

What are the global challenges to democracy?



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Globally, democracy is in crisis. An array of countries, from newly democratised nations to consolidated democracies, are experiencing severe backsliding. Described by Nancy Bermeo as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy”, the phenomenon has gripped the entire world. Starting as an aberration to the “Third Wave of Democracy” in the early 2000s, the phenomenon has become the defining feature of our time. Both empirical data provided by various organisations and analytical studies conducted by scholars have amply demonstrated the past 16 years have been difficult for democracy.

In a report published in November 2021, the Stockholm-based organisation, the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), had stated that, “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.” The severe erosion of democracy in India and Brazil has significantly increased the number of people living under non-democratic rule. But it is also the United States, purportedly the bastion of democracy, that “fell victim to authoritarian tendencies itself and was knocked down a significant number of steps on the democratic scale”, the report stated.

International IDEA Global State of Democracy Report 2021 didn’t tell us anything new but affirmed the findings of

similar other organisations which track the quality of democracy around the world. Washington-based Freedom House, London-based Economist Intelligence Unit, and Gothenburg-based the Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Institute have been tracking the trend for the past decade. The alarming part of the IDEA report is that “the number [of countries] moving in the direction of authoritarianism is three times the number moving toward democracy.” The VDem report, titled “Autocratization Turns Viral”, published in March 2021, informs, “the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990.” Additionally, since



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2020, the global pandemic has both facilitated the rise of autocratic regimes and accelerated the pace of democratic backsliding in fragile democracies.

These reports and simple observations of daily events of the world, clearly tell us that democracy is facing serious challenges. Two elements of democracy, ideal and a system of governance, are intertwined and, as such, both aspects are confronting a host of challenges. The fundamental ideas of democracy—accountability, representation, and freedom of speech—have been facing challenges from forces which intend to undermine these ideas to build a system that provides power to a few people, often to individuals. In the consolidated democracy, the declining confidence on democratic institutions, have engendered the rise of right-wing populism. In the emerging and relatively new democracies, this feature has been matched with disregard for democratic norms and rules by political actors, especially the incumbents.

There is no denying that democracy is practiced at the national level and democratic institutions are embedded within the nation-states. As such the primary challenges to democracy reside at the national level with particular socio-political and economic aspects of the country. However, in the past decade, democratic backsliding has become a global phenomenon, at times due to domino effects, and facing some common threats. It is well to bear in mind that these challenges are many-fold and far-reaching. Although any effort to list them is bound to be inadequate, some of the fundamental ones warrant our immediate attention.

Democracy requires dissent, differences of opinion, and vigorous debates on issues and policies. It engenders some polarisation. The polarisation among the elites—the political actors and parties, offers the voters clear alternatives and discussion on programmes and principles, thus contributing to the vibrancy of democracy. But in recent decades these differences have been transformed into a tool of toxic polarisation. Polarisation has now permeated the grassroots and become mass polarisation with an affective aspect as a central element. Affective polarisation fosters a dislike for others rather than a disagreement, segregation rather than

reconciliation and a sense of moral superiority rather than equality.

Deepening of the polarisation has engendered a mindset of “us” versus “them”. Debates have been turned into a way of vilification; division has been made into a chasm. Often the opponents are portrayed as enemies, not only the party but of the nation and state, and therefore, it is insisted that they need to be vanquished.

Differences have been wrapped around the notion of moral positions; they are presented as irreconcilable differences and mutually exclusive camps have been created on purpose for political gains. This kind of polarisation has become pernicious because it has led to a “zero-sum” game and thus promotes “victory at any cost”, even if it requires abandoning the basic principles of democracy. This phenomenon is evident in the current

political situation in the United States as the Republicans have become the willing accomplices of those who have expressed disdain for democracy. But the US is not the only place where such polarisation and political tribalism has threatened social and political cohesion. The United Kingdom, Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, and the Philippines are experiencing similar kinds of political tribalism. In Bangladesh, in the past decade, institutional decay was matched with a similar kind of polarisation in the name of nationalism, a particular interpretation of the spirit of liberation, and the role of religion in politics.

The polarisation has resulted from and then accelerated by the rhetoric of political leaders, especially those who either seek or want to retain power, and falsehood. This has become the second most important challenge to democracy. As the chasm was constructed, political leaders with the agenda to undermine democracy have used incendiary rhetoric against people and democratic institutions. Salil Shetty, secretary general of Amnesty International, on the occasion of the publication of its 2016 annual report, pointed to the emerging pattern saying that, “The limits of what is acceptable have shifted. Politicians are shamelessly and actively legitimising all sorts of hateful rhetoric and policies based on people’s identity: misogyny, racism and homophobia.” But these attacks not only targeted individuals and groups, but also the democratic institutions with a goal to undermine public confidence. Donald Trump and Republican leaders’ campaign promoting the “Big Lie” that the 2020 election was manipulated is a classic example of such strategy. They are not alone; similar strategy has been used by other leaders with a penchant for authoritarianism.

Social media have become the principal vehicle for spreading the falsehood and amplifying the message. Two aspects of this technological facilitator are important. First, there are well-coordinated efforts by state actors, such as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea in creating fake news. These efforts on the one hand provide false information, and, on the other hand, contribute to the increasing schism in a society. Second, social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate the interaction between like-minded individuals and reinforce the notion of a divided society. It is now well documented that profit, emotional response and popularity have shaped the Facebook algorithm which contributes to ideological homophily, which is defined as the tendency to choose to associate with others like oneself in political views. By making the truth a casualty, these leaders, and the tech giants have created a serious threat to democracy all around the world. On the other hand, governments of various countries have implemented laws which put restrictions on citizens expressing their view online. Poland is a case in point. In similar vein, in Bangladesh, the Digital Security Act of 2018 (DSA), which has become a tool for persecution of dissenting voices, has created a culture of fear.

Social media’s immense reach, particularly as a source of news which shapes the audiences’ world view, is in part due to the changing role of the mainstream media. Corporate influences combined with legal restrictions imposed on them have weakened their influence. Besides, in many countries media’s ownership has been overtaken by the allies of the government, thus has become an unofficial spokesperson of the regimes. These media tend to set agenda that is comfortable for the regime. In Hungary, more than half of the media is now under the control of Victor Orbán’s allies. Media Ownership Monitoring (MOM) project of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF), reported in December 2021 that Turkey’s mediascape is firmly under the control of the people affiliated with the government. For example, eight daily newspapers among the top 10 circulated, nine out of 10 most watched television stations, and seven out of 10 most visited websites belong to owners affiliated with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Businesspeople, with deep connections to the government and interests in other sectors, are the principal shareholders of companies that own the top 40 media outlets. Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman and I conducted a survey of the Bangladeshi media ownership which revealed that most of the media has deep ties with the present government and major media houses have businesses in sectors which

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