



Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Edited by Leo Shanahan

INTRODUCING

The Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Launched in May 2024, the Democracy Lighthouse appeared during a period of mounting anxiety and widespread political unrest about democracy's future. Funded and supported by the Toda Peace Institute, the Democracy Lighthouse has since then aimed to be an independent beacon and distributor of information on the global subversion and renewal of democracy.

The threats confronting democracies are evidently becoming more dangerous and intractable. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, rearmament in Europe, terrible wars in Sudan, Myanmar and Palestine, big power rivalries, the threats posed to democracy by the Trump administration in the United States, the repression of public protests against the abuse of power in countries such as Argentina and Serbia, and weakened judiciaries in Israel, Hungary, Mexico, and Türkiye are just some of the many challenges facing democracies everywhere. In this fast-changing and turbulent context, the Democracy Lighthouse has expanded its remit beyond its founding focus on platforming the hundreds of organisations and networks engaged in advocating for democracy. Our platform has added a range of new features, including interviews featuring the work of activists and scholars, latest book reviews, and publications by our Global Challenges to Democracy group. As part of this expansion, we have launched the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, a newsletter that provides monthly updates on our group's work.

This edition of the Democracy Lighthouse Digest includes the latest publications from our research team. The October feature article examines a democratic erosions systems map, the result of a joint project between the Lowy Institute and the Toda Peace Institute. This issue also includes Alpa Shah's recently published 'The Incarcerations' and a short commentary by Daniela Campello summarising the trial of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.

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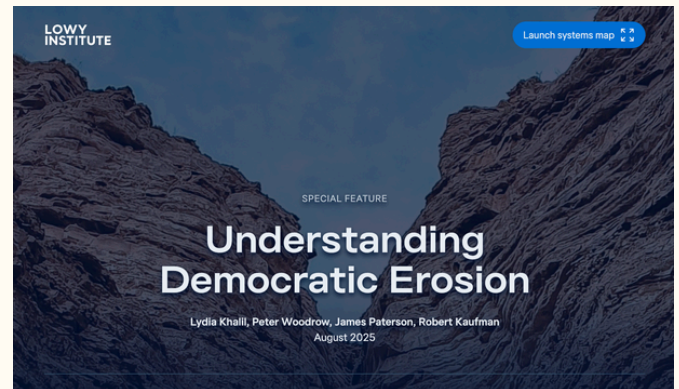
Understanding Democratic Erosion: A Systems Map

The Lowy Institute and the Toda Peace Institute have jointly developed and released an interactive systems map that examines the dynamics leading to democratic decline. Leo Shanahan explains more.

In June 2023, Toda Peace Institute's working group of democracy researchers identified common factors contributing to the global decline in democracy. The group then explored how the erosion of democratic institutions can be understood from a systems perspective. The Sydney-based Lowy Institute took the lead in spearheading the effort, and the result of this collaboration- an interactive systems map- has just been released and is available to view at the link below.

Various studies have tried to pinpoint the cause of democratic decline, but our project takes a different approach, arguing that “democratic erosion is a systems problem that is best understood by applying systems thinking to identify and explore the complex processes behind the phenomenon of democratic decline.” A systems map is seen as an invaluable tool for better understanding complex political dynamics. It is designed to reveal the underlying interrelationships and structures of any given political system by allowing users to zoom in and out and visualise the entire workings of the system. In this systems map, the authors highlight the preceding conditions, multiple factors and many actors that contribute to democratic erosion; and they hold that democratic decline is incremental and multifaceted. Democracies rarely abruptly change through revolutions and coups, they emphasise, and that's why attributing democratic decline to a single cause is misleading. Instead, the authors propose that researchers, policymakers, and activists should seek to understand the systemic dynamics that permit powerful individuals and anti-democratic groups to undermine democratic institutions and consolidate power in their hands.

The authors argue that although each case of democratic erosion is unique, all instances are characterised by three elements: conditions that create a desire for change or solicit a feeling that provides an opportunity for action; actors who exploit these conditions for an anti-democratic agenda or consolidation of power; and pathways that allow these conditions and actors to hollow out democracy. Each element of democratic erosion alone can seem inconsequential with its impact often only known over time and in combination with other factors. Acknowledging this, the systems map thus allows users to choose from a list of conditions, actors, and pathways to learn more about how democratic erosion happens.



The homepage of the Toda Peace Institute and Lowy Institute joint project: Understanding Democratic Erosion.



The Toda Peace Institute's working group of democracy researchers at a meeting in Geneva.

How do you use the map? The systems map illustrates the pathways and self-reinforcing loops, the circular chains of cause and effect, that accelerate democratic erosion. Some of these reinforcing loops include anti-democratic actors consolidating power, the weakening of balancing institutions, entrenched divisions, the loss of public faith in democracy, and the use of political violence. Users will see that by selecting any given element on the map the other elements with which it is connected are highlighted as can be seen in the image below.



The interactive systems map

The interactive systems map is not merely conceptual, for the patterns depicted in the map occur in multiple embattled democracies around the world. The authors point to the fact that although democratic erosion can lead to ‘autocracy’, often it results in lower democratic quality short of complete breakdown. This is the experience for citizens in many countries including the United States, Türkiye, India, and Hungary, where powerful leaders are overhauling the judiciary, undermining press freedom, controlling civil society, and persecuting opponents, meanwhile trying to maintain the appearance of democracy and a veneer of legality.

The authors conclude on a positive note. While systems mapping can help us understand analytically how democratic erosion happens, it can also be used to explore effective actions to counteract negative dynamics or reinforce positive ones. The challenge for politicians, thinkers, judges, and all those who care about democracy is how to promote more robust and resilient democratic institutions, practices and norms that not only survive democratic erosion but bounce back and thrive in an era of democratic erosion. None of the dynamics explored in the systems map is inevitable or irreversible. The goal of the systems map is to help people understand how the erosion of democracy works, so that democratic societies can guard against it.

[CLICK HERE TO VISIT THE SYSTEMS MAP](#)



A Vicious Spiral: Political Violence in Fragile Democracies

BY JORDAN RYAN

The assassination of Charlie Kirk signals a renewed threat to democratic stability in the United States and beyond. The killing is part of a pattern of political violence that transcends borders and increasingly shapes the political landscape of both established and emerging democracies.

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Modi's Mexicans

BY DEBASISH ROY CHOWDHURY

'Bangladeshis' are to Modi what Mexicans are to Trump. Both are proxies that help dress up naked identitarian hate with the logic of nationalism. But Modi isn't just constructing the fear of the 'other', he's constructing the 'other' as well, and using it to remake the citizenry.

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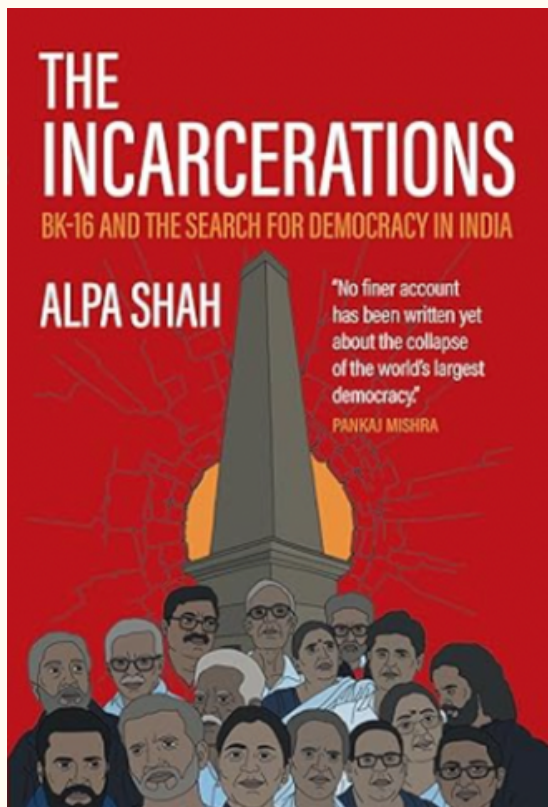


Trump 2.0's impact on Aotearoa New Zealand

BY KEVIN CLEMENTS

This report examines the alarm felt in Aotearoa New Zealand during the first seven months of the second Trump administration. Trump has challenged New Zealand's deeply held political principles and values as well as a long tradition of empathetic and compassionate politics.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)



The Incarcerations is published by OR Books and is available to [purchase](#) for 35 USD.

implantation of the electronic evidence that was used to incarcerate them. Through the life histories of the BK-16, Shah dives deep into the issues they fought for and tells the story of India's three main minorities - Adivasi, Dalits and Muslims - and what the search for democracy entails for them.

Essential and urgent, *The Incarcerations* reveals how this case is a bellwether for the collapse of democracy in India, as for the first time in the nation's history there is a multi-pronged, coordinated attack on key defenders of various pillars of democracy.

FROM THE SHELF

The Incarcerations: BK-16 and the Search for Democracy in India

BY ALPA SHAH

India, the world's largest democracy is facing its greatest challenge since the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

The Incarcerations tells the remarkable and chilling story of the Bhima Koregaon case, in which 16 human rights defenders (the BK-16) - professors, lawyers, journalists, poets – were imprisoned, without credible evidence and without trial, as Maoist terrorists intent on assassinating Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Expertly leading us through the case, Shah exposes some of the world's most shocking revelations of cyber warfare research, which show not only hacking of emails and mobile phones of the BK-16, but also



Democracy Watch

Daniela Campello, Associate Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at the Getulio Vargas Foundation's Business and Policy School, provides a summary of the Bolsonaro trial.

Brazil's Supreme Court recently convicted former president Jair Bolsonaro, sentencing him to 27 years in prison. He was found guilty of leading a criminal organisation and plotting a military coup after the 2022 elections, with the objective of abolishing the democratic state and establishing a military dictatorship. Evidence presented in court included a plan to assassinate President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who presided over the trial. Alongside Bolsonaro, senior military officers who served in his government and were actively involved in the coup attempt were also convicted. This was an historic development in a country with a long tradition of military intervention in politics. Given the near-unanimous ruling, Brazilian law offers little prospect that Bolsonaro's sentence will be substantially reduced on appeal.

In an attempt to influence the trial of Bolsonaro — a loyal follower who has long cast himself as Trump's ally — the U.S. president announced a package of retaliatory measures, accusing the Brazilian judiciary of persecution. These include 50% tariffs on selected Brazilian exports, the cancellation of U.S. visas for Brazilian Supreme Court justices, and the application of the Magnitsky Act, a tool typically reserved for terrorists and human rights abusers, against Justice Alexandre de Moraes. Further sanctions are reportedly under consideration following Bolsonaro's conviction.

For those tempted to celebrate the resilience of Brazil's democracy, the picture is more sobering than it looks. Bolsonaro lost the 2022 election by just 1.8 percentage points, underscoring his enduring political strength. History suggests that assaults on democratic institutions often escalate during a leader's second term, when incumbents feel emboldened and institutional checks are weaker. And even as he begins serving a 27-year sentence, Brazil's Congress is already debating an amnesty — clear evidence of a deepening clash between the judiciary and the legislature over the future of Bolsonaro and of Brazilian democracy itself.



Daniela Campello is an Associate Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at the Getulio Vargas Foundation's Business and Policy School (EBAPE), and a senior researcher at the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI).

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