

What are the global challenges to democracy?

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have dubious records ("Who Owns the Media in Bangladesh?", Centre for Governance Studies, January 2021). The third most important challenge to democracy is the growing pattern of executive aggrandisement, that's concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch. Political Scientist Nancy Bermeo has defined executive aggrandisement as a situation where "elected executives weaken checks on executive power...undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences." In the past decades a clear pattern has emerged wherein the leaders use the pliant legislature to grab enormous power. Often these are done through constitutional changes by a legislature where the authoritarian leaders' party has unbridled control. The cases of Bangladesh, Hungary and Turkey are illustrative in this regard. The constitutional changes regarding the electoral process in 2011 in Bangladesh had paved the way for a one-party parliament of the Bangladesh Awami League. In Hungary, Fidesz, the party led by Victor Orban, has trodden the same path. Turkey's transformation, especially the creation of an all-powerful

Presidency, has been done gradually over time through the legislative body and referendum.

The most important and consequential challenge comes from those who were supposedly the beneficiary of the democracy: the people. Several surveys of citizens of the consolidated democracy found that the people are dissatisfied with the way the democratic system is working in their countries. This is something that needs to be taken seriously. In many instances, elites have captured the institutions and policy-making process and left many feeling disenfranchised. Additionally, the growing economic disparity, which has become more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, is a contributory factor. As noted by a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2019 in 27 countries, "most believe elections bring little change, that politicians are corrupt and out of touch and that courts do not treat people fairly." These perceptions are backed by evidence and experiences and consequently eroding trust of institutions. Further delay in addressing these concerns and reforming the political and economic systems will only do more harm to democracy. This also points to a need to create a new social contract

which empowers people and creates a stake in the system. The fundamental element of the new social contract will be the mechanism that will deliver the common goods, institutions that will ensure inclusivity, and the processes of decision making that will be transparent.

However, it is also necessary to remember that while the lack of confidence in institutions is widespread in consolidated democracy, in many countries where democracy was beginning to take root after the 1980s, these institutions are either

missing or severely weak. In those instances, citizens are demanding building these institutions and ensuring the autonomy of these institutions so that these institutions can protect people at large from excesses of incumbent parties and leaders. For many, it is the yearning for participating in the process of governance that is driving them to engage in protest and civic actions.

What is common among people of both consolidated and new democracies is that the people's confidence in democracy as an ideal is strong. To quote Pew Research Center: "ideas at the core of liberal democracy remain popular among global publics." The basic elements of democracy such as popular sovereignty, inclusivity, rule of law, civil and political rights, and freedom of expression, are still cherished by an overwhelming majority of the global population. This unwavering support for democratic ideals has helped democracy to survive and reinvent itself during previous crises. The current crisis is a reminder to all that democracy is not a natural state, instead it needs to be earned, protected, and preserved.

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"EXCELLENCE IS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS AND NOT AN ACCIDENT"

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

