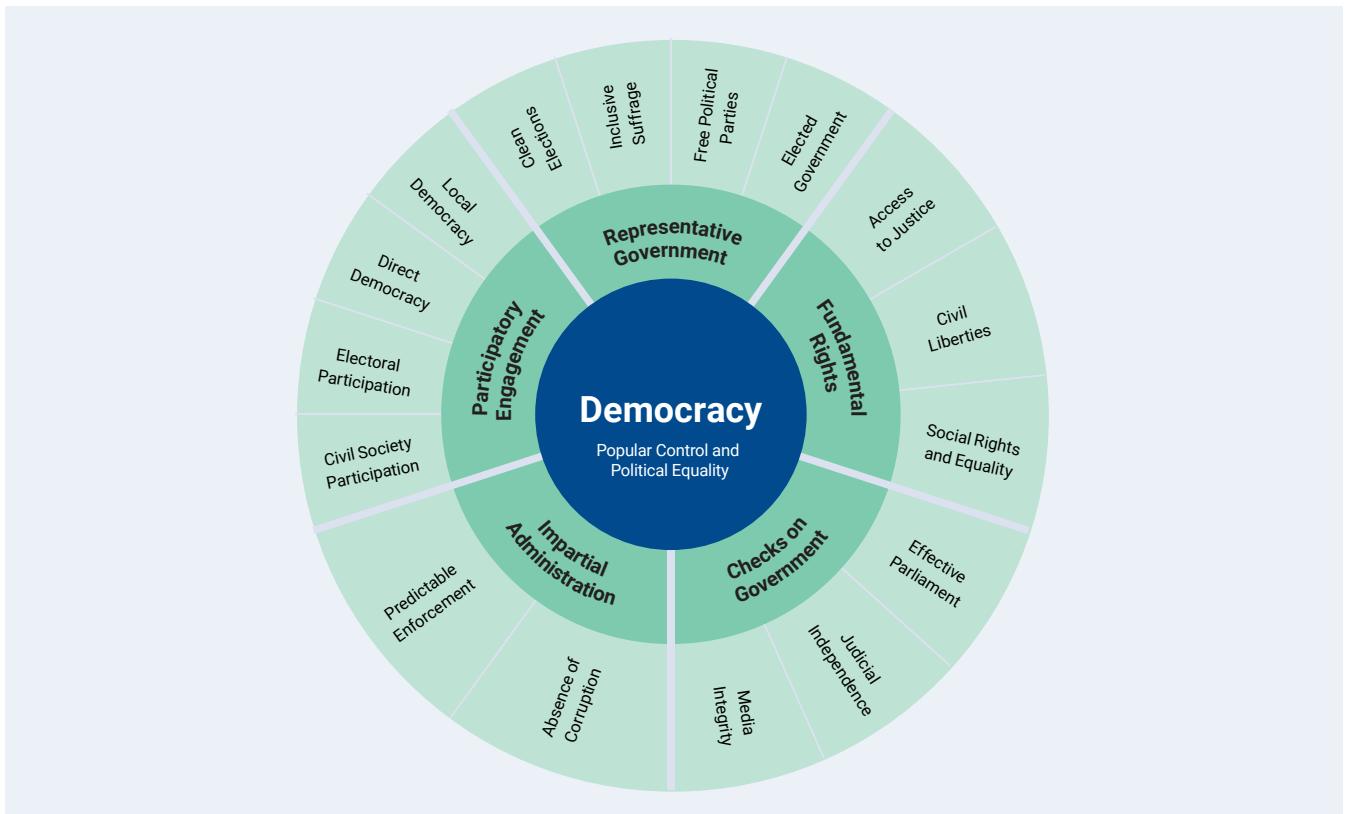
About the report

International IDEA's *The Global State of Democracy 2021* reviews the state of democracy around the world over the course of 2020 and 2021, with democratic trends since 2015 used as contextual reference. It is based on analysis of events that have impacted democratic governance globally since the start of the pandemic, based on various data sources, including International IDEA's [Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights](#), and International IDEA's [Global State of Democracy \(GSoD\) Indices](#). The Global Monitor provides monthly data on pandemic measures and their impact on democracy for 165 countries in the world. The GSoD Indices provide quantitative data on democratic quality for the same countries, based on 28 aspects of democracy up until the end of 2020. Both data sources are developed around a conceptual framework, which defines democracy as based on five core attributes: Representative Government,

Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. These five attributes provide the organizing structure for this report.

This report is part of a series on The Global State of Democracy, which complement and cross-reference each other. This report has a global focus, and it is accompanied by four regional reports that provide more in-depth analysis of trends and developments in [Africa and the Middle East](#); the [Americas](#) (North, South and Central America, and the Caribbean); [Asia and the Pacific](#); and [Europe](#). It is also accompanied by three thematic papers that allow more in-depth analysis and recommendations on how to manage electoral processes and emergency law responses, and how democracies and non-democracies fared based on lessons learned from the pandemic.

The GSoD conceptual framework



CONCEPTS IN THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY 2021

- The reports refer to three main regime types: *democracies*, *hybrid* and *authoritarian regimes*. Hybrid and authoritarian regimes are both classified as non-democratic.
- *Democracies*, at a minimum, hold competitive elections in which the opposition stands a realistic chance of accessing power. This is not the case in *hybrid* and *authoritarian* regimes. However, *hybrid* regimes tend to have a somewhat more open—but still insufficient—space for civil society and the media than *authoritarian* regimes.
- *Democracies* can be *weak*, *mid-range performing* or *high-performing*, and this status changes from year to year, based on a country's annual democracy scores.
- *Democracies* in any of these categories can be *backsliding*, *eroding* and/or *fragile*, capturing changes in democratic performance over time.
 - Backsliding democracies are those that have experienced gradual but significant weakening of Checks on Government and Civil Liberties, such as Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association and Assembly, over time. This is often through intentional policies and reforms aimed at weakening the rule of law and civic space. Backsliding can affect democracies at any level of performance.
 - Eroding democracies have experienced statistically significant declines in any of the democracy aspects over the past 5 or 10 years. The democracies with the highest levels of erosion tend also to be classified as backsliding.
 - Fragile democracies are those that have experienced an undemocratic interruption at any point since their first transition to democracy.
 - *Deepening authoritarianism* is a decline in any of the democracy aspects of non-democratic regimes.

For a full explanation of the concepts and how they are defined, see Table 6 on p. 8 of the [summary methodology](#).

Chapter 1

Key facts and findings

CHALLENGES

<p>The number of countries moving in an authoritarian direction in 2020 outnumbered those going in a democratic direction. The pandemic has prolonged this existing negative trend into a five-year stretch, the longest such period since the start of the third wave of democratization in the 1970s.</p>	<p>Democratically elected governments, including established democracies, are increasingly adopting authoritarian tactics. This democratic backsliding has often enjoyed significant popular support.</p>
<p>Some of the most worrying examples of backsliding are found in some of the world's largest countries (Brazil, India). The United States and three members of the European Union (EU) (Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, which holds the chair of the EU in 2021) have also seen concerning democratic declines.</p>	<p>Authoritarianism is deepening in non-democratic regimes (hybrid and authoritarian regimes). The year 2020 was the worst on record, in terms of the number of countries affected by deepening autocratization. The pandemic has thus had a particularly damaging effect on non-democratic countries, further closing their already reduced civic space.</p>
<p>Electoral integrity is increasingly being questioned, often without evidence, even in established democracies. The former US President Donald Trump's baseless allegations during the 2020 US presidential election have had spillover effects, including in Brazil, Mexico, Myanmar and Peru, among others.</p>	<p>The uneven global distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, as well as anti-vaccine views, undermine the uptake of vaccination programmes and risk prolonging the health crisis and normalizing restrictions on basic freedoms.</p>

OPPORTUNITIES

<p>Many democracies around the world have proved resilient to the pandemic, introducing or expanding democratic innovations and adapting their practices and institutions in record time.</p>	<p>Despite pandemic restrictions on campaigning and media space unfairly favouring incumbent governments in some countries, the electoral component of democracy has shown remarkable resilience. Countries around the world learned to hold elections in exceedingly difficult conditions, and they rapidly activated special voting arrangements to allow citizens to continue exercising their democratic rights.</p>
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<p>Throughout 2020 and 2021, pro-democracy movements have braved repression in many places, such as Belarus, Cuba, Eswatini, Hong Kong and Myanmar. Social movements for tackling climate change and fighting racial inequalities have emerged globally and continue to make their voices heard, despite pandemic restrictions. More than 80 per cent of countries have experienced protests during the pandemic, despite restrictions on assembly in almost all countries in the world.</p>	<p>Some countries have continued to make headway in their democratization processes. In Zambia, the opposition leader sailed to victory in August 2021, despite the incumbent party's strong-arm tactics.</p>
<p>There are also signs of the private sector taking on democratic rights issues, such as over the treatment of Uighurs in China, while forthcoming EU legislation on mandatory human rights due diligence for private sector companies may provide an additional push for greater engagement as well.</p>	<p>Recent research shows that authoritarian regimes have not been better than democracies at fighting the pandemic, even without accounting for the lack of data transparency in most non-democracies.</p>

To curb rising authoritarianism and reverse this course, International IDEA calls for a global alliance for the advancement of democracy through a three-point agenda:



Deliver

Government institutions, in close consultation with civil society, must take the lead in recrafting social contracts. These contracts should be the result of inclusive societal deliberation that sheds light on the gaps between what people require to meet their aspirations and what governments can currently provide. Specifically, these new social contracts, which will be the basis for immediate recovery and longer-term development efforts, should—at a minimum—address the varied inequalities exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritize corruption eradication, and ensure that environmental sustainability principles are mainstreamed into policy development.



Rebuild

Government institutions, political parties, electoral management bodies (EMBs) and media should reform democratic institutions, processes, relationships and behaviours so that they are better able to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. They should update practices in established democracies, build democratic capacity in new democracies, and protect electoral integrity, fundamental freedoms and rights, and the checks and balances essential to thriving and resilient democratic systems. They should also prioritize (re)building the mutual trust between citizens and their representatives that characterizes the strongest democracies.



Prevent

Government institutions, along with civil society and the media, must prevent rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding by investing in democracy education at all levels of schooling, by buttressing the pillars of democracy that ensure accountability, including broad participation and access to information, and by actively learning from other countries' experiences in fighting disinformation, building democratic cultures and strengthening democratic guardrails.

Chapter 2

Democracy health check: An overview of global trends

2.1 CHALLENGES

More countries are moving in an authoritarian than in a democratic direction

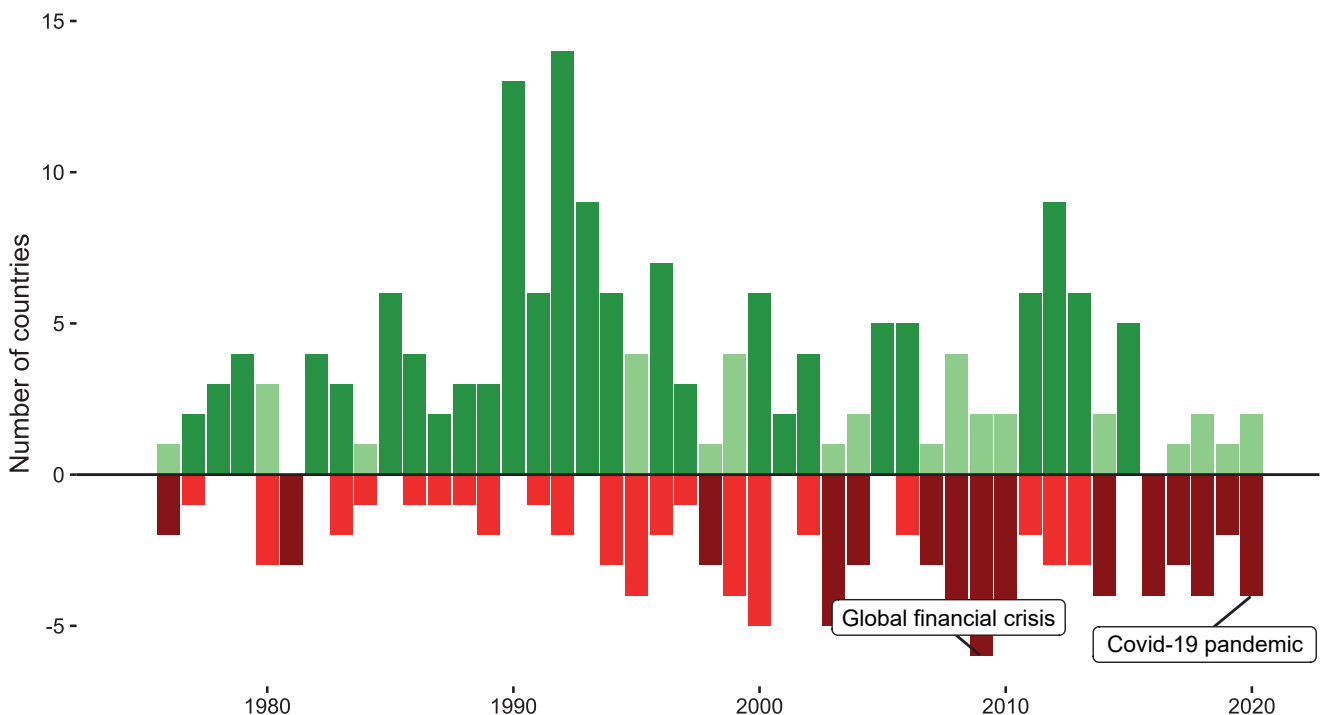
Since 2016, and for the fifth consecutive year, the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is approximately three times as high as the number moving towards democracy (Figure 1). Although

the 2007–2008 financial crisis sparked a similar decline, this is the first time since 1975 (when our data collection began) that the world has seen five consecutive years of this negative trend (Figure 2).²

Fewer countries than ever are moving towards democracy; since 2015, the absolute number of democracies has been declining (Figure 3).³ As of August 2021, the only country likely to (re)transition

FIGURE 1

Number of countries moving in an authoritarian direction or a democratic direction



Notes: This bar graph shows the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism (from democracy to either a hybrid or authoritarian regime, or from a hybrid to an authoritarian regime) in red or towards democracy (from either a hybrid or authoritarian regime to a democracy or from an authoritarian to a hybrid regime), by year since 1975. Years shown in dark green rather than pale green are those where the number of countries moving in a democratic direction outnumbers those moving in an authoritarian direction. Years shown in dark red rather than pale red are those where the changes towards authoritarianism outnumber the changes towards democracy.

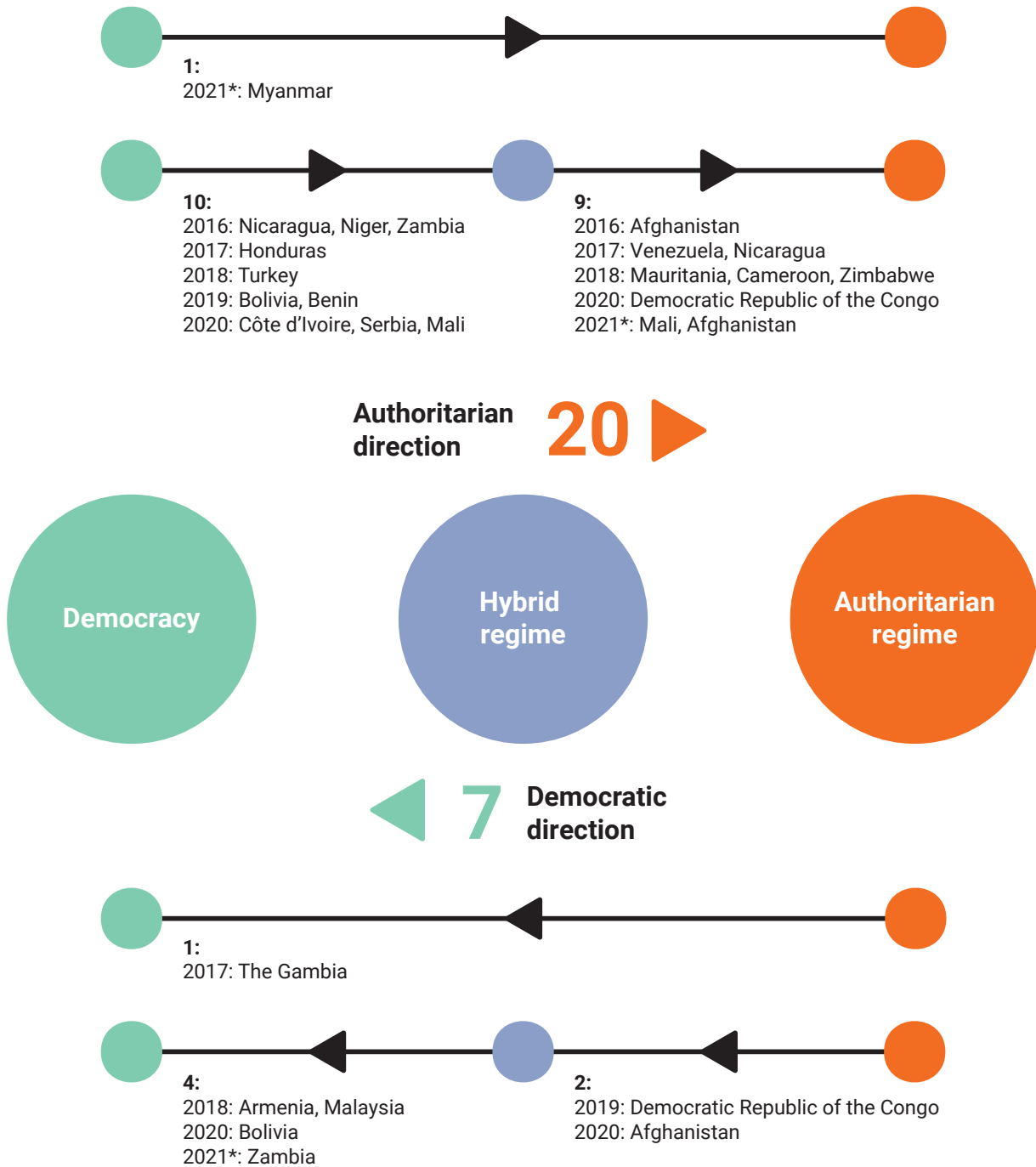
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

to democracy in the period covered by this report is Zambia. There are also countries that have ceased to be democracies in 2020—Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Serbia—

while Myanmar⁴ ceased to be a democracy after the military coup in 2021 (Figure 2). In Mali and Myanmar, the change in regime type was due to military coups.

FIGURE 2

Countries moving towards authoritarianism, and towards democracy



*Projected GSoD indices data for 2021. Final data will be available in May 2022.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

A number of democratization processes have also been halted or challenged in 2020 and 2021. In Ethiopia, the June 2021 elections were held amid increasing conflict in the Tigray region, in a context marked by a fifth of the electorate disenfranchised due to conflict and arrests of opposition politicians.⁵ Armenia’s conflict with its authoritarian neighbour, Azerbaijan, in Nagorno-Karabakh, and a military rebellion in early 2021, added strain to a fragile democratization process. After long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir was ousted following massive popular protests in Sudan in 2019, a transitional government was put in place. However, Sudan’s transition towards democracy has been fraught with challenges, including flare-up of conflict in the Darfur region, accusations of excessive use of police force in the enforcement of Covid restrictions, stalling of the creation of a legislative body, and protests against economic reforms. The second coup attempt in 2021, which took place in October, risks the progress made to date.⁶ In Afghanistan, the departure of the US military allowed the Taliban to quickly take over the country. Having ousted the elected leadership, the Taliban’s newly announced government is all male and includes many individuals accused of terrorist activities over the last two decades.⁷

Fragile, new democracies have experienced worrying reversals

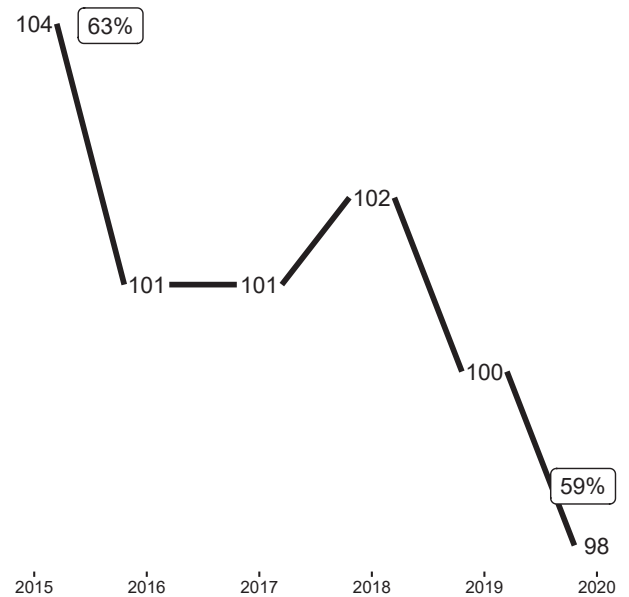
Mali held challenged elections in 2020, when parts of the country were barred from voting due to jihadist insurgencies, and the leader of the opposition was kidnapped a few days before election day. Between 2020 and 2021, two coups dimmed the prospects of democratization and free elections.⁸ In Myanmar, which has been embarked on a fragile democratization path since 2015, the military used false claims about a rigged election to justify a coup in February 2021, which deposed the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The democratic process has also been disrupted in Tunisia in July 2021—the only democratic success story emerging from the Arab Spring—as the President deposed the Prime Minister and suspended parliament until further notice, invoking emergency powers.⁹

More democracies than ever are suffering from democratic erosion

Democratic erosion refers to a loss in democratic quality, as observed through a statistically significant decline on at least one aspect of democracy. In 2020, 43 per cent of democracies had suffered declines in the previous 5 years (Figure 4); patterns over the previous 10 years were similar, affecting more than half of democracies.¹⁰

FIGURE 3

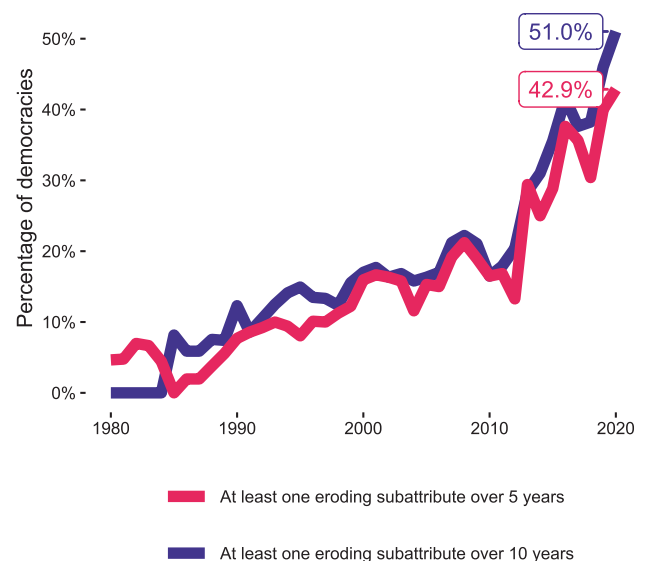
Number of democracies by year, 2015–2020



Note: The number of countries included in the GSod Indices during this period is 165. The graph shows the number of countries classified as democracies in each year since 2015, and the percentage of countries that number represents.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of democracies with a significant decline on at least one subattribute over 5- and 10-year periods



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

Figure 4 shows the widespread nature of declines among democracies by mapping the increase in the percentage of democracies declining on at least one subattribute. However, there is important variation in what democratic erosion looks like in different countries. Some democracies have declined slightly in one area in particular (e.g. Canada’s decline in the quality of Effective Parliament), while others have declined deeply and across many areas (e.g. Brazil has had significant declines across eight subattributes). The countries that have declined the most (measured in terms of the average across all 16 subattributes of democracy and that were democracies at the start of the decline) in the past 10 years are: Turkey, Nicaragua, Serbia, Poland and Brazil (see Figure 5 for full list).

There are also notable new forms of democratic decline. Until 2020, the most common democratic declines in the world tended to be related to the integrity of elections, media and freedom of expression. Although these aspects of democracy have continued to decline during the pandemic, pandemic responses that have included travel restrictions, the use of emergency powers that sometimes sidelined parliaments, and the failure to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the virus on minorities and marginalized groups have expanded the scope of democratic deterioration (see Chapter 4 on Fundamental Rights for more details). Democratic decline has broadened to include less commonly seen drops in Freedom of Movement, Predictable Enforcement, Social Group Equality and Effective Parliament (see Figure 7).¹¹

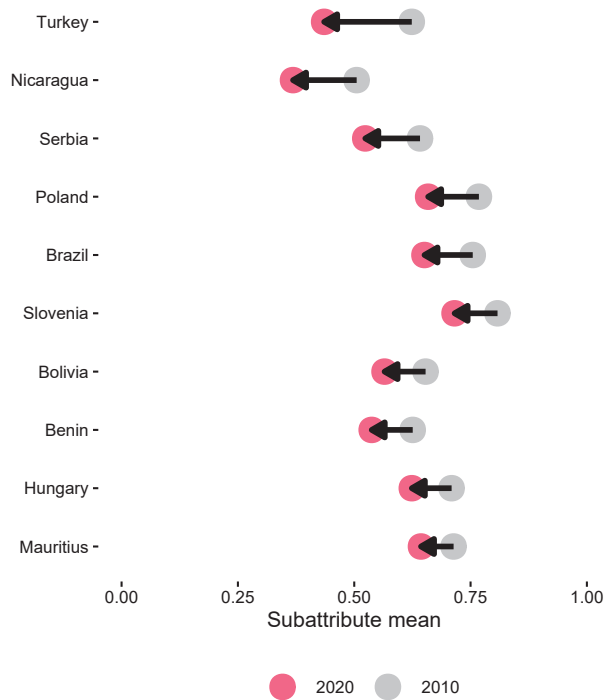
Backsliding countries are dismantling the core attributes of democratic systems¹²

The number of democratically backsliding countries has never been as high as in the last decade.¹³ Since many democratically backsliding countries are large, they represent more than 30 per cent of the world’s population. In fact, 70 per cent of the global population now live either in non-democratic regimes or in democratically backsliding countries. The percentage of the world’s population living in high-performing democracies is only 9 per cent (see Figure 6).¹⁴

These trends have become more acute and worrying with the onset of the pandemic. Over the past two years, some countries, particularly Hungary, India, the Philippines and the USA, have seen a number

FIGURE 5

Democracies with the greatest declines over 10 years (2010 to 2020)



Note: This figure tracks changes across all 16 subattributes for each country. Changes in this average measure represent the breadth and depth of declines in democratic quality.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

of democratic attributes affected by measures that amount to democratic violations—that is, measures that were disproportionate, illegal, indefinite or unconnected to the nature of the emergency (see Figure 7).¹⁵

Unlike outright authoritarian regimes or even hybrid regimes, backsliding democracies use parliamentary majorities, obtained by initially free and fair elections and high levels of electoral support, to gradually dismantle checks on government, freedom of expression, a free media and minority rights from within the democratic system.¹⁶ This process of democratic backsliding is often gradual, taking an average of nine years from the onset of backsliding until it ends in either a democratic breakdown or a return to democratic health.¹⁷

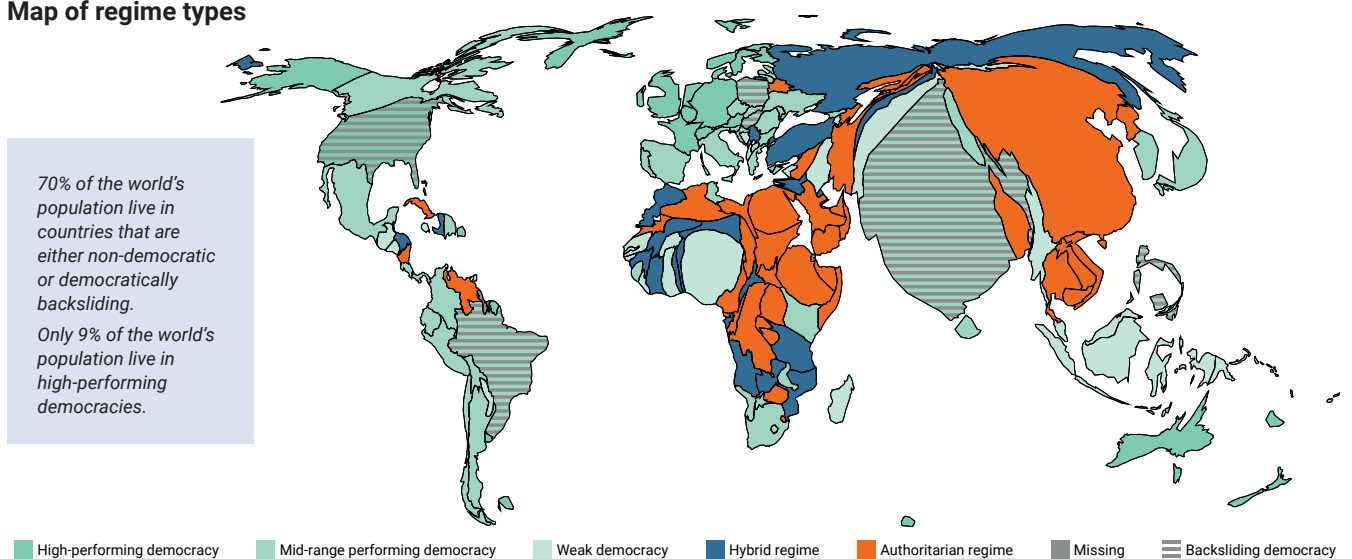
BOX 1

Explaining the drivers of the democratic decline

- **The rise of illiberal and populist parties in government in the last decade is a key explanatory factor in democratic backsliding and decline.** Periods with such governments in office show a decline on the aspects of Elected Government, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Freedom of Movement.¹⁸
- **Democratic backsliding is also linked to increasing levels of societal and political polarization and low levels of support for democracy.** Countries with deep political divides and embittered political controversies, as well as low levels of public support for democracy, are more prone to experiencing democratic backsliding. This is then exacerbated by political parties that use hate speech or disseminate false information in their campaigning. Declines in public support for democracy could be linked to governments' perceived inability to respond to social demands and perceptions about poor governmental performance in tackling the effects of economic crisis, corruption and inequalities, or more adversarial political conflicts undermining the credibility of democratic institutions.¹⁹
- **Economic crises are also tied to declining support for democracy and democratic backsliding.**²⁰ Lower or negative economic growth rates contribute to the triggering and continuation of democratic backsliding.²¹
- **Mimicking contributes to the spread of democratic deterioration as countries tend to imitate the (anti-) democratic behaviour of others.**²² Hence, when a number of large and influential economic and geopolitical players backslide democratically, or propose seemingly effective authoritarian models of governance as an alternative to liberal democracy, this provides models to emulate, reducing pressure and incentives for democratization.²³
- **The struggle to balance freedom of expression (especially through social media) with public safety, as well as the scourge of disinformation, can further democratic declines.** As social media firms play a louder and larger role in politics around the world, countries are struggling to effectively and responsibly address a host of issues, including fake (and sometimes dangerous) news, foreign governments' manipulation of social platforms to influence public opinion, data privacy and security, the firms' monopoly of the market and the firms' lack of transparency.

FIGURE 6

Map of regime types

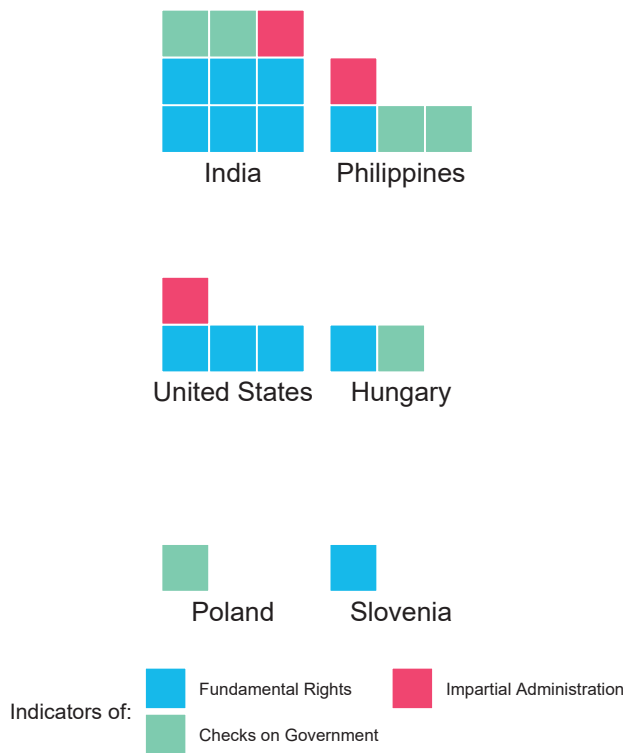


Note: This map shows the countries in the world by political regime type. The map has been population-weighted to show the size of countries relative to their population size.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

FIGURE 7

Backsliding democracies with the greatest number of democratic violations relating to the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to August 2021)



Notes: Each square represents an aspect of democracy covered by the GSoD Indices in which a violation has been recorded, with the colours indicating which aspect was affected.

Source: International IDEA, Global Monitor of Covid-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights, 31 August 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

Democratic backsliding can take different forms. Some ethnonationalist strategies use religion as a political weapon (e.g. India), whereas others attack gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Turkey).²⁴ Currently backsliding countries include some of the largest economies in the world: Brazil, India and the USA, in addition to countries such as Hungary, the Philippines and Poland. Slovenia, which holds the presidency of the EU in 2021, was added to the list of backsliders in 2020.

Some of these countries have been backsliding for a long time (Hungary) or began backsliding from a position of relative democratic weakness (the

Philippines). The backsliding process may be quicker for weak democracies, but the risk of democratic breakdown is also real for mid-range performing democracies (see the rapid descent of Poland over the last five years). Almost a third (30 per cent) of formerly backsliding democracies have turned into hybrid or authoritarian regimes, including Nicaragua, Russia, Turkey and Venezuela. Democratic breakdown in backsliding democracies usually occurs when levels of electoral support diminish, and incumbent governments manipulate the electoral process to remain in power.

While full democratic breakdown is one possible path for democratic backsliders, those that still enjoy some levels of electoral support can continue to hold free elections (and thus have higher levels of Representative Government), while the liberal aspects of democracy (Civil Liberties, Checks on Government) suffer continued losses and become disproportionately lower (so-called ‘illiberal democracies’). According to the GSoD Indices, there were only eight countries in the world in 2020 that combined relatively good scores on Clean Elections with poorer performance in Civil Liberties and Checks on Government (Bulgaria, El Salvador, Hungary, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland and Sri Lanka). Half of these countries (Hungary, India, the Philippines and Poland) are currently identified as backsliding, while El Salvador and Sri Lanka are at high risk of backsliding and are likely to be classified as such in the new data for 2021 if they continue to experience democratic declines.

Non-democratic regimes have become more authoritarian in the last five years

The year 2020 represented the worst on record for deepening authoritarianism in non-democratic regimes. The percentage of non-democratic regimes with statistically significant declines on at least one subattribute over a five-year period increased from 21 per cent in 2015 to 45 per cent in 2020, the highest ever (Figure 8). Hybrid regimes have seen declines in a greater number of democratic aspects, particularly during the pandemic, in part because there is little space for further democratic declines in authoritarian regimes (most of which have continued to apply systematic repression during the pandemic). Some hybrid regimes have also used the shield of the pandemic to drop any semblance of democracy and tighten their grip on power, without fear of significant international condemnation (see Figure 9).

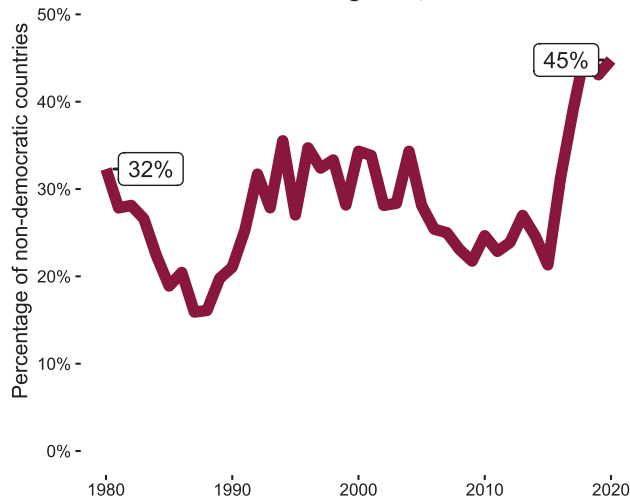
BOX 2

Developments in democratically backsliding countries in 2020 and 2021

- Brazil was the democracy with the largest number of declining attributes in 2020. The pandemic management has been plagued by corruption scandals and protests, while President Jair Bolsonaro has downplayed the pandemic and given mixed messages. The President has openly tested Brazil's democratic institutions, accusing magistrates of the Superior Electoral Court of preparing to conduct fraudulent activities with regard to the 2022 elections and attacking the media. The President has also declared that he will not obey the rulings of the Supreme Federal Court, which is investigating him for spreading false news regarding the electoral system in the country.²⁵
- In Hungary, human rights groups and the international community balked when the parliament (dominated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's political party Fidesz) granted the government the right to rule by decree without time limit in order to manage the pandemic, and established prison sentences of up to five years for spreading disinformation on the virus. In June 2021, this was replaced with a state of medical emergency, which cannot be lifted by parliament and is in place until December 2021.²⁶ Ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections, a series of new bills, if passed, will favour the party of the incumbent government and put the level playing field for opposition parties at risk in the next elections.²⁷
- India is the backsliding democracy with the most democratic violations during the pandemic. Violations include: harassment, arrests and prosecution of human rights defenders, activists, journalists, students, academics and others critical of the government or its policies; excessive use of force in the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations; harassment against Muslim minorities; Internet obstructions; and lockdowns, particularly in Kashmir.²⁸
- The Philippines has deepened its democratic backsliding during the pandemic through increased militarization of the pandemic response and a crackdown on free media. Several laws concentrate power in the executive to handle the pandemic,²⁹ including an anti-terrorism law that the government can use to target critics and a law which criminalizes the spread of disinformation, with fines up to USD 20,000.³⁰ Human rights violations have continued and increased during the pandemic, with killings as part of the 'war on drugs' rising dramatically with almost full impunity and lack of investigation. Furthermore, a number of politically motivated restrictions, legal actions and prosecutions have taken place in the country, including against activists, journalists and media outlets.³¹
- In Poland, incumbent candidate Andrzej Duda, backed by the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party, won re-election after heavy criticism for initially trying to bypass parliament and the National Electoral Commission to move forward with an all vote-by-mail presidential election.³² Criticism was raised about unconstitutional changes to the electoral law less than six months before the election, removal of functions from the National Electoral Commission, and Covid-19 restrictions on campaigning that favoured the incumbent party, which controls public broadcasting and which resorted to xenophobic, homophobic and antisemitic rhetoric, as well as the misuse of state resources.³³ Since then, restrictive abortion legislation has been passed despite public outcry, journalists have faced increasing restrictions and LGBTQIA+ activists have continued to face harassment and arrests through the establishment of 'LGBT-free zones'.³⁴ The judiciary, already severely weakened in its independence and politicized prior to the pandemic, has continued to face restrictions. The Court of Justice of the European Union issued a judgment in July 2021 that Poland's disciplinary system for judges is in breach of EU law.³⁵
- Slovenia, which holds the presidency of the EU in 2021, has been backsliding since 2020, although declines in Checks on Government and Civil Liberties have been recorded since 2016–2017. Concerns have been raised by the EU, as well as by local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), about harassment and threats towards journalists, defamation lawsuits against media outlets, funding cuts to NGOs, and legislation that has sought to expand surveillance and police powers. Concerns have also been raised about political pressures on the judiciary. However, state institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), and opposition parties and the parliament have played an active and key role in calling out and counteracting such efforts.³⁶

FIGURE 8

Deepening autocratization: Five-year democratic declines in non-democratic regimes, 1975–2020



Notes: The graph shows the percentage of non-democratic countries with at least one subattribute registering a statistically significant five-year decline from 1975 to 2020.

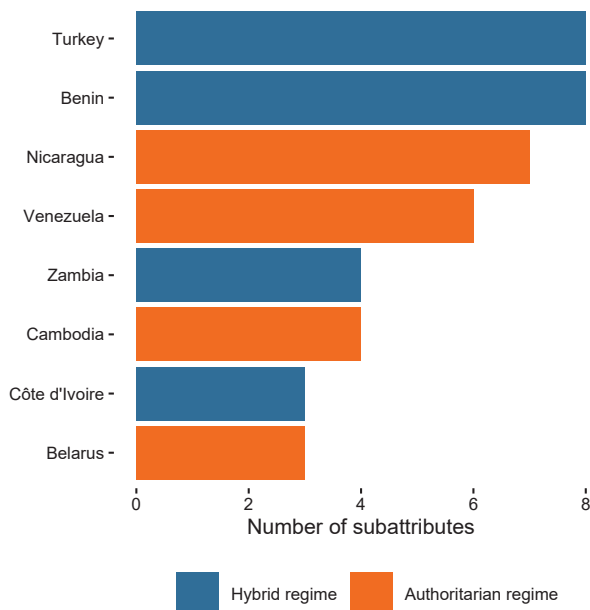
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

Hybrid regimes with the greatest number of subattributes registering five-year democratic declines in 2020 were: Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Serbia, Tanzania, Turkey and Zambia (although the opposition's victory in the Zambian election in 2021 may reverse these declines).³⁷ Statistically significant declines on a year-to-year basis are relatively rare, but were noted in Belarus, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire and Palestine.

Violent repression in non-democratic contexts can be seen in Belarus, Cuba and Myanmar, where the authorities have suppressed pro-democracy movements in 2020 and 2021, often using pandemic restrictions as a justification. In Côte d'Ivoire, arrests of opposition politicians ahead of the 2020 elections were made using their spread of 'fake news' on Covid-19 as a justification.³⁸ In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has severely repressed opposition candidates, independent journalists and civil society activists ahead of the 2021 elections. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin, after extending his term until 2032 through a flawed constitutional referendum in 2020, has cracked down on dissent, ordering the imprisonment

FIGURE 9

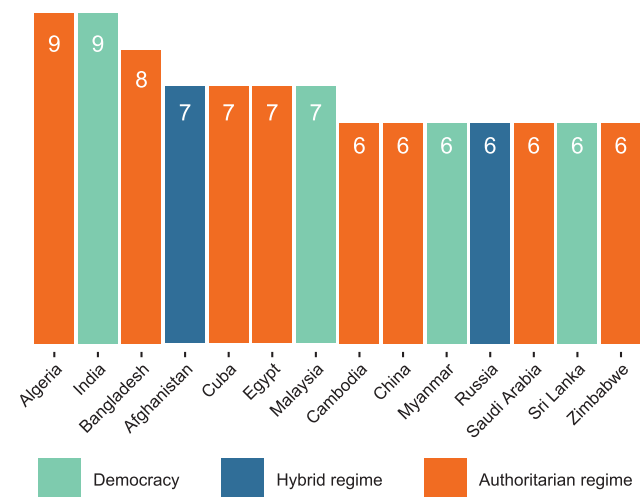
Non-democratic countries with the greatest number of subattributes registering significant declines over five years (2015–2020)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

FIGURE 10

Countries with the most democratic violations during the pandemic (March 2020–September 2021)



Notes: The data on democratic violations is drawn from International IDEA's Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights, and represents the number of aspects of democracy (out of 22) where democratic violations have been observed as of August 2021. The colours used in the graph represent the regime type as of 31 December 2020. For some countries, this classification will change in the next edition of the GSOD Indices due to events that occurred during 2021.

Source: International IDEA, Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights, 31 August 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/countries-regions-profile>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

of regime critic Alexei Navalny since early 2021 on politically motivated charges. This follows the Russian authorities' attempt to harm Navalny through poisoning and a ban on all political organizations linked to him, classifying them as 'extremist'.³⁹ Common to all these cases is a total disregard for human rights, violent repression and resistance to Western international pressure, often aided by masked or overt support from other autocratic powers, such as China and Russia (in the case of Belarus).⁴⁰

2.2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR RENEWAL

Democratic adaptation and modernization

The pandemic has forced many democratic institutions, such as electoral commissions, political parties and parliaments, to make more use of digital tools and collaborate more with other agencies, including health authorities. Such reforms, if maintained beyond the pandemic, can help make democratic institutions more agile and responsive to citizen needs, particularly in the electoral arena. *The Global State of Democracy 2021* and the accompanying thematic paper on electoral processes contain numerous examples of countries that have adapted and reformed their electoral processes. Table 1 shows the countries adopting various types of special voting arrangements (SVAs), most of which were in place before the pandemic but were extended during the pandemic.

The explosion of civic activism

People around the world continue not only to believe in the ideal of democracy but also to vocally demand it; 85 per cent of the respondents in one recent global poll said that having a democratic system was either 'fairly good' or 'very good'.⁴¹ During the pandemic, civil disobedience and protests have sprung up and grown in many countries, including Belarus, Cuba, Eswatini, Hong Kong, Myanmar and Thailand. In some cases, these protests have continued even in the face of violent repression. In fact, **82 per cent of countries** (135) have experienced protests during the pandemic.⁴² The Milk Tea Alliance in Asia, an online multinational protest and solidarity movement for democracy, provides a powerful example of the strength of democratic aspirations among people—and particularly youth—across Asia and beyond. The movement facilitates the sharing of protest tactics among democracy activists across countries such as India, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand.⁴³

BOX 3

Deepening autocratization and technology in China

China is an authoritarian regime in which there are no expectations of a right to privacy or control over personal data. Nonetheless, the ways in which the Chinese Government has harnessed technological innovations to maintain control over its people are striking, and the ways in which these technological approaches are being adopted abroad are cause for concern.⁴⁴

Use of technology for surveillance in China has been closely linked to, and aided by, the development of the tech industry in the country, with many private companies part of the surveillance complex. Since the Chinese conduct most of their daily activities online, such as banking, shopping and paying for services, there are millions of data points that can be attached to each citizen, shaping a very detailed profile of every person living in the country. Moreover, millions of cameras are spread throughout the country, while the government deploys some of the most sophisticated facial recognition technologies in existence.⁴⁵ That same information can potentially be linked to each person's profile. In addition, non-Chinese companies wanting to operate in the Chinese market are forced to comply with certain regulations, such as storing their data on Chinese soil, in order to make sure there are no loopholes in the surveillance system.⁴⁶

While no one in China is able to avoid surveillance, the extent of the technological monitoring of individuals and groups is most extreme with regard to the Uighur minority, who mainly live in Xinjiang province. There, the state has collected extensive biometric data (including DNA) that it has deployed to track people.⁴⁷ It has also been reported that the state harnesses its vast array of surveillance cameras across the country to collect data for a facial recognition system that tracks individuals from the Uighur community as they travel to cities in other parts of China.⁴⁸

Other countries have noted the success China has had in maintaining such a high level of surveillance and have begun to adopt the technology for their own domestic use.⁴⁹ The international aspects of China's domestic surveillance also include the indirect participation of tech companies based in democracies through the export of both hardware and software that are used in these surveillance programmes.⁵⁰

Politically engaged consumers have driven multinational private companies to protest against restrictions on voting rights in the United States, promote voting among their staff and support the Black Lives Matter movement.⁵¹ Similarly, the public statements by some companies against the treatment of Uighurs in China, and Twitter's blocking of the Chinese Embassy account in the USA regarding the same issue, as well as the implicit support given by Twitter to the Milk Tea Alliance, may also indicate a growing engagement by the private sector in democracy and human rights issues.⁵² Furthermore, the trial initiated in 2021 against four French retail companies accused of concealing 'crimes against humanity' in China's Xinjiang region may act as a deterrent for other companies sourcing clothes from China.⁵³ The forthcoming EU legislation on mandatory human rights due diligence for private sector

companies can also provide an additional push for greater democracy and human rights engagement by this sector.⁵⁴

Striding along the democratization path

Some countries continue to take important strides on their democratization paths, despite challenges posed by the pandemic. Zambia held elections in 2021 that were hailed as free and fair, with opposition candidate Hakainde Hichilema winning with a wide margin over incumbent President Edgar Lungu, opening up for democratic regime change through a peaceful transfer of power for the third time in Zambia's history.⁵⁵ Sudan had until October 2021 initiated a gradual transition to democracy since 2020 after massive pro-democracy protests triggered the deposition of long-standing ruler Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for 30 years.⁵⁶

TABLE 1

Special voting arrangements used in 2020 and 2021 national elections and referendums by country, data as of 31 August 2021

Type of SVA	Countries and territories	
Early voting (25)	2020	Belarus, Bermuda*, Ghana, Iceland, Israel, Jamaica, Lithuania, Myanmar*, New Zealand, North Macedonia*, Republic of Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka (various special categories of voters), Tajikistan, Trinidad and Tobago*, USA
	2021	Cabo Verde, Congo (security forces only), Israel (security forces only), Lao PDR*, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, UK (only by post)
Postal voting (16)	2020	Iceland, Lithuania, New Zealand (only from abroad), Poland*, Republic of Korea*, Romania (only from abroad), Switzerland, USA
	2021	Aruba* (voters in isolation), Ecuador, Gibraltar, Liechtenstein, Micronesia (only from abroad), Netherlands (above 70 years only), Slovenia, UK
Proxy voting (8)	2020	Belize, Croatia*, Poland, Switzerland
	2021	Algeria (various special categories of voter), Gibraltar*, Netherlands*, UK
Mobile ballot box voting (36)	2020	Belarus, Bermuda*, Croatia*, Czechia*, Georgia*, Iceland*, Italy*, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania*, Moldova*, Mongolia*, Montenegro*, Myanmar*, North Macedonia*, Republic of Korea*, Romania*, Russia, Serbia, Seychelles, Singapore, Suriname*, Switzerland, Tajikistan
	2021	Armenia (in-patients and voters in preliminary detention centres), Aruba (voters in hospitals, prisons and nursing homes), Bulgaria* (restricted to various special categories of voters), Bulgaria* (permanently disabled and voters in Covid quarantine), Cyprus, Ecuador, Iran*, Israel, Lao PDR, Moldova* (disabled voters), Mongolia* (restricted to various special categories of voter), Portugal*, Slovenia* (ill voters and residents of care facilities), UK

Note: Countries that include an asterisk (*) extend SVAs for Covid-19 patients.

Source: International IDEA, Featured Cases of Risk Mitigation Measures during Covid-19—Global, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

BOX 4

Democracy versus authoritarianism: which one is better for fighting pandemics?

A narrative that has gained prominence during the pandemic argues that authoritarian regimes may be more effective in fighting pandemics than democracies.⁵⁷ Recent research conducted by McMann and Tisch debunks this narrative, analysing the number of deaths from Covid-19 and vaccination coverage across different regime types based on a multivariate regression analysis.⁵⁸ The study finds:

- There is no statistical evidence that authoritarian regimes have been better at handling the pandemic than democracies, even accounting for the fact that many non-democratic regimes are not transparent in their data reporting.

- The quality of democracy matters—democracies with higher levels of fundamental rights and more impartial administrations have been more effective in curbing the pandemic than those democracies with lower performance—even accounting for other factors such as GDP and public health capacity.
- Democracies with more competitive processes for electing their executives have higher vaccination rates than other democracies.

These findings should encourage leaders and activists in hybrid and backsliding democracies to strengthen democracy, particularly fundamental rights, impartial administration, and competition for executive office, because these efforts can be associated with public health benefits.

However, a military coup in October 2021 has put the country's democratization path under severe strain.

In the following chapters, the analysis narrows in on the GSoD's five core attributes: Representative

Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. The analysis offers an explanation of recent trends and developments, with key examples from around the world.

Chapter 3 Representative Government

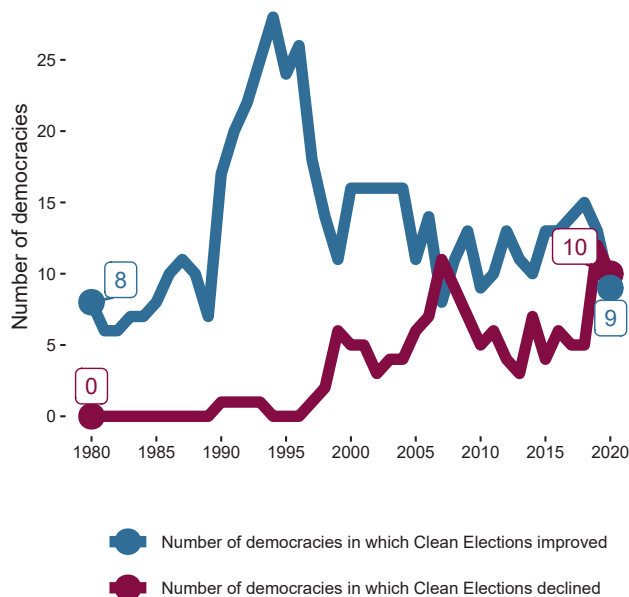
The GSoD Indices use the Representative Government attribute to evaluate countries' performance on the conduct of elections, the extent to which political parties are able to operate freely, and the extent to which access to government is decided by elections. This attribute is an aggregate of four subattributes: Clean Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties and Elected Government.

3.1 CLEAN ELECTIONS

The GSoD Indices Clean Elections subattribute measures the extent to which elections are free, aggregating measures of electoral management body (EMB) autonomy and capacity, evidence of voting

FIGURE 11

Number of democracies with statistically significant advances and declines in Clean Elections in the previous five years, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

irregularities, government intimidation during elections, and the extent of electoral competition.

A total of 10 democracies have experienced declines in Clean Elections since 2015: Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Czechia, Hungary, India, Mauritius, Namibia, Poland and the USA. In this period, five other countries lost their democratic status due to severe declines (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Honduras, Serbia and Turkey).

In 2020, for the second time in the last 20 years, the number of democracies with declines in the quality of their electoral processes exceeds those with advances (Figure 11).

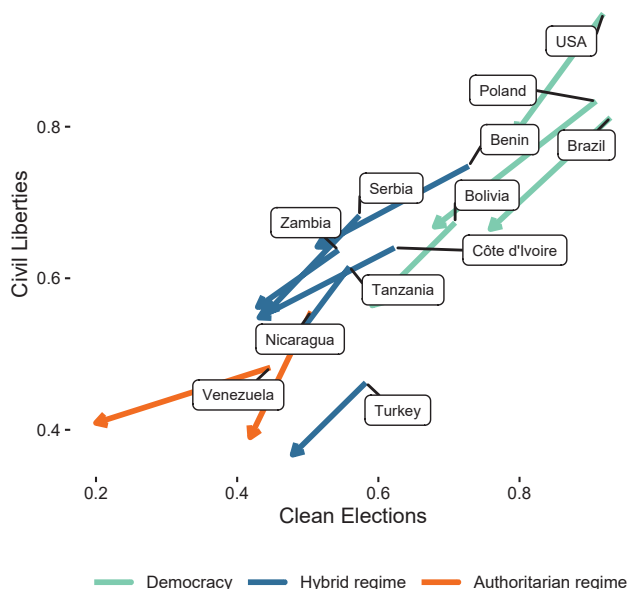
Of the 27 countries with a decline in their Clean Elections score from 2015 to 2020, 12 also recorded a significant decline in Civil Liberties during the same period, particularly in Freedom of Expression⁵⁹ (Figure 12). This worsening electoral environment has been observed in previously mid-range and high-performing democracies, with some democracies borrowing from the authoritarian toolbox. Kenya, a weak democracy, and India, a backsliding democracy, deployed Internet shutdowns during election periods, with India topping the world's list of countries that most frequently used such a tactic.⁶⁰ In 2020, government control of the media space, coupled with restrictions on campaigning, were seen in the backsliding democracies of Poland and Serbia, turning the latter into a hybrid regime as a result.⁶¹

In fact, the supportive infrastructure needed for credible elections—which is shaped by political party pluralism, inclusive suffrage, a vibrant civil society, a free and independent media, respect for civil liberties, institutional checks and balances, and a robust rule of law—has been worsening in recent years. Government control of the media, clampdowns on freedom of expression, and Internet shutdowns have played key roles.

Declines in electoral quality affect democracies of all types (Figure 13). This testifies to the fragility of democracy around the world in both new and old democracies. Serbia, which has been backsliding since 2013, finally became a hybrid regime in 2020.⁶²

FIGURE 12

Top 12 countries with largest declines in Clean Elections and Civil Liberties



Notes: The origin of each arrow is the value for each country for Clean Election (x axis) and Civil Liberties (y axis) in 2015. The end of the arrow is each country's score on those two subattributes in 2020.

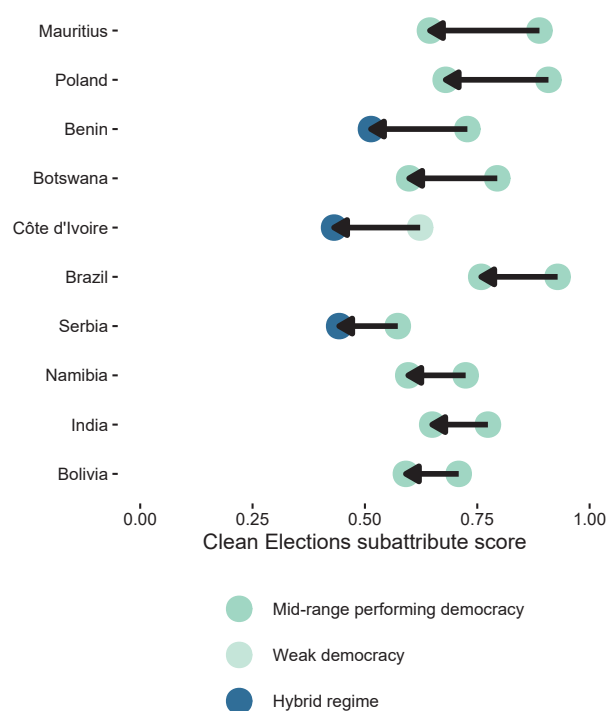
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

Throughout this period, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had constrained and discredited civil society⁶³ and enacted restrictions on free media; there were also voting day irregularities (from vote buying to multiple voting).⁶⁴ In 2020, parliamentary elections were largely contested with accusations of the misuse of public resources and an uneven playing field.⁶⁵ The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) claimed that the dominance of the ruling party, including in the media, was a cause for concern,⁶⁶ and parts of the opposition boycotted the elections.

Disputes about electoral outcomes are on the rise, including in established democracies. A historic turning point came in 2020–2021 when former President Donald Trump questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election results in the United States. Baseless allegations of electoral fraud and related disinformation undermined fundamental trust in the electoral process,⁶⁷ which culminated in the storming of the US Capitol building in January 2021.

FIGURE 13

Democracies with biggest declines in Clean Elections, 2015–2020



Notes: The graph shows the 10 countries that were democracies in 2015 and experienced the biggest declines in their Clean Elections score since that time. The dot on the right shows the score and regime type of the country in 2015 and the dot on the left shows the score and regime type in 2020.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

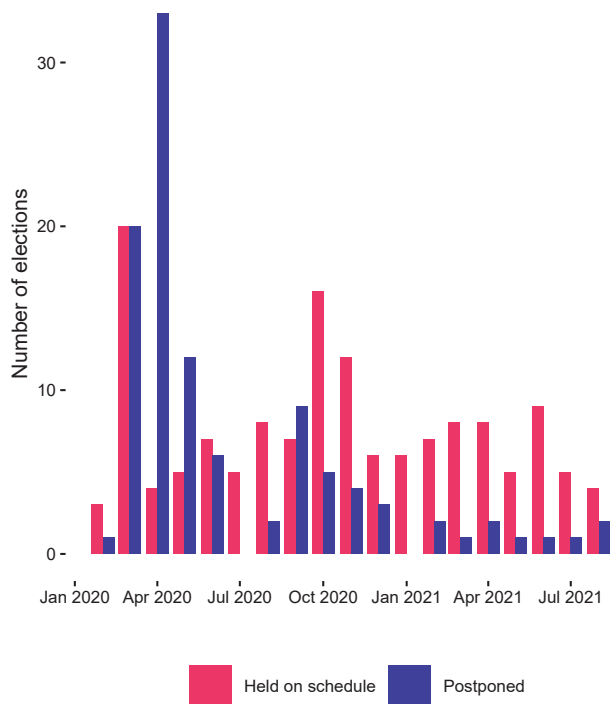
As of the end of October 2021, a similar argument alleging fraud but providing no evidence⁶⁸ was used to justify a bloody military coup in what had been the weak new democracy of Myanmar in February 2021.⁶⁹ Peru experienced one of its worst political crises following a divisive presidential election in November 2020. Candidate Keiko Fujimori, who lost the election, rejected the results and claimed that the election was rigged in favour of the winning candidate Pedro Castillo.⁷⁰ EMBs have also been subject to increasing attacks, including in mid-range and high-performing democracies that held elections in 2020 and 2021 or in countries due to hold elections. In Mexico and Brazil, presidents have questioned the integrity of the electoral commissions ahead of elections.⁷¹ In Brazil, the President has gone even further, questioning the 25-year-old voting system, and alleging that elections might be cancelled unless it is changed.⁷²

During 2020 and the first half of 2021, protesters questioned election results in Belarus, where the government responded with violent repression. In Kyrgyzstan, election results were annulled in October 2020 following mass protests, and a new vote was held in 2021.⁷³ In Côte d'Ivoire, the incumbent president won a contested victory in an election marred by violence, an opposition boycott and allegations of fraud.⁷⁴ As a result, the country no longer meets the minimum criteria for democracy and was reclassified as a hybrid regime in the 2020 GSoD classification.⁷⁵

These examples are evidence of a trend that began in 2010, marked by a global increase of electoral boycotts and a decline in the number of countries where all parties accept electoral results. As a result, there has been a global increase in electoral violence.⁷⁶

FIGURE 14

Elections held and postponed during the Covid-19 pandemic



Notes: The graph shows the number of elections held on schedule and postponed between February and December 2020, the first 10 months of the pandemic. The linear trendline shows the decrease in the number of postponed elections as the pandemic progressed.

Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 21 September 2021.

The declines are most noted in Africa but are also pronounced in Latin America and Asia.

While the global decline in electoral quality is no doubt grounded in links to domestic political developments in many countries, the geopolitical dimension also plays a role. Weakened global pressure for democratization, driven by backsliding in a number of geopolitically powerful countries and a delegitimization of the democratic model, have undermined democratic norms globally, as well as satisfaction with democracy.⁷⁷ In parallel, the growing economic influence of China (through both investments and loans) in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America may be an important part of this equation.⁷⁸

Electoral resilience in the face of the pandemic

Not all the evidence is negative with regards to elections. Despite the increasing pressures that democratic elections face globally, the pandemic offered marked and somewhat surprising proof of their resilience. An initial period of postponed elections after the onset of the pandemic was followed by a period of quick learning and adaptation that allowed many democracies to successfully hold elections. In 2020, during the pandemic (between February and December) 82 out of 162 scheduled elections at all levels (50.6 per cent) were postponed. Out of those postponed, 63 (76.8 per cent) were subsequently held.⁷⁹ As Figure 14 shows, postponement decreased as countries and EMBs learned to hold elections in challenging conditions.

There were some notable challenges. In some cases, postponements were seen to unfairly favour incumbents, who had more time to stay in office and/or restore their popularity during the crisis. For incumbents with authoritarian mindsets, holding elections during a legal state of exception provided an opportunity to use health and safety measures to sideline and silence political opponents, civil society, critical media and human rights advocates. While SVAs became a promising tool for many countries to deal with the challenge of holding elections during the pandemic, they often add significant costs, impose the need to update inadequate legal frameworks and ignite political controversies around possible risks to electoral integrity.⁸⁰

BOX 5

Special voting arrangements (SVAs)

SVAs are designed to expand voting opportunities and to facilitate the principle of universal suffrage; they constitute alternatives to casting a ballot in person on election day at a polling station. SVAs make voting more accessible for individuals, and this acquired special relevance during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are four types of SVAs, as follows:

- postal voting;
- early voting;
- proxy voting; and
- mobile ballot box voting.⁸¹

Other challenges included difficulty in conducting electoral observation, due to travel and movement restrictions and health concerns,⁸² along with difficulties in observing new voting methods and procedures put in place to ensure the safety of voters. As a result, a number of organizations conducting election monitoring (including the Organization of American States,⁸³ the Carter Center⁸⁴ and the OSCE⁸⁵) launched remote and hybrid expert missions, with smaller groups of observers on the ground. This has also placed greater importance on local CSOs conducting observation, with international bodies relying on them to complement their work.⁸⁶

In addition, voter turnout in most countries has dropped during the pandemic. From the beginning of the pandemic to the end of June 2021, voter turnout declined in 63 per cent of countries (53 out of 84 countries) that held national elections and referendums in comparison with their 2008–2019 average.⁸⁷

BOX 6

Managing elections during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic sparked significant electoral innovation, and many electoral management bodies (EMBs) adapted their logistics, planning and materials to ensure the health and safety of voters. The Republic of Korea and Mexico provide two good examples of this trend.

The Republic of Korea was one of the first countries to decide to go ahead with its scheduled election in the early stages of the pandemic. The EMB facilitated early voting, extended home voting provisions to Covid-19 patients in hospitals and those in self-isolation, and instituted safety and hygiene measures in polling stations. Worth highlighting is the use of augmented reality (AR) technology—the enhancement of real-world objects through electronic devices—for virtual election campaigning. Candidates ran eye-catching campaigns with three-dimensional leaflets and virtual spaces. These measures guaranteed the safety of voters and resulted in an overall turnout of 66 per cent, the highest rate in a parliamentary election since 1992.

Mexico went to the polls on 6 June 2021 to elect 21,000 representatives at all levels. Deemed the ‘largest in

Mexico’s history’⁸⁸—because of both the number of positions and the number of voters involved—this election represented a logistical challenge during a pandemic. The National Electoral Institute (INE) issued a specific Covid-19 protocol to keep voters safe in the 160,000-plus polling stations established nationwide.⁸⁹ Some of the actions undertaken included: mandatory use of face masks, signs and marks for keeping social distancing, hand sanitizing gel upon arriving at polling stations, disinfection of surfaces every two hours, allowing voters to bring their own crayon or pen to mark the ballot and only allowing two voters at a time inside the polling station. The turnout for this election stood at 52.66 per cent, the highest for a mid-term election since 1997.

EMBs around the world have been able to keep voters safe during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has also been the case during other health emergencies, such as the Ebola epidemic in Liberia in 2014⁹⁰ and the Spanish influenza in 1918–1920.⁹¹ This dynamic shows that an epidemic should not be used as an excuse to cancel the holding of elections and deny citizens their right to elect (and remove) their representatives.

Generally speaking, these pandemic years have been marked by examples of electoral resilience. Out of all elections held on time between February 2020 and September 2021, 73 per cent of them were in democracies.⁹² Although there was a decrease in voter turnout in the majority of national elections, 31 countries actually saw an increase in voter turnout during the pandemic—10 with an increase of more than 10 per cent.⁹³ Key ingredients for successful elections in a context of pandemic-related postponements were trust, multiparty consensus and inclusive decision-making. In Finland and New Zealand, transparent and inclusive decisions contributed to less controversial changes to timelines and to rules and regulations for proceeding with elections.⁹⁴ In the Republic of Korea, well-planned election administration and the adoption of safety measures (Box 6) led to an increase in turnout of over 13 per cent compared with previous elections.⁹⁵

New remote and digital practices are likely to last beyond the pandemic, as they also respond to broader societal and demographic changes, including increasing migration flows and voter mobility.⁹⁶ Political parties around the world also used innovations to run campaigns and engage with constituents throughout the pandemic. In the United States, parties held virtual party conventions⁹⁷ before adopting non-traditional rallies, such as drive-in events and those held at airports.⁹⁸

More analysis on the electoral lessons learned from the pandemic for future crises can be found in the GSoD 2021 thematic paper on elections.⁹⁹

Political parties under pressure

Many political parties have seen their membership and levels of activism in steady decline over the last few decades, due to voter disenchantment with institutions and a growing perception that governments are failing to address people’s social and economic needs. Despite overall improvement in all regions of the world between 1975 and 2020 (Figure 15), since 2016, and for the fifth consecutive year, the number of countries with declines in the Free Political Parties subattribute exceeds those with improvements—no surprise, given the global rise in democratic backsliding and a rise in authoritarian-leaning movements and parties around the world during that time (Figure 16).

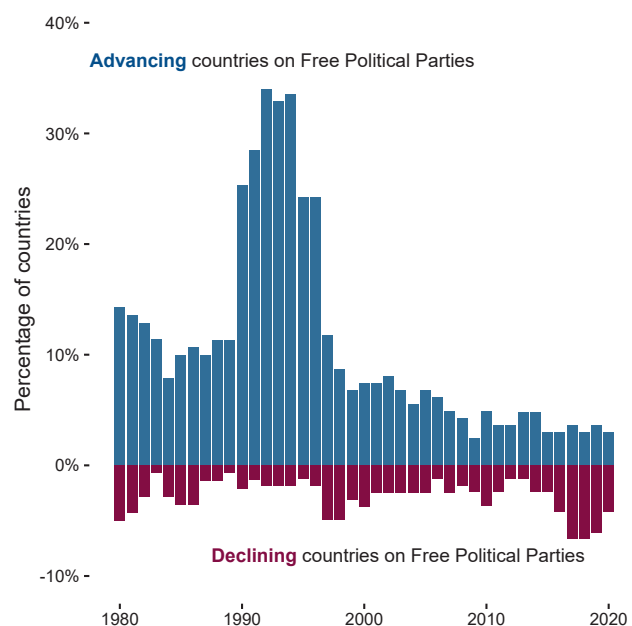
Parties have also been challenged in the last several years by new social and protest movements seemingly

more capable of catalysing society’s demands without formal political representation. This is the case, for instance, of the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean or the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA and beyond. Parties have also updated the way they understand membership, as seen in countries as diverse as France, India and Senegal.¹⁰⁰ The Aam Aadmi Party in India and La Republique en Marche! in France, among many others, have completely eliminated membership fees. Other parties, such as the Democratic Alliance in South Africa, have created a programme of online ambassadors to adapt party messages to the online sphere.¹⁰¹ The programmes have engaged a number of party activists with influence on social media, to explain party policies and positions online.

Perhaps in response to these new movements, many parties have harnessed technology to help them become more inclusive, including applications for crowdfunding and citizen engagement. In India, given the rapid increase in smartphone usage among

FIGURE 15

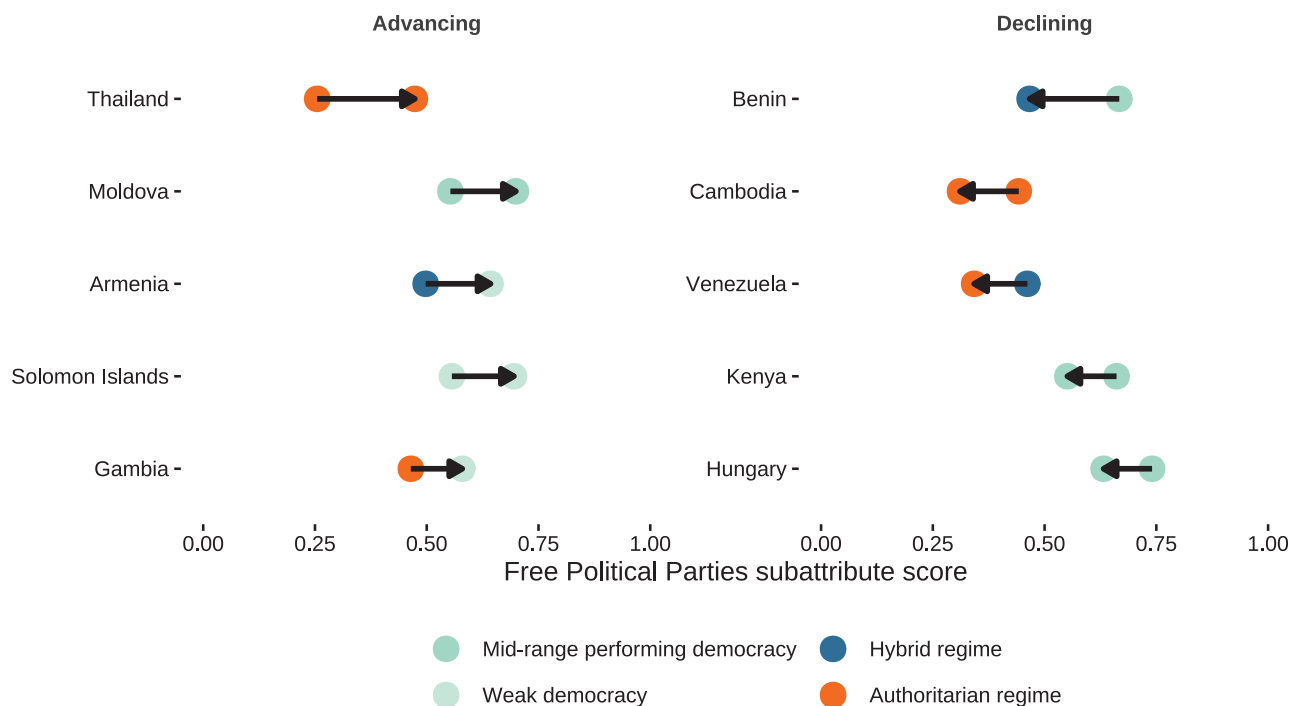
Percentage of countries advancing and declining on Free Political Parties, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

FIGURE 16

Top advancing and declining countries on Free Political Parties, 2015–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

lower- and middle-income voters, the Aam Aadmi Party developed a mobile app that facilitates direct donations.¹⁰² In the USA, candidates have developed apps that help improve contact and engagement with voters, including one where supporters were able to earn ‘points’ for sharing and liking certain media posts and for inviting friends to join.¹⁰³ The pandemic pushed parties even further to innovate in their offline activities but also to take the party further online.¹⁰⁴ The 2020 elections in the Republic of Korea were a clear example of a traditionally in-person political campaign moving largely online.¹⁰⁵

However, not all countries have been experiencing the shrinking of space for fair, multiparty competition. Since 2015, the top advancing countries for Free Political Parties are Armenia, the Gambia, Moldova, Thailand and Solomon Islands. In Armenia, mass anti-government protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, who failed to maintain his pledge to refrain from extending his rule. Since then, the electoral playing field is more levelled and opposition parties have more space to organize and campaign more freely.¹⁰⁶ In the Gambia, the end of President Yahya Jammeh’s 22-year rule has been marked by a more vibrant and plural space for political party action, unprecedented in that country.¹⁰⁷

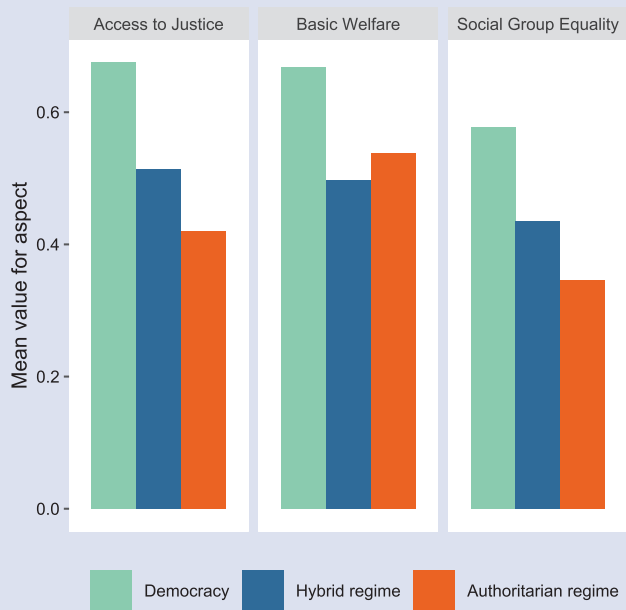
BOX 7

Social benefits of effective representative government

Elections and political parties are key facilitators of social and economic improvement. A number of studies have shown a positive relation between having a representative government and key welfare indicators, ranging from having adequate healthcare to the prevention of disasters.¹⁰⁸ International IDEA's data shows that democracies perform best (compared with non-democracies) across all 16 subattributes, including those directly related to social and economic wellbeing, such as Access to Justice, Basic Welfare and Social Group Equality (Figure 17), while democracies also consistently register higher performance on Absence of Corruption and Gender Equality as described above. Indeed, representative government, in which leaders can be held accountable by voters, creates an incentive for democratic governments to invest in people's development and delivery priorities.^{109 110}

FIGURE 17

Performance of democracies and non-democracies in key GSoD aspects



Note: The graph shows how democracies perform relative to hybrid and authoritarian regimes. The heights of the bars correspond to the mean level for each regime type on the listed GSoD Indices aspect.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

Chapter 4

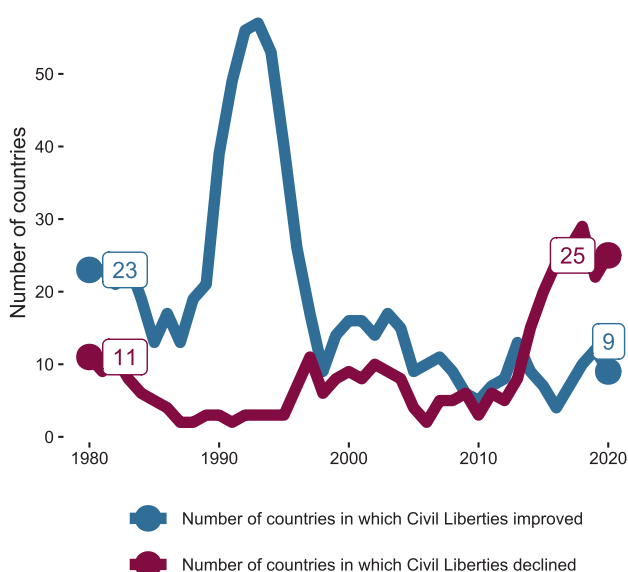
Fundamental Rights

The Fundamental Rights attribute aggregates scores from three subattributes: Access to Justice, Civil Liberties, and Social Rights and Equality. Overall, it measures the fair and equal access to justice, the extent to which civil liberties such as freedom of expression or movement are respected, and the extent to which countries are offering their citizens basic welfare and political equality.

It has become increasingly common for governments to struggle to respect and protect people’s civil liberties (Figure 18). A trend that began a decade ago has continued over the course of the last two years, as the pandemic has tested governments’ abilities to achieve the correct balance between public health and respect for people’s rights and freedoms. The difficulty has been compounded by a surge of protests, which have been sparked by dissatisfaction with pandemic responses but also by other long-unresolved grievances and persistent inequalities.

FIGURE 18

Number of countries with significant five-year declines and advances in Civil Liberties, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsd-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

4.1 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The Freedom of Expression subcomponent, which measures people’s right to seek, retain and impart information and ideas through any form of media, has suffered serious declines in the last two years. Some of these declines predate the pandemic, and certain governments have used the Covid-19 outbreak to justify the continuation of restrictions unrelated to the virus. In fact, Freedom of Expression was the aspect of democracy most at risk prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Measures that restrict this right have been the most disproportionate, when compared with other limitations on rights, and they are more likely to persist after the pandemic is over (see Box 8).

Restrictions on freedom of expression include the use of legislation to silence critical voices, the censorship of and restrictions on access to certain kinds of information, and attacks on journalists.¹¹¹ In Botswana, the Emergency

BOX 8

The attack on freedom of expression around the world

International IDEA’s *Global Monitor of Covid-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights* shows that 90 countries (55 per cent) have passed laws or taken actions to restrict freedom of expression during the pandemic, often justifying such actions as a necessary way to combat disinformation about the virus, which itself has been defined as an *infodemic* by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Figure 19). In total, 38 countries have used new laws or mandates to criminalize disinformation and 18 countries have used existing laws; 38 countries have made disinformation on Covid-19 an imprisonable offence. In at least 10 countries, the new laws are permanent and will last beyond the pandemic and risk causing long-term damage to freedom of expression in those countries. In addition, 18 countries imposed fines for the spread of disinformation on Covid-19, of which 9 are democracies, including **Albania, Bulgaria, Mongolia** and the backsliding **Philippines**. In the Philippines, the fines are the highest—at USD 20,000.

Powers (COVID-19) Regulations 2020 made ‘the intention to deceive’ the public about Covid-19 or measures taken by the government to address the pandemic an imprisonable offence, punishable with up to five years in jail or a USD 10,000 fine.¹¹² Data from International IDEA’s Global Monitor of Covid-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights shows that in many countries, including Belarus, Egypt, Papua New Guinea, Turkey and Venezuela, attacks have been perpetrated against scientists, healthcare workers, activists or opposition politicians in addition to journalists. These victims have been targeted for disseminating data, research and information, as well as for lodging complaints on the handling of the pandemic or reporting on the virus. In September 2020, for example, Human Rights Watch raised concerns when Sudanese artists were imprisoned and fined for chanting pro-democracy slogans at a police station.¹¹³

While the large majority of concerning developments related to Freedom of Expression have occurred in non-democratic regimes that were already weak prior to the pandemic, 15 democracies have experienced concerning developments during the pandemic. The Global Monitor also shows that the Asia and the Pacific region has been particularly hard hit. One of the most striking examples is

that of Hong Kong, where new security legislation, widely criticized as curtailing freedom of speech and assembly, was introduced in June 2020. In early December 2020, a trio of young high-profile democracy activists, veterans of the 2014 ‘umbrella movement’, were sentenced to between 7 and 13 months’ imprisonment for ‘unauthorized protest’ that had taken place more than a year earlier, when the new legislation was not in effect.¹¹⁴ Ten days later, they were joined by billionaire Hong Kong newspaper owner Jimmy Lai, a long-standing supporter of the territory’s pro-democracy movement. Under the new legislation, trials can be held in secret and without a jury, and cases can also be taken over by mainland authorities.¹¹⁵

This context has been made worse by an embattled independent press, which has long faced pressure from the growth of social media and has more recently struggled to survive the economic impact of the pandemic (see Section 5.3 on Media Integrity for more details).¹¹⁶

Restricted access to information

Freedom of expression is dependent upon the access to information, and democracies have done well in this regard. A total of 91 per cent of all countries covered by International IDEA’s Global Monitor provide a government website on Covid-19, and 97 per cent of democratic governments do so. In contrast, 77 per cent of authoritarian regimes provide the public with this kind of resource.

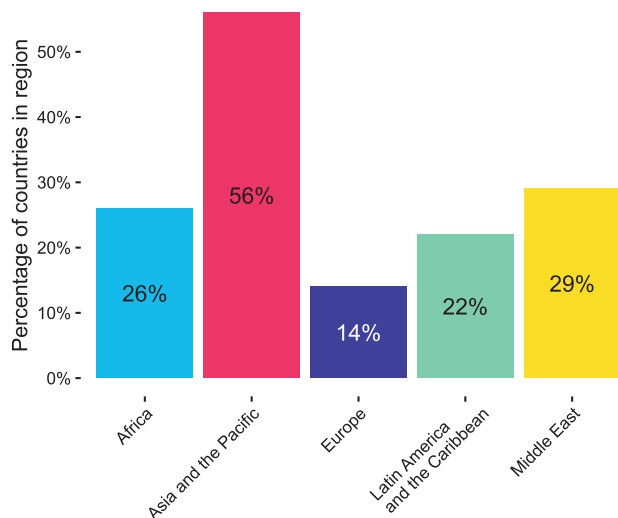
In June 2020, for example, the late President of Tanzania, John Magufuli, rumoured to have died from Covid-19,¹¹⁷ declared that his country was ‘Covid-free’. His government restricted the media from publishing Covid-19 content without permission, and many Tanzanians were afraid to speak out due to the fear of repercussions.¹¹⁸ Critics accused the government of a cover-up, especially after evidence of night-time burials with attendants in protective gear came to light.¹¹⁹

Democracies have not gone unscathed. In the USA and Poland, for example, there were reports of doctors and other medical staff who had been instructed not to speak with journalists. In some cases, those who flouted this order lost their jobs.¹²⁰

Learning from the MERS and SARS epidemics, some countries have revised their legislation to strengthen the right to information during a public health emergency (e.g. the Republic of Korea).¹²¹ A number of countries provide good examples of open government, posting and regularly updating information about the spread of infections, the

FIGURE 19

Violations of Freedom of Expression by region



Notes: The bars represent the percentage of countries in each region in which there was a violation of the right to Freedom of Expression.

Source: International IDEA, Global Monitor of Covid-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights, 31 August 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/countries-regions-profile?rsc=%5B625%5D& covid19=1>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

number of deaths from Covid-19 and up-to-date information about restrictions and vaccinations to keep citizens informed.¹²² Many countries' public health agencies—such as in [Italy](#), [Sweden](#)¹²³ and [Taiwan](#)—held weekly or much more frequent press briefings throughout the pandemic to keep the public regularly informed. Many authorities have also made efforts to reach people in different languages.¹²⁴

Ensuring transparent access to reliable Covid-19-related information is key to preventing the spread of disinformation. In Taiwan, the government used viral memes, cartoons, animal mascots and other humorous digital campaigns to communicate with the public on the

virus.¹²⁵ South Africa developed a hotline to report false information, and Taiwan and the United Kingdom opened specialized units to identify and respond to disinformation. Web-based and app-based anti-disinformation games and fact-checking sites have also been developed to debunk inaccurate content and help people navigate facts and disinformation on the virus.¹²⁶ WHO launched a multilingual messaging service with WhatsApp to answer questions.¹²⁷ And supporting official efforts, the NGO Taiwan FactCheck Center has been cooperating with social media platforms nationally to verify pandemic-related information posted online, as well as educate the public in identifying and reporting fake news.¹²⁸

BOX 9

Disinformation as a defining vulnerability of democracy

Disinformation has become a defining issue of politics in our times. The term is often used broadly to encompass the artificial and inauthentic manipulation of public opinion online, through multiple techniques including false or misleading information. It has always existed, but social media and online communications have exponentially amplified its impact and reach. Disinformation campaigns can be international in scope, with the power to impact public opinion, freedom of thought, the right to privacy and the right to democratic participation. Disinformation also endangers a range of economic, social and cultural rights, harming citizens' faith in democratic institutions by distorting perceptions of free and fair elections and by fomenting digital violence and repression.¹²⁹

This has allowed formerly fringe ideas and political forces to come to the forefront of the political debate, and galvanized polarizing rhetoric. Social media is designed to prioritize any content that boosts engagement, so companies gather more behavioural data to target their ads more accurately. When this logic is applied to political debate, it is confrontation and affective polarization, rather than compromise and dialogue, that fuel engagement. Populist, nativist, illiberal and authoritarian leaders thrive in such scenarios, which can also sometimes push democratic forces to use similar polarizing and confrontational narratives and techniques to maintain their voices online. This presence is fundamental, as users increasingly use online platforms as their main source of information. In some countries, including [Indonesia](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Peru](#), nearly 80 per cent of the population use their smartphone as their main news device.¹³⁰

Disinformation attacks common political knowledge—those ideas and beliefs that are shared by the majority and that maintain the cohesion of political systems, such as the integrity of the electoral process or the separation of

powers.¹³¹ An example of an attack on common political knowledge that threatens the quality of democracy can be found in the wave of disinformation targeting vote-counting in the USA or Peruvian presidential elections. This has significantly damaged trust in elections, even if both elections were largely free and fair.¹³²

Regulation has advanced significantly in recent years, both from social media platforms themselves and from governments. Social media platforms have implemented several self-regulating measures and invested a significant amount of resources in fighting political disinformation. Today, Google and [Twitter](#) basically ban paid political advertisements and Facebook has created a wide array of tools that increase the transparency of [political ads](#), among other things. Some of the [measures taken by Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) during the 2020 US presidential elections are also proof of this. On the government side, although upcoming laws such as the Digital Service Act in the EU are praiseworthy, many governments are taking advantage of regulations to restrict freedom of expression and media integrity.¹³³ This has been exacerbated during the pandemic. In [Nicaragua](#), for instance, journalists have been harassed under the Cyber Crimes Law, approved by parliament in December 2020.¹³⁴

Political disinformation will never disappear, but regulation should address the behaviours and means that make it possible. Addressing the way disinformation operations are financed by political parties and candidates will be a start and will in parallel reduce the undue influence of money in politics. Other actions should aim to change behaviour by political actors and by the media, so that they foster non-polarizing narratives. Action should also focus on applying the open government principles to fight disinformation and to increase media literacy among citizens.¹³⁵

4.2 FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantee everyone the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of association with others, including through trade unions.¹³⁶

As the pandemic has ravaged the world, it is clear that governments have struggled to protect public health while continuing to maintain respect for these rights. In fact, **96 per cent of countries** placed some form of restriction on the freedoms of association and assembly since the start of the pandemic, including bans on the size or the holding of public gatherings. Many restrictions have appeared to serve political purposes. In Sri Lanka, the government banned an annual memorial of victims of the civil war that takes place in the northeast of the country, where commemorations tend to be for former rebel soldiers.¹³⁷

But people have also been driven to protest and voice their concerns, despite the restrictions. Protests have continued in **82 per cent of countries** (135), despite the pandemic. Pandemic-related protests have broken out over lockdown measures, demands for better safety measures for frontline workers, economic and financial aid for struggling businesses, and perceived government mismanagement of the pandemic. In some cases, pandemic-related concerns have intertwined with pre-existing issues (see Chapter 7 on Participatory Engagement for more details).

Curbing freedom of movement and worship

As they have sought to contain the spread of the virus within and outside their borders, governments have also found it necessary to curb freedom of movement. In fact, almost **all countries in the world** covered by the GSoD Indices, including high-performing democracies, have imposed some kind of restriction on domestic and foreign movement and the right to worship. **More than half of all countries** in the world (55 per cent) implemented a national lockdown at some point. As a result, freedom of movement has been severely impacted during the pandemic in all democracies. Restrictions have included lockdowns, bans on domestic travel as well as international travel, and/or mandatory quarantine for visitors. In a related development, at least **135 countries** (82 per cent) placed some restrictions on freedom of religion during the pandemic, either banning religious gatherings or

restricting their size and duration. By August 2021, restrictions on worship remained in place in **68 countries** (41 per cent).

In democracies, these measures have been implemented in proportion to the health threat and imposed within democratically approved legal frameworks. In some cases, however, initially temporary measures have remained in place or been reimposed to respond to subsequent waves of the pandemic, thereby limiting democratic freedoms for much longer than originally envisaged. In most cases, this has gone on for more than a year. As of August 2021, restrictions on movement remained in place in **161 countries** (98 per cent), although vaccination campaigns are slowly leading to a reopening of societies.¹³⁸

Restrictions on movement between countries have not always been seen to be equally or fairly applied. There has been criticism about the Trump Administration's early ban on travel from China to the United States even while travel from Europe to the USA continued to be allowed. One study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that a ban on European travel to the USA in February 2020, when the ban on China was active, could have potentially saved tens of thousands of lives.¹³⁹ Allegations of racism have also been levelled against Australia, which imposed a ban on Australians of Indian descent being allowed back home.¹⁴⁰

Enforcement of Covid-19 measures

In the early phase of the pandemic, many governments invoked a legal state of exception (namely, a state of emergency or a state of disaster), giving themselves (often with the cooperation of the legislature) additional powers to introduce regulations and big spending programmes to deal with the effects of the pandemic. In this context, **69 countries** have made violating Covid-19 regulations an imprisonable offence. Two-thirds of the countries passing laws of this nature (67 per cent) are democracies, with 12 from the EU. The weak democracy **Albania** and the mid-range performing democracy of **Mexico** top the list of countries with the longest prison sentences for breaking pandemic restrictions (15 and 12 years respectively). These restrictions can take on undemocratic characteristics. For example, excessive use of force in enforcing restrictions violates democratic norms; this has alarmingly occurred in **59 per cent of countries** (97) in the world during the pandemic, including 54 democracies. For example, in **Zambia**, arbitrary detentions, together with intimidation

tactics and harassment, have been used by the police to enforce the movement restrictions imposed, in an effort to curb the Covid-19 pandemic.

More than **20 per cent of countries** across all regions have made use of the military in some respect to support enforcement of Covid-19 measures. This heightens the risk of unchecked excessive force and the normalization of increasingly militarized civil life after the pandemic. Military enforcement throughout the pandemic has been most commonly observed in **Latin America** (39 per cent of countries), the **Middle East** (35 per cent) and **Asia and the Pacific** (25 per cent).

Globally, **42 per cent of countries** have used either voluntary or compulsory contact tracing apps or sharing of mobile data as part of their pandemic response. While these approaches have proven effective in curbing the spread of the virus, they also pose new challenges to personal integrity and data protection, particularly in countries that lack adequate legislative frameworks. There is also a risk that the storage of personal data can be used for political purposes after the pandemic is over. Of particular concern are the eight non-democratic regimes (**Azerbaijan, Bahrain, China, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Singapore, Thailand and Turkey**) that have made these apps mandatory, countering good practice guidelines.¹⁴¹

BOX 10

Emergency law responses during the pandemic

The majority of governments' early containment measures—in March 2020—were in the context of legally defined emergency law responses, allowing governments to temporarily restrict rights in ways that maintained the rule of law.

There is wide variation across countries in the types of emergency law response that are available for governments. In some cases, the constitution defines several levels of emergency law response (Spain has a state of alarm, a state of exception and a state of siege),¹⁴² while in other countries the only emergency law response available is designed for use during a war or insurrection (as in Latvia).¹⁴³ Finally, some countries do not have a constitutional avenue for an emergency law response by the central government but do provide a statutory framework (as in the USA).¹⁴⁴ The GSoD thematic paper on emergency law responses and Covid-19 highlights the ways in which the pandemic has exposed the shortcomings in how many constitutions regulate extraordinary situations. In a world in which climate change increases the probability of natural disasters, clear legal frameworks with effective oversight mechanisms for emergencies should be a high priority for legal reform in many countries.¹⁴⁵

Emergency laws do not necessarily allow for derogation of rights. In the Spanish case, the lowest level of emergency law response (the State of Alarm) declared in March 2020 was later found to be in violation of the Constitution because the government used that emergency law response to implement measures that had the effect of suspending rights guaranteed by the Constitution.¹⁴⁶ Emergency laws are also not solely within

the purview of the executive. In fact, most frameworks require the legislature to review and approve executive action within a specified timeframe. In Fiji, the period is 24 hours,¹⁴⁷ while in Botswana, approval is required within 7 or 21 days depending on specified circumstances.¹⁴⁸ Sometimes, the mechanism varies depending on the type of emergency declared.¹⁴⁹

An additional check on possible rights restrictions can be found in international and regional human rights covenants, many of which provide for derogation of rights during emergencies and which often require signatory states to provide an official notification of this action.¹⁵⁰ This provides an added layer of accountability for governments that determine that the pandemic requires such a robust response. However, the GSoD thematic paper on emergency law responses and Covid-19 notes that compliance with the notification obligation has not been universal, and that the safeguards in this area are inadequate.¹⁵¹

The relationship between the type of emergency law response used in a country (whether constitutional or legislated), and potential impacts on the state of democracy is complex and context specific. Two guiding considerations enable nuanced judgements in individual cases. First, do the emergency law responses follow the substantive and procedural requirements of national and (to whatever extent it is relevant) international law? Second, are the measures necessary, and if so have they been implemented in a proportional way? These questions allow for a nuanced analysis of the extent to which restrictions on (or indeed clear violations of) fundamental rights may still be consonant with democracy.

Gender and social group inequality—at the start of the pandemic

The fight for gender equality was slow-going even before the pandemic, but the consequences of the virus have made progress even harder. Lockdowns have increased gender-based violence in many countries. In Cyprus and Singapore, for example, helplines have registered an increase in calls by 30 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively. In Argentina, emergency calls for domestic violence cases increased by 25 per cent after the lockdown started.¹⁵² Lockdowns and school closures in **96 per cent of countries** (158) since the start of the pandemic have also had a disproportionate impact on women's economic and productive lives, as it is women who have often had to give up jobs to look after children who cannot attend school. The International Labour Organization projected that women's employment was 19 per cent more at risk than men's employment during the pandemic.¹⁵³ Moreover, 40 per cent of all employed women work in hard-hit sectors (retail, food service and entertainment), compared with 37 per cent of men.¹⁵⁴

Moreover, women have been under-represented in leadership and expert groups managing the Covid-19 crisis and have had limited opportunities to make their voices heard in the policy responses to the pandemic.¹⁵⁵ Global female parliamentary representation remains low at approximately 26 per cent of total seats in national legislatures. Only three legislatures in the world (Cuba, Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates) are made up of more than 50 per cent women, and none of them are democracies.¹⁵⁶ In 2021, there are still countries in the world with no women legislators (Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu). Female representation in other spheres of public life and in the private sector globally is even lower, with only 21 per cent of women in the executive branch and only 5 per cent of corporate boards chaired by women.¹⁵⁷

In addition to globally low levels of gender equality being exacerbated by pandemic effects, gender equality is also threatened by rising authoritarianism, with political leaders increasingly using gender as a weapon as part of their backsliding strategies.¹⁵⁸ Hungary and Poland pressed for the removal of the term 'gender equality' in the EU declaration on advancing social cohesion post-pandemic at a social summit held in May 2021.¹⁵⁹ In March 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pulled Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention, the legally binding Council of Europe treaty to tackle violence against women.¹⁶⁰ Hungary did so in 2019.¹⁶¹ In Azerbaijan, the authorities have targeted women's rights activists

using a smear campaign to push women out of political life.¹⁶² In Russia, President Vladimir Putin has scaled back numerous domestic violence laws, while India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has fought against the criminalization of marital rape.¹⁶³

At the same time, despite the backlash faced by women in many countries, the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 have shown how much female leadership matters. Women have been at the forefront of the pandemic response, representing 70 per cent of healthcare workers.¹⁶⁴ Women have also been leading lights of the pro-democracy movements that have developed in Belarus and Myanmar during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, showing the strength of female leadership for bringing about societal change, even in the face of violent repression.¹⁶⁵ In Chile, elections for the Constituent Assembly held in May 2021 led to more women than men elected in certain districts, forcing a situation in which additional men had to be given seats to respect the parity principle.¹⁶⁶ At the local level, the state of Victoria in Australia saw a rise in female representation in local council elections in October 2020, despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Victoria is now one of the few local governments in the world that is close to gender parity, with 43.8 per cent of councillors, and an express aim of achieving 50 per cent by 2025.¹⁶⁷ In Nepal, mayors and deputy mayors have been key actors in ensuring that pandemic-related interventions are both gender sensitive and inclusive. The majority of Nepal's elected deputy mayors are currently women.¹⁶⁸

Social group equality has also been severely affected by the pandemic, as vulnerable groups—such as children, migrants, disabled people, and ethnic, sexual and religious minorities—have faced discrimination in the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations and access to healthcare across the world. First, the impact of the pandemic has deepened long-existing economic inequalities throughout the globe. The International Monetary Fund describes a 'Great Divergence', in which advanced economies in the post-pandemic era could grow even faster than they did before the pandemic, while smaller economies languish for years to come.¹⁶⁹ This divergence is also evident within countries, as industries such as tourism and hospitality have suffered while sectors such as pharmaceuticals and networking technology have boomed. Wealthier people and nations may emerge from the pandemic better off than they were before, while the more disadvantaged bear the economic brunt.¹⁷⁰ According to a report

by The Economist Intelligence Unit, countries with the lowest vaccination rates will stand to lose about USD 2.3 trillion worth of output between 2022 and 2025, an amount that is roughly the GDP of France.¹⁷¹

There are also important divides between different ethnic and racial groups within countries.¹⁷² A study in England and Wales found that men and women of black African heritage had the highest death rates from Covid-19—around two times higher than their white counterparts.¹⁷³ Over the past two pandemic years, different groups' varying levels of enjoyment of civil and political liberties have also become apparent. In many of these cases, these inequalities are long-standing; the context of the pandemic, however, has refocused attention on them. In the United States, for example, research indicates that some states' voter registration and voting laws, either recently approved or currently under discussion, end up disproportionately affecting minorities in a negative way.¹⁷⁴ In India, the government has used laws against cow slaughter and anti-conversion to target Muslims,¹⁷⁵ while sedition and counter-terrorism laws have been used to target

human rights defenders, student activists, academics, opposition members and other critics.¹⁷⁶ Deepening polarization has also been evident in Sri Lanka, where the government imposed a ban on burials, saying that virus-infected bodies could infect groundwater. This ban impacted the country's Christian and Muslim minority communities until it was lifted in February 2021.¹⁷⁷

Sexual minority groups have also been targeted. In Poland, more than 100 municipalities have declared themselves 'LGBT-free zones' since 2019, signing declarations against LGBTQIA+ ideologies and relationships.¹⁷⁸ In Hungary in 2021, a law was passed banning homosexuality from sexual education in schools, causing outrage in the EU and among LGBTQIA+ rights activists.¹⁷⁹

Despite these setbacks, LGBTQIA+ rights have also experienced some important milestones in 2021. In the USA in November 2020, Sarah McBride became the first transgender state senator (in the state of Delaware) in the history of the country. And in 2021, the world's first non-binary mayor was elected in Wales in the UK.¹⁸⁰

Chapter 5

Checks on Government

The Checks on Government attribute aggregates scores from three subattributes: Effective Parliament, Judicial Independence and Media Integrity. It measures the extent to which the parliament oversees the executive, as well as whether the courts are independent, and whether media is diverse and critical of the government without being penalized for it.

Given the rise in authoritarianism, it is unsurprising that global progress towards better checks on government is not advancing more quickly. At a high level of aggregation, this attribute stalled around 2010, and

there have been slight declines at the regional level in the Middle East and in Europe. The individual countries that have experienced declines between 2015 and 2020 are Benin, Brazil, Poland and Yemen. Checks on Government is a key attribute indicative of democratic backsliding, and so it is not surprising to see that two of those countries (Brazil and Poland) have been identified in this report as backsliding democracies, while Benin lost its democratic status in 2019. During the same period, statistically significant gains were made in Armenia, Ecuador, the Gambia, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and Uzbekistan.¹⁸⁷

BOX 11

Checks on government and service delivery

Checks on government are vitally linked to the delivery of government services. In many countries, the judiciary plays an important role in ensuring that citizens receive from the government the goods and services to which they are legally entitled. Landmark cases in countries including Brazil,¹⁸¹ Colombia,¹⁸² India¹⁸³ and South Africa¹⁸⁴ have required governments to take positive steps to fulfil promises made by the law. An effective parliament, too, is vital to service delivery for citizens, as members of the legislature can ensure that the people they represent receive timely and adequate services from government agencies.¹⁸⁵

One area of checks on government where there has been growth and innovation in recent years is in the openness and transparency of government data. An effective 'open government' policy requires collaboration between the executive, the legislature, civil society and the media.¹⁸⁶ In this way, journalists, CSOs and citizens can access information about the government without undue delays, redaction or bureaucratic hurdles. As the impacts of climate change are increasingly being felt around the world, open government data will be more necessary than ever. This will enable both checks against government overreach (including climate mitigation strategies that violate fundamental rights), and accountability in areas where governments have not lived up to their promises.

5.1 THE STRUGGLE FOR JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

The number of countries with weakening Judicial Independence started to rise in 2009 and has reached and remained at an all-time historic high since then, including during the first pandemic year of 2020 (Figure 20). Such weakening judicial independence is often the result of attempts to politicize judicial institutions and weaken the rule of law, both in weak democracies and as part of democratic backsliding processes. Political leaders who want to concentrate power in the hands of their parties often seek to implement reforms that allow them to rule with only minimal checks. Disempowering or capturing the judiciary is a key part of those attempts (see, for example, rhetorical and institutional attacks on the judiciary in Poland and Brazil).¹⁸⁸

However, there are also many countries that have experienced significant advances in Judicial Independence since 2010, an increase that has continued during the pandemic year of 2020 (Figure 20). Judicial institutions have played a crucial role in containing executive overreach during the pandemic, both in the invocation and extension of states of emergency, and in the application of restrictions.

Among the most problematic of cases is Poland. The PiS Government has gradually chipped away at the independence of the judiciary since 2015, changing the rules governing several courts in a manner that is

designed to give the ruling party more opportunities to appoint judges, and more control over who those judges will be.¹⁸⁹

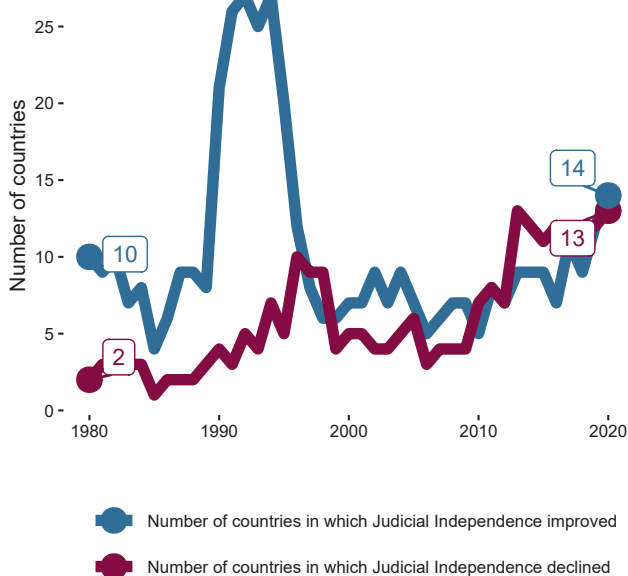
During the pandemic, several Latin American countries have been rocked by conflicts between judicial institutions, parliaments and government. In the weak democracy of Guatemala, for example, conflicts between the legislature, the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court and the Attorney General have undermined the credibility of judicial institutions. The conflicts have been exacerbated during the pandemic, positioning Guatemala on the verge of a constitutional crisis, as the legislature has sought variously to impeach justices of the Constitutional Court, to prevent their appointment, and to remove their immunity from civil litigation.¹⁹⁰ In particular, litigation initiated by the legislature against sitting justices carries the risk of a constitutional crisis.¹⁹¹ These conflicts have severely undermined the capacity of the judiciary to combat corruption, even as the country ranks among the top 25 per cent of countries with the highest levels of corruption in the world.¹⁹²

Even high-performing democracies in Western Europe have suffered challenges to ensuring judicial independence during the pandemic, although not as a result of it. In Spain, the government initially passed but then withdrew a bill that would have made the appointments process for judges easier and subject to less scrutiny.¹⁹³ The proposal highlights the ways in which high-performing democracies must be vigilant to maintain judicial independence.

Judicial institutions, however, have also successfully resisted executive influence. In 2020, Malawi was the second African country in history to annul a presidential election and demand a rerun, with the Constitutional Court citing ‘widespread, systematic and grave irregularities’. Fresh elections were free of irregularities in June 2020, with a win for opposition parties.¹⁹⁴ In Lesotho, the Constitutional Court ordered the reopening of parliament, after the Prime Minister ordered a three-month closure because of the pandemic.¹⁹⁵ In Guyana, the Supreme Court ordered a recount of votes after the 2020 elections, resulting in the incumbent’s loss.¹⁹⁶

FIGURE 20

Number of countries with significant five-year declines and advances in Judicial Independence, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

5.2 THE CRITICAL ROLE OF EFFECTIVE PARLIAMENT

The GSoD Effective Parliament subattribute measures legislatures’ (including opposition parties’) capacity for executive oversight and investigation. Parliamentary strength has been improving in several countries since 2015, with new democracies, such as Armenia and the Gambia, as well as mid-range performing democracies, such as the Republic of Korea and Ukraine, serving as examples (Box 12) of how legislatures can improve their performance.

With the onset of the pandemic, the critical role of parliaments in sustaining democratic models of governance quickly became clear. In countries where ruling parties had a history of entrenching their parliamentary influence in the pre-pandemic period, parliaments were muted. Ruling-party majorities often self-divested from systematic and rigorous oversight and meaningful public deliberation on measures to address the pandemic (see, for example, in Hungary,¹⁹⁷ India¹⁹⁸ and South Africa¹⁹⁹). During the first pandemic year of 2020, the number of countries with weakened parliaments increased (Figure 21).

BOX 12

Improved performance in the Ukrainian Parliament

Parliamentary capacity has been one of the bright spots in Ukraine’s democratic growth. A combination of Ukrainian political will and international support has enabled the country to make significant advances. After the 2013–2014 revolution in Ukraine, it became apparent that the Verkhovna Rada—its parliament—was ready for reform that would transform the institution and adapt it to European standards. Between September 2015 and February 2016, a Needs Assessment Mission from the European Parliament worked closely with the Ukrainian Parliament and developed a roadmap for internal reform and capacity-building. With this came the creation of the Parliamentary Reform Project (implemented by the EU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)), which, since March 2016, has strengthened Ukraine’s parliament in the areas of transparency, effectiveness and accountability.²⁰⁰

In 2019, the joint EU-UNDP programme entered a new phase as a new workplan for the Parliamentary Reform Project was approved. It included experts who would assist in a wide range of issues, from developing a parliamentary educational programme to drafting laws on parliamentary public services and introducing digital tools in the legislative process.²⁰¹ By 2020, two important new laws were adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament: On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Concerning Ensuring Effective Implementation of Parliamentary Control and On Parliamentary Service. The former enabled a better flow of information from officials, and the latter helped the Secretariat of the parliament organize legislative support services in a more efficient manner.²⁰²

When the pandemic hit the country, the parliament maintained stability and—through political consensus—passed laws to curb Covid-19. It also managed to maintain progress in the fight against corruption, particularly through the work of the National Agency for Prevention of Corruption and the e-declaration system (an anti-corruption innovation introduced in 2014).²⁰³

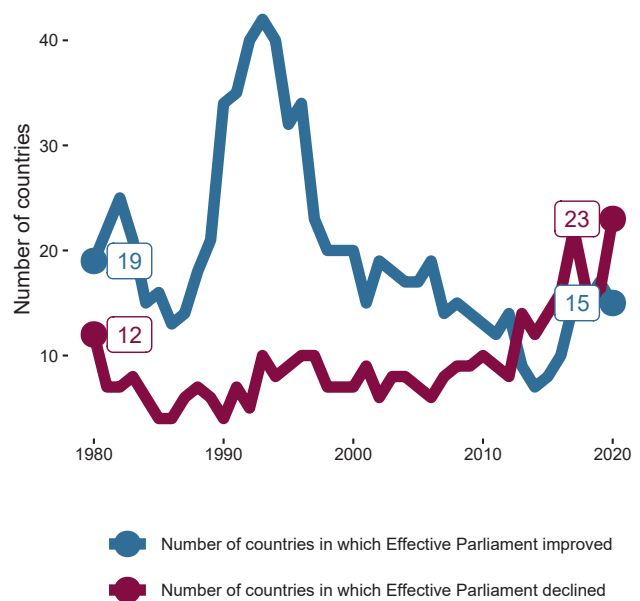
Although there has been a great deal of progress in recent years, Ukraine faces many challenges as it seeks to make its parliament more effective. One such hurdle is a parliamentary-presidential form of government that tends to give the president more power than the parliament in many situations.²⁰⁴ Further capacity-building in the parliament will have to take place within a political context that has significant internal institutional challenges and pressing external threats.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, parliaments were sidelined in many countries, both in the approval of emergency measures and in their implementation, as increased powers were invested in the executives in order to swiftly respond to the pandemic. Emergency law responses, either constitutional or statutory, were invoked in **more than half the countries** (58 per cent) covered by International IDEA’s Global Monitor of Covid-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights—that is 97 countries, 71 of which renewed at least their first emergency law response—usually requiring legislative approval.²⁰⁵ This move to invoke emergency law responses, in combination with an initial disruption to parliamentary activities due to risk of infection, may have temporarily weakened parliamentary powers and oversight in some countries. However, the majority of those cases were in non-democratic regimes. For additional analysis on emergency responses during the Covid-19 pandemic and their implications for democracy, see [GSoD 2021 Emergency Law Responses thematic paper](#).

Most parliaments, however, have continued to carry out their functions during the pandemic through virtual or adapted forms of interaction. In a study of emergency law responses across 106 countries up to July 2020,

FIGURE 21

Number of countries with significant five-year declines and advances in Effective Parliament, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

64 per cent had involved the legislature in the legal response to the pandemic.²⁰⁶ Some parliaments have enabled proportionate attendance and voting according to party group size, so that activity could continue on a multiparty basis, without crowded plenary and committee rooms (Australia). Others have allowed notices of motions to be submitted electronically, permitted proxy votes, and allowed the electronic submission of questions (New Zealand).²⁰⁷ These new routines have allowed parliaments to play more active roles, as the pandemic has unfolded, in both the debate and approval of economic packages, in the extension of states of emergencies and in the scrutiny of government handling of the pandemic. A number of parliaments have, for example, established Covid-19 parliamentary committees to oversee the government's response to the pandemic. This is the case, for example, in Australia, Bhutan, Canada, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Norway and the Philippines.²⁰⁸

Beyond the importance of parliamentary oversight of emergency law responses identified above, parliaments have a vital role to play in oversight of new spending measures and budgetary exceptions that have been part of many national pandemic responses. But parliaments also have a positive function in innovating and finding solutions. Collaboration across government is likely to lead to better outcomes than a centralized response with control focused in the executive branch.²⁰⁹

5.3 THE WEAKENING OF MEDIA INTEGRITY

Media Integrity measures the extent to which the media: (a) are free from government control; and (b) include a diversity of opinions, including criticism of the government. Globally, Media Integrity is in decline. For the past eight years, the number of countries in which the subattribute has registered significant declines has been higher than the number of countries showing improvements.

Part of the continuous decline in Media Integrity globally is related to an intractable crisis in traditional media, anchored in declining advertising revenue, increasing media ownership concentration, the rise of free-to-access online media, the pre-eminent role of social media debates in setting the agenda, and the proliferation of disinformation. These factors have upended the global media landscape, rendered many media outlets unsustainable and, most importantly, dwindled public trust in media.²¹⁰ Such a scenario creates fertile ground for media repression. In India, for instance, the capacity

of media to report in Kashmir has been severely restricted due to the ongoing Internet disruption.²¹¹ In Nicaragua, the only remaining printed newspaper critical of the regime was raided by police in August 2021.²¹²

In Slovenia, the government is increasing its efforts to undermine critical media, and some journalists have reported that it is no longer a safe haven.²¹³ According to the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) report released in June 2021, there has been an increase in threats against journalists, especially women, as critical reporting has been delegitimized as 'opposition journalism'.²¹⁴ As a result, there has been a rise in self-censorship, further decreasing the ability of the public to access information.²¹⁵ Reinforcing such a hostile landscape for journalism, governments are increasingly using digital technology to repress and target journalists online, from blocking access to certain websites in China, Egypt or Venezuela, hacking into journalists' phones in Mexico or Saudi Arabia, or attacking journalists online in India or Russia.²¹⁶

Governments' pandemic responses have sparked additional serious concerns about restrictions on the capacity of media to hold governments accountable. These concerns range from governments' increasing control of public media outlets, such as in Poland, where public media failed to report impartially or critically on the government's handling of the pandemic.²¹⁷ Other examples include widespread arrests and harassment of journalists reporting on the pandemic, such as in Bangladesh, Nicaragua or Tanzania .

Despite the overall negative trend, 13 countries recorded significant improvements in Media Integrity, including some weak democracies, which constitute 30 per cent of the improvers. In the Gambia, President Adama Barrow has begun to fulfil his promise of developing a freer media. For example, several privately owned radio and TV stations have been created, ending the state monopoly in the media.²¹⁸ In July 2020, the government granted media outlets a subsidy of about USD 30,000 to help them through the pandemic-induced financial crisis.²¹⁹ In the midst of what appeared to be a very bad year for the media in many countries, this is a modest example of important support for the free press. Its sustainability, however, will depend on its ability to regain financial independence. When it is able to function effectively, the media will be a tool to promote accountability and transparency, a forum for society, and in some cases an agenda-setter that highlights social problems and supports democracy and democratic efforts.²²⁰

Chapter 6

Impartial Administration

Impartial Administration is the aggregate of two subattributes: Absence of Corruption and Predictable Enforcement. It measures the extent to which the state is free from corruption, and whether the enforcement of public authority is predictable.

In keeping with the orientation of the other aspects in the GSoD Indices, a high score in Absence of Corruption denotes *less* corruption.

Impartial Administration is a key deliverable for democracy, partly because it deals with the aspects of government that individuals engage with most frequently—regulations and bureaucracy.

6.1 ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION

Corruption is one of the most intractable problems in governance. In fact, the GSoD Indices show that levels of corruption and predictable enforcement have remained largely stagnant globally over the past four decades. There is some regional variation, with North America and Europe consistently performing well, and Africa and the Middle East performing poorly. For the majority of the world's population, corruption remains a significant challenge. In a global survey on experiences with corruption, Transparency International found that one in four respondents to their global corruption survey had paid a bribe to a public official in the previous 12 months.²²¹

Although new digital technologies have the power to increase transparency and curtail opportunities for corruption, they have also posed new challenges in the fight against corruption. Cryptocurrencies, blockchain, big-data analytics and artificial intelligence have opened up avenues for new forms of digital corruption, challenging regulatory systems and anti-corruption efforts. They have created new hurdles in monitoring political finance—a major source of corruption—by making it more difficult to trace donors' identities and the destinations of their donations and easier to circumvent existing political finance regulations, such as donation limits and

bans from foreign and anonymous sources.²²² Such technologies are also reportedly used by organized crime networks for money laundering.²²³

As the pandemic has ravaged the world and thrown light on systemic inequality, it has perhaps never been clearer that impartial administrations, free from corruption and with the capacity to predictably enforce public policies, are key not only to democratic progress, but also to basic human welfare.

Corruption undermines trust in democracy as a form of government, fuels civic discontent and diverts scarce resources for basic welfare away from those in need. It also provides a fertile ground for extremist movements to grow.²²⁴ Covid-19-related corruption can severely undermine pandemic measures and hinder recovery efforts. Indeed, many of the protests across the world, prior to and during the pandemic, have been fuelled by citizen frustration about wide-scale government corruption (e.g. Bulgaria,²²⁵ Haiti,²²⁶ Iraq,²²⁷ Lebanon²²⁸ and Tunisia²²⁹). Corruption poses a threat to the legitimacy of both democracies and non-democracies. Furthermore, a number of democracies battle high levels of corruption (18 per cent of democracies).

However, democratic systems of government are overall better at tackling corruption than non-democratic governments. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes are more prone to corruption than democracies. Three-quarters (75 per cent) of authoritarian regimes have high levels of corruption, as do 57 per cent of hybrid regimes. No single authoritarian regime and only one hybrid regime (Singapore) has low levels of corruption, demonstrating that Singapore constitutes the exception rather than the rule.²³⁰

A worrisome trend in the last few years has been the elimination or neutralization of public entities fighting against corruption, usually because of their effectiveness. In countries as diverse as Guatemala and Indonesia, anti-corruption agencies have been either eliminated or placed under severe restrictions. In Guatemala, a UN-backed successful anti-corruption commission was dismantled in 2019, after having prosecuted many high-level corruption cases.²³¹

Moreover, the top anti-corruption prosecutor of the country was dismissed in 2021.²³²

The pandemic has unfortunately also opened up new avenues for corruption, both in the purchase of healthcare supplies to fight the virus, and, more recently, in the purchase and distribution of vaccines. Transparency International estimates that, in the health sector, around 7 per cent of procurement is lost to corruption.²³³ International IDEA's Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights has recorded at least **73 countries** in which alleged or confirmed instances of pandemic-related corruption have occurred.

Examples include weak backsliding democracies, such as Brazil—where investigations for misappropriation of funds are ongoing in all 27 states.²³⁴ Furthermore, after allegations of corruption in the procurement of vaccines surfaced in July 2021, mass protests broke out in Brazil, demanding President Jair Bolsonaro's removal from office.²³⁵ Even high-performing democracies, such as Germany, have not been spared. A scandal broke there in March 2021, when it became apparent that two politicians had received kickbacks for brokering mask deals.²³⁶ The distribution of vaccines has also been tainted by corruption scandals in various countries, including Peru (dubbed 'Vacunagate') and Lebanon,²³⁷ with most cases related to line-jumping for public officials and corruption in the procurement of vaccines.

Chapter 7

Participatory Engagement

Participatory Engagement is composed of four subattributes (Civil Society Participation, Electoral Participation, Direct Democracy and Local Democracy). The subattributes measure citizens' participation in civil society organizations (CSOs) and in elections, and the existence of direct democracy instruments available to citizens, as well as the extent to which local elections are free.

For the purposes of this report, civic space is defined as the space in which formal and informal CSOs engage, together with other actors (e.g. the media and the public), to deliver services, make their voices heard and advocate for change.²³⁸ The GSoD Indices measure civic space through the subattributes of Civil Society Participation, Media Integrity and Civil Liberties (the latter two of which are also covered separately in Chapters 4 and 5 on Fundamental Rights and Checks on Government).

Around the world, civil society has continued to play various important roles throughout the pandemic, acting to give voice to public sentiment and to provide assistance in the face of pandemic lockdowns and other restrictions.

CSOs have helped organize some of the protests around the world, which have reflected frustration with current societal models and the perceived inability of traditional political parties to tackle societal challenges. During the pandemic, protests have been triggered by a range of issues, including dissatisfaction with governments' handling of the pandemic (e.g. in Brazil,²³⁹ Serbia²⁴⁰ and Thailand²⁴¹), frustrations with deteriorating living conditions and corruption (e.g. Colombia, Cuba, Iraq, Lebanon, South Africa and Tunisia),²⁴² as well as diverse other concerns unrelated to the pandemic, such as racial discrimination (the Black Lives Matter movement) or agricultural prices in India.²⁴³ In 2021, mass protests related to the pandemic and other political issues have also affected a wide array of other countries, including Australia, Colombia, Cuba, France, Mongolia, Myanmar, Peru, Russia, Sri Lanka and Uganda.²⁴⁴

Civil society's role during the pandemic is not simply confined to being a locus of protest. Where

governments have either effectively abdicated responsibilities to citizens or been slow and/or inefficient in their pandemic response, CSOs have played—and continue to play—an often-critical role in improving the harsh effects of pandemic lockdowns. CSOs have provided essential food, medical supplies and safe spaces to vulnerable sections of the population. CSOs throughout the world have also played a key role in service delivery to marginalized groups, including LGBTQIA+ groups, children, migrants and refugees, women and girls exposed to violence, and informal settlement residents, among others. They have reached marginalized and non-native speakers with reliable information on Covid-19.²⁴⁵ CSOs have also helped limit the spread of disinformation in ways that do not undermine freedom of expression. There are numerous examples of CSOs and civil society networks coming together to debunk misinformation to help journalists provide accurate coverage of the pandemic, including the LatamChequea network and Africa Check.²⁴⁶ Others implemented training in media literacy and some worked actively to prevent the spread of hate speech. Hence, while the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and existing inequalities, it has also demonstrated the importance of civil society as a source of resilience in times of crisis.²⁴⁷

While civil society activism has thrived in many places during the pandemic, some pressing challenges remain. In 2020, the number of countries where Civil Society Participation declined went up slightly (Figure 22). This pattern is due in part to a growing number of illiberal political parties in power, who have used the war on terror and, more recently, the fight against disinformation to justify restrictions on civil society groups, making it harder for them to register, operate, access funds and advocate for reform freely. In fact, since 2016, 91 countries have proposed or enacted more than 260 legal measures that impact civil society engagement, of which most (72 per cent) were designed to make it harder for CSOs to operate and advocate.²⁴⁸ In some countries, these trends have deepened during the pandemic, with governments using pandemic-related restrictions to further justify limitations on civic participation and free speech, as described in Chapter 4 on Fundamental Rights.

BOX 13

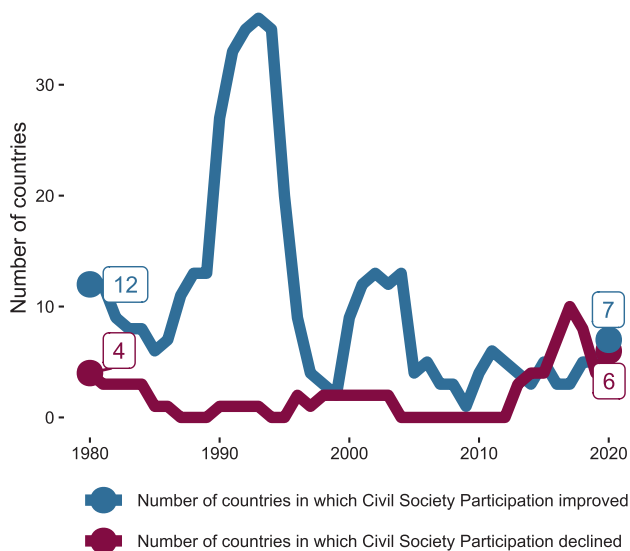
Resistance in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) seized power in early February 2021. The Tatmadaw arrested the elected government leadership, as well as election commissioners, members of parliament and of political parties, pro-democracy activists and journalists, and subsequently declared the November 2020 election results null and void. In response to the coup, a widespread civil disobedience and grassroots pro-democracy movement emerged—made up of elected politicians, CSOs, journalists, youth, women, and workers and civil servants, including teachers, healthcare professionals, factory workers and more—to protest against military rule and demand a return to civilian government. Since the coup, they have staged street and online protests and strikes, all despite violent repression. More than 1,000 have been arbitrarily killed and thousands have been arrested and tortured. Women and youth have played a key role in the movement and have influenced the engagement tactics used. The *htamein* campaign, for example, used women’s sarongs—the traditional garment in Myanmar—as flags or to cover roads in urban areas.²⁴⁹ The movement is unique in that it bridges divides in Myanmar society, including not only ethnic Bamar, but also ethnic groups previously excluded from the political process (such as the Rohingya or the Karen).

Showing complete disregard for international minimum standards and ignoring numerous statements of condemnations, including UN General Assembly Resolutions, and faced with continued resistance, the Tatmadaw has resorted to imposing a climate of terror and repression on the civilian population, regularly carrying out house raids, indiscriminate beatings and indefinite detentions, while also severely limiting popular access to print and electronic media. Meanwhile, the democratically legitimate representatives have formed a rump parliament with more than 80 per cent of elected MPs and have forged an alliance with ethnic organizations and civil society to establish a National Unity Government (NUG), which seeks to restore democracy and rebuild the state as a federal democratic union without reserving a special political status to the military. It has issued formal apologies to the Rohingya community for atrocities committed in the past and has said that it will accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Women’s participation in the NUG cabinet is at one-third, an unprecedented level of female representation in Myanmar.²⁵⁰ The NUG has launched an armed offensive against military rule as a form of popular self-defence, but has issued strict instructions stipulating that members of the security forces are treated humanely and that their human rights are respected.

FIGURE 22

Number of countries with significant five-year declines and advances in Civil Society Participation, 1980–2020



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsoi-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

7.1 DIRECT AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

While participatory democracy tools existed well before the pandemic, Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions on assembly have moved much state, private sector and civil society activity online, spurring a number of new initiatives to strengthen digital participatory democracy. Some of these democratic innovations are state-led, seeking inputs from citizens to inform policymaking (e.g. referendums, citizens’ assemblies, participatory budgeting), while others are driven by political parties or by civil society (e.g. hackathons, observatories). While many of these initiatives will need to be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness and impact on policy, overall they can provide an important push for renovating democratic institutions and processes. Both the rise of new forms of mass mobilization and the proliferation of democratic innovations outside of traditional political party channels may point to a need to fundamentally rethink the model of representative democracy and bring it closer to the reality of the 21st century. In 2020, the number of democratic innovations in Latin America reached an all-time historic high, with more

than 2,000 implemented across 18 countries—70 more than in 2019.²⁵¹ Many of these democratic innovations were created to address pandemic-related challenges.²⁵² Democratic innovations at the local level have also occurred in other regions, with locally driven initiatives to increase citizen oversight over pandemic spending and to hold decision-makers accountable.²⁵³ Virtual citizens' assemblies and similar forums in Europe also show how such democratic innovations can allow citizens to make their voices heard in the policymaking process, despite pandemic restrictions on assembly.²⁵⁴

7.2 PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

Ensuring that democratic channels of communication and accountability between citizens and states—via traditional elections as well as through new channels in the periods between elections—are renewed, scaled up and institutionalized will be key for minimizing the risk of unrest in the short term and for renovating democracy in the long term. In order to make sure that such communication is broadly accessible, it will be critical to integrate strategies for the spread of digital access to the most hard-to-reach places.

In some countries, it will be necessary to revisit the social contract between the government and the people entirely. If such processes are based on broad participation, they could result in a governance framework that is more citizen-owned and publicly legitimate. If citizens have a say in designing the rules, they have more incentive to respect them and more motivation to protect their integrity. A particularly promising example of this is provided by Chile—which has shown how new social contracts can be recrafted to address pressing societal needs.

Following decades of growing public anger over narrowing economic opportunities, segregated health and education systems, and monopolistic business practices, Chile was rocked by mass protests in 2019. Protestors were demanding better and more equitable democracy in the form of a new constitution to replace the one promulgated by the military regime of Pinochet in the 1980s, and in 2020, citizens voted in favour of such a new constitution.²⁵⁵

In order to ensure broad legitimacy, the Constituent Assembly, the body responsible for drafting the new constitution, is mandated to contain equal numbers of men and women and to reserve seats for groups representing Indigenous Peoples. All decisions must be

approved by a two-thirds majority of all members. The vote for the Constituent Assembly, held in 2021, resulted in the traditional left and right blocs winning just over one-third of the seats. The hard left and leftist independents, along with Indigenous Peoples, make up more than half of the Assembly.²⁵⁶ The President is an Indigenous woman from the Mapuche group. The drafting process will include confronting difficult and fundamental questions about the relationship between government and its people, and issues such as serious economic inequality, natural resources, the neoliberal economic model, labour and women's rights, public health, education, water rights and the pension system. A new referendum will be held in 2022 to approve the new Constitution.²⁵⁷

BOX 14

Democratic innovations during the pandemic

Digital democratic innovations have flourished across the world during the pandemic. In Latin America, Latinno recorded a total of 2,226 democratic innovations implemented at local, regional and national levels across 18 countries in 2020—an increase of 3 per cent since 2019.²⁵⁸ Examples include hackathons bringing together citizens, the private sector, CSOs, state agencies and health workers to identify digital solutions to pandemic-related challenges, including simplified digital banking or coping mechanisms for life in lockdown (Argentina,²⁵⁹ Bolivia,²⁶⁰ Brazil,²⁶¹ Chile²⁶²); observatories to monitor pandemic-related procurement or health expenditures (Argentina,²⁶³ Brazil²⁶⁴); initiatives to monitor the legality and transparency of Covid-19 policies, measures and restrictions (Argentina,²⁶⁵ Dominican Republic,²⁶⁶ Nicaragua,²⁶⁷ Panama²⁶⁸); forums and tools for identifying challenges and solutions faced by vulnerable groups, such as women, LGBTQIA+ groups and people living with disabilities (Chile,²⁶⁹ Dominican Republic²⁷⁰); digital maps of femicides to raise awareness about domestic violence (Dominican Republic²⁷¹); and digital tools to map citizen needs with services (Honduras²⁷²). A number of democratic innovations have also been implemented in other regions during the pandemic. In Mongolia, an app was developed to allow citizens to digitally vote on infrastructure investments during the pandemic;²⁷³ in Scotland, the government launched a digital conversation with citizens to seek inputs on Covid-19 restrictions;²⁷⁴ in the UK, a People's Commission on life after Covid-19 has been launched to engage over one million citizens in formulating a vision for what the UK will look like after the pandemic;²⁷⁵ and virtual citizens' assemblies on pandemic recovery in Oregon in the USA,²⁷⁶ and climate change and post-pandemic sustainable recovery in France, have also been held.²⁷⁷

Chapter 8

Conclusion: The future of democracy and lessons for future crises

Tentatively emerging from Covid-19, democracy finds itself at a crossroads. On the one hand, an increasingly authoritarian world—marked not just by more repression in already authoritarian environments but by democratic regimes' use of traditionally authoritarian tactics—risks the survival of democratic norms and governance. On the other hand, there are green shoots of innovation and reform, as many governments—and citizens—realize that basic political freedoms will only survive if democracy adapts and revitalizes itself for new generations facing great challenges, ranging from climate change to growing inequality.

To counteract the current challenges and create the conditions for a more sustainable, inclusive and accountable recovery, democracies must reassert their strengths and show the world how and why democratic governance is the best option. They must reflect on lessons learned from the pandemic and implement the reforms needed to be able to more effectively, efficiently and responsively deliver the goods and services that are critical to human dignity and that allow people to pursue their goals. This is a time for democratic actors and institutions to be bold and push the frontiers of the democratic project.

Chapter 9

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to be general in nature and provide, in most cases, broad guidelines for policymakers and democratic actors, at the local, national and international levels. It is our intention that they spark new and innovative thinking among stakeholders and that they be considered in various country contexts, where applicable. The examples we provide are also meant to be illustrative and are not endorsements of the parties, organizations or actors they involve. Please note that there are also specific recommendations relating to electoral processes and the use of emergency powers and democratic institutions in the separate thematic papers, as well as more detailed region-specific recommendations. There are links to all these below, after the general recommendations.

an alliance focused on protecting and advancing democracy and based on respect for human rights worldwide. This alliance should concentrate on reasserting the critical role democracy plays—through mechanisms that promote and facilitate popular control and political equality—in furthering equitable and accountable sustainable development and post-pandemic recovery. Going forward, the alliance should support democracies to deliver the services that citizens want and need, politically, economically and socially, through the following three-point agenda for democratic renewal.



Deliver

PREAMBLE

International IDEA calls on governments, civil society, academia, multilateral institutions and the private sector from democracies across the world to form

Government institutions, in close consultation with civil society, must take the lead in recrafting social contracts in multiple ways. These covenants should be the result of inclusive societal deliberation that sheds light on the gaps between what people require to meet

BOX 15

Bucking trends to tackle inequality

In September 2021, the Republic of Korea demonstrated a new openness to extending the national debt beyond the 40 per cent of national GDP that had been considered the norm in the country. The money borrowed will go towards expanding welfare benefits, creating jobs and developing emerging technologies. Although there are concerns about rising public debt, the government has said that it believes this is one important way to tackle the social polarization exposed by the pandemic. Indeed, more than 40 per cent of the population of the Republic of Korea over the age of 65 suffer the impacts of poverty.²⁷⁸ The Republic of Korea scores well on Oxfam's Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index. During the pandemic, Oxfam noted the country's continuing commitment to addressing inequality by, for example, instituting universal emergency relief payments to 22 million households.²⁷⁹

In Argentina, the government imposed a temporary solidarity wealth tax, whereby those who own assets worth at least USD 3.4 million pay up to 3.5 per cent tax on those assets. The money, which will come from the 12,000 richest of Argentina's 44 million inhabitants, is meant to go towards medical supplies, relief for small businesses, social aid programmes and the provision of natural gas to people off the energy grid.²⁸⁰

In the United States, a new child tax credit is expected to cut the poverty rate by nearly 50 per cent and lift 4.1 million children out of poverty this year. The first round has decreased food scarcity from 15.7 per cent to 9.9 per cent compared with the period immediately before receiving the monthly child tax credit payments.²⁸¹

their aspirations and what governments are currently providing. Specifically, these new social contracts, which will be the basis for immediate recovery and longer-term development efforts, should—at a minimum—address the various inequalities exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritize corruption eradication, and ensure that environmental sustainability principles are mainstreamed into policy development.

Inequality

1. National and local governments and political parties should redesign democratic institutions with the needs of historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups at the forefront. Governments, with support from civil society, must urgently set concrete, time-bound targets to reduce inequalities, invest in universal public services, and adopt progressive taxation of the wealthiest members of society.
2. Donors should also consider making action on inequality a condition of funding, going beyond superficial markers of diversity into more substantive evidence that inequalities are addressed in systematic ways.
3. Academia has a key role to play in evaluating innovative practices in this field, in terms of both process and outcomes, and should continuously feed practitioners with lessons on how democratic practices and tools can make democracy more inclusive.
4. Political parties should prioritize gender equality and broad inclusion, facilitating women's and other disadvantaged groups' participation and representation to ensure more responsive policies. Civil society and media have a key role to play in monitoring progress, suggesting reforms and facilitating debate around progress on equality.
5. Political parties and legislatures should design creative ways to include youth in political decision-making processes. Good examples include lowering the voting age, establishing a youth ombudsman and/or including youth representatives in democratic decision-making bodies.
6. Governments should consider defining fiscal contracts with citizens by convening, for example, national dialogues over a fiscal pact committed to improving equity in tax enforcement and taxpayer services, broadening direct taxation, and strengthening civil society engagement with tax issues.²⁸²

BOX 16

Lowering the voting age

In Austria, the voting age was lowered to 16 for all elections at all levels in 2007. More than a decade of evidence suggests that voting age reform is connected with not only a higher electoral turnout but also high levels of trust in the political system.²⁸³

BOX 17

Progress in gender parity in Chile

When the Chilean Government decided to redraft the country's Constitution, it also made important progress in demonstrating a commitment to gender equality. The Constituent Assembly, which is the body responsible for drafting, is mandated to comprise an equal number of men and women. Voting for Constituent Assembly members resulted in more women than men, and in the end it was seats for men that had to be topped up in some regions. In addition, requirements included that all-party lists had to be headed by a female candidate.²⁸⁴ Delegates also voted in a female member of the Indigenous Mapuche community to serve as head of the Assembly.²⁸⁵

Corruption

7. Governments must show a renewed and serious commitment to the fight against corruption, recognizing the ways in which it disproportionately impacts certain groups, especially those who are exposed to discrimination.²⁸⁶ International financial and development institutions should condition support on proven progress in fighting corruption. Civil society and the media should continue to play a critical watchdog role in the fight against corruption.
8. Governments should increase integrity by going beyond a mere focus on compliance to an overhaul of institutions and legal frameworks that incentivize (financially and otherwise) acting within the law.
9. Governments, with support from civil society and the media, should provide the public with open and transparent data on budgets, expenditures

and policies and their outcomes so that people understand how corruption has an impact on their everyday lives and can hold governments to account.

BOX 18

The links between corruption and discrimination

Transparency International analysis shows that:

- Discrimination can result in greater exposure to corruption.
- Certain forms of corruption are inherently discriminatory.
- Discrimination can mean that corruption has a disproportionate impact on certain groups.
- Discrimination can stand in the way of challenging corruption while corruption can prevent victims of discrimination from accessing justice.

In Kenya, the minority, pastoralist Turkana community has experienced both corruption and discrimination. When oil exploration began in Kenya's neglected Turkana County, many were hopeful about the development benefits it would bring. However, allegations of corruption have been levelled against Tullow Oil (the exploration company) and the government for false claims about the value of the corporate and social responsibility projects Tullow had funded and about the allocation of jobs and contracts. According to Oxfam, neither the government nor Tullow Oil has adhered to international human rights law with regard to using the land. The Turkana community has been inadequately consulted on the use of their land, and it faces obstacles in understanding contracts that have been signed between Tullow and the government, largely because of the lack of government transparency. The Turkana community has long felt that it has been discriminated against for public sector employment, and the experience with regard to oil exploration has only furthered that.²⁸⁷

In general, corruption disproportionately has an impact on the poor and otherwise marginalized in society, especially women and girls, youth and children, ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQIA+ communities and people with disabilities.²⁸⁸ In Paraguay, for instance, 12.6 per cent of poor people's incomes is spent on bribes, while that figure is only 6.4 per cent for wealthier individuals.²⁸⁹

10. Governments, together with civil society and educational institutions, should combat acceptance of corruption by embracing a long-term view of the fight against corruption. This includes a commitment to developing curricula, beginning in primary school, that focuses on the principles of personal integrity.

11. Civil society and the media have a key role to play in exposing impunity by staying ahead of the ever-evolving openings for corrupt practices, with a focus on identifying weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws.

12. Governments have a responsibility to close regulatory loopholes in the funding of political parties and election campaigns (political finance). Examples include greater transparency and—when applicable—limitations on donations; spending limits on third-party campaigners; public funding for political parties; updated laws that address emerging corruption risks in the use of online fundraising tools, social media advertisements and cryptocurrencies; empowered oversight agencies to ensure the implementation of existing laws; connecting political finance regulations with other anti-corruption and transparency measures, such as lobbying registers, open public procurement data and asset disclosure of elected officials; and the expansion of comparative data and developing indicators in relation to political finance.

BOX 19

Guarding electoral integrity and political finance transparency

Political advertising, especially when combined with political disinformation campaigns, has an outsized impact on elections around the world. According to International IDEA's Political Finance Database, only 13 per cent of countries in the world limit online media advertising spending in relation to election campaigns. In Lithuania, all political advertising must be marked as such, visibly separated from other disseminated information, and the source of funding must be disclosed. In 2020, the country's EMB published recommendations that covered issues such as regulation of influencers and political online activity in social networks during the silence period before election day. Lithuania also has established laws on maximum donations and donor profiles; donation information must be submitted by information producers, disseminators and candidates.²⁹⁰

Environmental sustainability

The legitimacy of democratic governance is inextricably tied to addressing climate change. If democratic systems cannot put in place measures to protect humankind and ensure the sustainability of the planet, it is difficult to make a case for the value of those systems. The impacts of climate change on food security, migration, water scarcity and the financial consequences of extreme weather events have direct effects on democratic governance. Given that democratic nations are responsible for more than half of the world's carbon emissions, it is imperative that they step up on environmental reform. Luckily, democracies already have the assets to mobilize action, including free and open access to information, accountability of government officials and greater legitimacy of public policies.

13. Governments, with the support of civil society, should adopt participatory processes that involve youth and citizens in the design and implementation of laws and targets on climate change and in the design of mechanisms that fairly address those affected by industrial shifts caused by sustainability policies.
14. Democracy assistance organizations, think tanks and research institutions could consider including environmental dimensions in assessments of the performance of democratic systems.
15. Bilateral and multilateral donors, democracy assistance organizations and academia should commit to evidence-based decision-making and the development of a research agenda that can provide continuous, reliable data related to the interaction between democracy and climate change.

BOX 20

Getting governments to talk to scientists

In Finland, an independent Climate Change Panel consisting of 15 top experts from various climate-relevant fields of science was appointed under the Climate Change Act from 2015 to promote dialogue between science and policymakers. So far, the Panel has achieved desirable results by strengthening the scientific point of view in decision-making on climate policy and contributing to the quality of climate discussion in society.²⁹¹



Rebuild

Government institutions, political parties, EMBs and media should reform democratic institutions, processes, relationships and behaviours so that they are better able to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. They should update practices in established democracies, build democratic capacity in new democracies, and protect electoral integrity, fundamental freedoms and rights, and the checks and balances essential to thriving and resilient democratic systems. They should also prioritize (re)building the mutual trust between citizens and their representatives that characterizes the strongest democracies.

Political institutions and processes

16. Governments should redesign political institutions and processes in ways that incentivize democratic actors and reward processes that are more inclusive, citizen-centred, accountable and responsive in terms of their decision-making and service delivery. Research institutions have a key role to play in evaluating lessons learned from democratic innovations in this field.
17. Political parties, legislatures and civil society should reconsider the role, purpose and composition of the party system in the 21st century. In particular, political parties should consider the demands that citizens have been making throughout the recent wave of protest movements and assess how they can integrate those concerns into their plans and proposals going forward.

Electoral processes

18. EMBs, legislatures and other bodies that make election-related decisions must ensure that they engage in consultative and transparent processes, especially when electoral calendars are changed. Changes to the conduct and/or cadence of elections must be accompanied by roadmaps that mitigate any possibly undemocratic implications.
19. EMBs and other similar institutions should consider institutionalizing risk management and crisis preparedness, including in relation to dangerous counter-narratives about electoral integrity. This includes building mutually trusting relationships between election-relevant institutions and reviewing lessons learned from the pandemic.

BOX 21

Participation through citizens' assemblies

In recent years, there has been a striking rise in the use of citizens' assemblies, through which a group of randomly selected citizens come together and hear from experts, competing interest groups and people personally impacted by the issue at stake. They then deliberate together and make recommendations on the way forward. Such assemblies have been used in more than 25 countries; examples include Ireland (to decide on the constitutional status of abortion, gender equality and on addressing climate change), and France, Germany and the UK (on climate change). Evidence suggests that this kind of deliberative democracy works; the balanced and structured process tends to result in more informed preferences,

the deliberative context has been successful at breaking through deadlock and the broader public seem to have confidence in the judgements of these bodies.

Deliberative polling, a technique that brings people with disparate viewpoints together in a moderated discussion about key issues in the public debate, can prove effective in fostering constructive dialogue between groups with differing opinions. In Uganda, deliberative polling showed that the chance for groups to talk to each other resulted in substantial opinion change; debate helped people change their initial opinions, often making them favour the solution that was eventually most popular.²⁹²

BOX 22

Innovations in intraparty democracy

As the wave of protests of 2018–2020 ran into the pandemic, and a new wave of popular discontent (from left and right, North and South) arises, it may be time to again consider how well political parties are performing at connecting to their base and representing their voters in legislatures. Is more or better intraparty democracy a promising approach for improving representative democracy's capacity to deliver services for voters?

The first to innovate in this regard have been challenger parties aiming to introduce not only new ideas but also new forms of political activism. Some parties have tried to implement more democratic internal decision-making processes by giving party members direct influence over the party's positions, leadership and even sometimes how their members will vote in the legislature. Notable examples include Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy.²⁹³ Similarly, some parties have implemented delegative voting, also referred to as 'liquid democracy', which means that 'for each issue to be decided, each citizen has a single vote that can be transferred to a trusted person (or "proxy") at will'.²⁹⁴ Forms of liquid intraparty democracy have been pioneered by the various Pirate Parties in Scandinavia and Germany,²⁹⁵ and also by the Liike Nyt party in Finland.²⁹⁶

Within political parties, liquid democracy can be implemented as a means of determining the party's position on each vote in the legislature through a democratic process using the full party membership. In principle, it allows party members to delegate their

votes to proxies in areas where they have less interest, and to serve as proxies for others in areas where they have expertise. However, research has pointed out how decision-making systems that aim at giving members of the party the capacity to vote in each decision have largely served as legitimization of leadership's decisions.²⁹⁷ In nearly all cases, the proposals by the leadership of the party are accepted by the members, and leadership will only subject decisions to members' votes when they know they will score an overwhelming victory.²⁹⁸

Intraparty democracy has had more creative applications. A decade ago, the Pirate Party in Germany began to use an innovative web-based application (LiquidFeedback) to facilitate discussion and ranking of proposals as the party developed its policy positions.²⁹⁹ In a similar vein, the Five Star Movement in Italy began implementing a platform, called Rousseau, where members could also vote and discuss policy positions; it also served as a database of the party's members. The platform was, however, abandoned by the party in 2021.³⁰⁰

Despite their obvious appeal, such systems have serious drawbacks. A recent study of the uses of these has argued that LiquidFeedback caused difficult dissension within the German Pirate Party, while the Five Star Movement limited the power of party members as it entered government in Italy.³⁰¹ Additionally, the emergence of 'super voters' within the delegative framework of LiquidFeedback suggests some limitations to the vision of radical egalitarianism.³⁰²

BOX 23

Code of Conduct in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, in an effort to protect the integrity of the parliamentary elections in March 2021, the Ministry of the Interior initiated a [Code of Conduct](#) on Transparency of Political Advertisement.³⁰³ The negotiation and drafting process was supported by International IDEA. The Code commits its signatories—political parties and online platforms—to abide with ethical use of voter data in micro-targeting, to promote transparency in online political advertisements, and not to disseminate misleading content, hate speech and messages that incite violence. The Code was signed by 11 out of 13 parliamentary parties and 4 global online platforms (Facebook, Google, Snapchat, TikTok). It is the first of its kind in Europe.

20. EMBs should develop the capacity to improve the integrity of special voting arrangements after the pandemic, especially those able to facilitate participation for historically marginalized groups, to enhance their effectiveness and inclusion and strengthen trust in them.
21. Civil society and other election monitoring/observation groups should draw and share lessons about communicating, advocating and holding authorities accountable in fast-moving and uncertain scenarios. Particular emphasis on the importance of EMBs' role in establishing themselves as the most reliable source of information is important.
22. Political parties, media and network platforms should sign codes of conduct that commit signatories to reducing polarization and preventing the use of disinformation to challenge electoral results. Codes should be developed for each electoral process, and they should be the result of consultations with EMBs and with the involvement of civil society, media and other electoral stakeholders. Countries such as Ghana, Mexico and the Netherlands, among others, have signed such codes. The Code of Conduct signed by political parties and social media platforms in the Netherlands, with the guidance and leadership of International IDEA, offers a useful example.³⁰⁴

Fundamental rights and freedoms

23. Policing agencies and government agencies responsible for internal security, with the advice of

civil society, must design supportive infrastructures for peaceful public assembly and protest, including by re-imagining how to safely police protests, in terms of both protesters and law enforcement. Legislatures must demonstrate how protesters' concerns are being integrated into policy reform discussions. Civil society and media must play their parts as watchdogs, holding officials to account when necessary.

Checks and balances

24. Governments must ensure that all state institutions intended to check executive power are given enough political, legal and human resources to perform their duties, and that laws and regulations facilitate congressional and judicial oversight.
25. State-level actors should buttress the independence of the judiciary and the independence of judges to both protect against executive overreach and ensure that the government upholds its positive obligations under constitutional and international law to protect the life and health of the people. Judicial bodies and other stakeholders should review the rules of standing (i.e. the capacity of a party to bring a suit in court) to ensure that they are sufficiently broad to enable individuals, civil society organizations, and independent oversight and integrity institutions to bring claims to address problems of both executive overreach and inaction.
26. State-level actors should consider amending constitutions to ensure that emergency declarations are automatically subject to judicial review.
27. State-level actors should review and update *ex ante* emergency legislation frameworks to harmonize outdated or suspect laws to ensure compliance with the constitution and democratic principles, so that future emergencies can be met with a response based on the rule of law.
28. The international community should pay attention to the potential for pandemic emergency law responses to be abused, both now and in the longer term, including through the normalization of emergency powers and the expansion of unchecked executive authority. Parliaments and judiciaries should consolidate and share lessons learned, both domestically and internationally, and develop policies that mitigate the risk of executive overreach for future emergencies.

BOX 24

Transparency initiatives

As part of Estonia's e-approach to governance, the country has established a centralized state portal for accessing government agencies and public services. Transparency and accountability are at the core of a system that, for instance, allows citizens to see which government authorities have accessed their personal data and file a complaint in case of unwarranted access.

In Colombia, the Transparency Secretariat of the Presidency developed an app that allows citizens to report incomplete or over-billed public works. By the end of 2015, 83 such projects, estimated to be worth almost USD 500 million, had been pinpointed and their identification helped initiate criminal proceedings.³⁰⁵

Participation and communication

29. National and local governments, with the support of civil society, should strengthen communication channels between citizens and their representatives and enable spaces for deliberation and monitoring by civil society.

30. Governments must restore public trust in the information order by ensuring that their laws are aligned with and in compliance with article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, promoting inclusive digital engagement, protecting data privacy, and regulating social media by enforcing transparency, due process rights for users and due diligence on human rights by companies.



Government institutions, along with civil society and the media, must prevent rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding by investing in democracy education at all levels of schooling, by buttressing the pillars of democracy that ensure accountability, including broad participation and access to information, and by actively learning from other

countries' experiences in fighting disinformation, building democratic cultures and strengthening democratic guardrails.

Accountability

31. Democracy assistance organizations should revise and reorient their programming to more effectively address new and emerging challenges to democracy, as well as to ensure that it is more evidence-based and long-term in nature. Sharing lessons learned between democracy assistance organizations could help improve efficiency and impact.

32. Regional and global organizations with member states should set higher standards for member democracies so that any actions seeking to weaken or dismantle internal democratic bulwarks have serious consequences.

33. Regional and global organizations and donors should urgently prioritize sophisticated early warning tools that flag contexts in which serious democratic decay is likely. Such tools should include indicators that measure the full range of democratic attributes and should help alert policymakers, activists and the media to the need for interventions in the short and long term.

BOX 25

Making countries accountable

In May 2021, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Mali from the bloc after the country's second coup in nine months. ECOWAS had imposed sanctions against Mali in August 2020, after the first coup, saying that those would only be lifted after a civilian prime minister had been named. At that time, neighbouring countries also closed their borders and suspended financial transactions with Mali. Although sanctions were not reimposed after the second coup, ECOWAS said that a new civilian prime minister must be named and an inclusive government formed to proceed with the transition. It was also adamant that elections scheduled for February 2022 must go ahead. Days after a military coup in Guinea, ECOWAS suspended that country, demanding an immediate return to the constitutional order and the release of President Alpha Condé. In this case, ECOWAS leaders also agreed to send a delegation to Conakry.³⁰⁶

Civil society

34. Civil society organizations (CSOs) must strengthen their capacity to operate and protect civic space in the digital realm, and democracy assistance organizations have a key role to play in supporting such capacity strengthening.
35. Governments must conduct risk assessments on money laundering and terrorism financing so that they can clearly identify, assess and understand the risks they face. These assessments should include civil society, and the results should feed into a risk-based approach that minimizes unfair restrictions on CSOs that are not at risk of being abused by money launderers or terrorist organizations.
36. Government agencies and the private sector must recognize, protect and facilitate CSOs' role as watchdogs and more systematically include these groups in policy dialogue and strategic plans.
37. Governments should support civil society's right to receive funding by following the guidance provided in the United Nations Human Rights Council's Resolution on Covid-19: The Road to Recovery and the Essential Role of Civil Society.³⁰⁷ This Resolution reaffirms the critical role that civil society plays in society and urges governments to protect and promote the work of CSOs. Governments should ensure that pandemic recovery packages include easily accessible resources for civil society, especially those who operate in local communities.

Media

38. Regulators and news publishers should work together to come up with proposals for ways in which news publishers can gain more control over how and when their content is presented on social media platforms.³⁰⁸
39. Governments must support independent and public interest journalism, partly by making sure that deals with digital platforms requiring them to pay news outlets for their content do not inadvertently harm smaller publishers.³⁰⁹ They should also design incentives for philanthropic donations to the news sector³¹⁰ and consider the use of tax concessions to encourage public interest journalism.³¹¹
40. Governments must prioritize the protection of journalists and other representatives of the media. There must be legal accountability for threats to,

intimidation of, harassment of, attacks on and killings of journalists.³¹²

41. Governments should support the newly created International Fund for Public Interest Media, which focuses on strengthening public interest media in low- and middle-income countries.³¹³
42. Governments must work with social media platforms, human rights experts, tech experts and CSOs to develop regulatory practices that balance free speech principles with the need to combat harmful content, hate speech and disinformation.

Education

43. National and local governments should prevent democratic backsliding by investing in civic education about democratic values, rights and responsibilities. Schools and universities should offer students exposure to the inner workings of democratic institutions.

BOX 26

The EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation

The EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation includes several prominent signatories, including Facebook, Google, Mozilla, Twitter, members of the European Digital Media Association (EDiMA) trade association and a number of advertising groups. The code is voluntary, but these organizations have committed to self-regulatory standards that include:

- disrupting advertising revenues of accounts and websites that spread disinformation;
- making political advertising and issue-based advertising more transparent;
- addressing the issue of fake accounts and online bots;
- empowering consumers to report disinformation and access different news sources, while improving the visibility and findability of authoritative content; and
- empowering the research community to monitor online disinformation through privacy-compliant access to the platforms' data.³¹⁴

BOX 27

Educating young democrats

In Sweden, democracy is a key feature of the education system. The curriculum includes lessons on the theory and practice of democracy. Representatives of political parties visit schools, enabling students to learn about the political system and the differences between the political parties from early on. Students may also get the chance to practise democracy in school elections and act as school representatives.³¹⁵

44. Parliaments, judiciaries, EMBs, government ministries and CSOs should make greater efforts to engage with peer organizations operating in other contexts to learn from each other. Academia, legislative research organs, civil society and think tanks should promote research and knowledge exchange that focus on understanding the causes of democratic backsliding in all kinds of democracies, and develop prevention strategies, such as early warning systems that help practitioners and policymakers design well-timed interventions in advance of serious democratic decline.

IN TIMES OF CRISIS

See the links below for recommendations and lessons learned to protect and strengthen democratic processes and institutions in times of crisis in the following areas.

Electoral processes

While the scale and severity of crises may vary, managing known and unknown electoral risks will be easier if structural arrangements and

responsive behaviours are in place to address them. Recommendations on how lessons learned from delayed elections or from those held during the Covid-19 pandemic can inform responses to future crises can be found [here](#).

Democracy and Covid-19 outcomes

The narrative that authoritarian regimes have been better than democracies at combating the Covid-19 pandemic is not supported by the GSoD data findings. No significant difference in pandemic outcomes is found between non-democratic regime types and among democracies. Within democracies, our findings show that democracies with higher levels of Fundamental Rights and more Impartial Administrations have performed better than weaker democracies. The detailed statistical analysis that supports these arguments can be found [here](#).

Use of emergency powers

Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have included examples of responsive and responsible governance, as well as both executive overreach and inaction in addressing the threat and impacts of the virus. While some governments have used the pandemic to justify the use of extraordinary powers outside the bounds of national and international law, others have shown reluctance to address the virus, risking public health. Recommendations and lessons learned from the use of emergency powers and their impact on democracy during the Covid-19 pandemic can be found [here](#).

For recommendations and lessons learned to protect and strengthen democratic processes and institutions in times of crisis across different regions, see the following links:

Africa and the Middle East

The Americas

Asia and the Pacific

Europe

Endnotes

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About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

WHAT DO WE DO?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

WHERE DO WE WORK?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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Democracy is at risk. Its survival is endangered by a perfect storm of threats, both from within and from a rising tide of authoritarianism. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these threats through the imposition of states of emergency, the spread of disinformation, and crackdowns on independent media and freedom of expression. *The Global State of Democracy 2021* shows that more countries than ever are suffering from 'democratic erosion' (decline in democratic quality), including in established democracies.

Yet, the pandemic has also evinced democracy's resilience in key ways. It has fuelled pro-democracy movements to challenge this authoritarian tide from Belarus to Myanmar. Protests over climate change and racial inequality have gone global, despite restrictions on assembly in most countries during the pandemic. Many states have adhered to democratic principles during the public health crisis, thanks to transparent and innovative governance.

This Report provides lessons and recommendations that governments, political and civic actors, and international democracy assistance providers should consider in order to counter the concerning trends in the erosion of democracy, and to foster its resilience and deepening.

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Reports review the state of democracy around the world. The 2021 edition covers developments in 2020 and 2021, with democratic trends since 2015 used as a contextual reference. This global report is complemented by four regional reports. The reports draw on data from the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices and lessons learned from International IDEA's on-the-ground technical assistance to understand the current democracy landscape. The 2021 reports also draw heavily on data collected by International IDEA's Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights.

ISBN: 978-91-7671-479-9 (Print)
ISBN: 978-91-7671-478-2 (PDF)