



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.

In this edition of the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, Debasish Roy Chowdhury examines the emergence of transnational far-right alliances and discusses what this means for democracy. Pedro Aibéo, the founder of our partner organisation Architectural Democracy, looks at the relationship between democracy and urban spaces. This edition also includes the latest book – *Demagogues and Despots* – from Democracy Lighthouse's own, Professor John Keane. It concludes with a piece from Wolfgang Merkel which argues that the time for democratic resilience is now.

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[DEMOCRACY LIGHTHOUSE](#)



A White Supremacist's Passage to Modi's India

BY DEBASISH ROY CHOWDHURY

This report focuses on celebrity MAGA influencer and conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer who, despite issuing slurs and rants against India and Indians on social media, has masterfully recast herself as an advocate for “Hindu people” against the “brutalities of Islam.”

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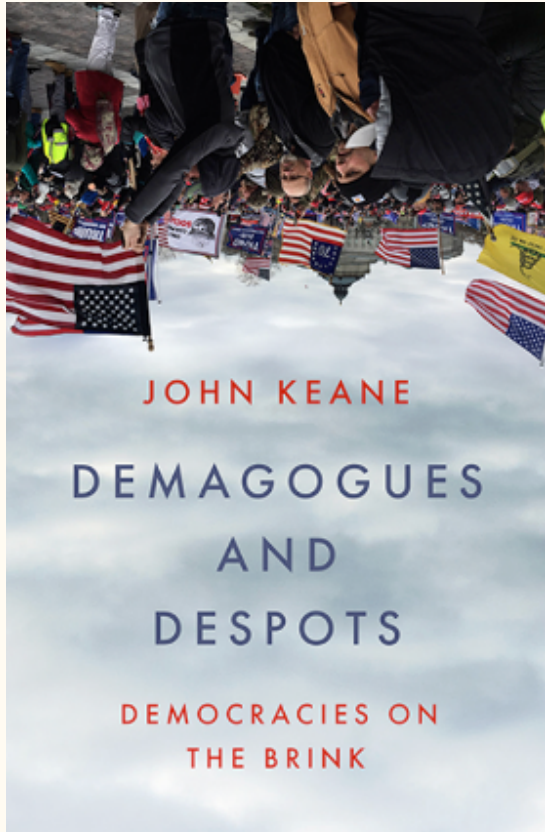


Democracy and the Spaces We Can No Longer Shape

BY PEDRO AIBÉO

Democracy does not live only in constitutions, elections and courts. It also lives in the places where people meet, wait, argue, rest, organise and remain without permission. When those spaces become harder to shape, harder to inhabit, or harder to use without paying, democracy weakens long before anyone announces its decline.

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Demagogues and Despots is published by HURST and is available to purchase for 15.99GBP. The book will be published this month.

weaponised lying and talk of enemies. And alarmingly, the new despots hunt in packs.

But what's so good about democracy? In bold, energetic prose, Keane explains that it's much more than popular self-government based on free and fair elections. Democracy is the collective insistence that unaccountable power is always dangerous—and that democratic institutions are our best weapon against demagogues and despots.

FROM THE SHELF

Demagogues and Despots: Democracies on the Brink

BY JOHN KEANE

Democracy and despotism live closer together than you'd expect. This book from Professor John Keane, a member of the Democracy Lighthouse research team, reveals why that should alarm us all.

We live in troubled times, marked by a sinister trend threatening democracy everywhere: the triumph of despotism not only in countries like Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also in states run by popularly elected demagogues—Trump, Erdoğan and Netanyahu.

John Keane shows why this new despotism defies the laws of political gravity. Instead of relying exclusively on fear or force, it fosters a strange, pseudo-democratic type of government, led by rulers skilled in winning public loyalty through election-rigging, legal trickery, corruption,

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Democracy Watch

Wolfgang Merkel, Emeritus Professor at Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), argues that the time for democratic resilience is now.

Global democracy indices such as Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Freedom House (FH) have reported a steady decline in the liberal and social quality of democracy worldwide since the international financial crisis of 2008–2009. But democratic backsliding or the erosion of democracy is not inevitable and can be changed by citizens, civil society, properly functioning administrations, the rule of law, democratic governments, political parties, and social movements.



Wolfgang Merkel

Democratic resilience does not simply mean the defence of democracy or the return to the status quo ante. It is not defensive but active, in society, the economy, and the state. There are three major modes of democratic resilience that determine how we appropriately respond to the challenges facing democracy: to defend, to adapt, and to recover from the damage to democracy caused by illiberal and undemocratic governments, even in formally democratic regimes such as in Brazil (Bolsonaro), the U.S. (Trump), India (Modi), Poland (PiS), and Hungary (Orbán). In Brazil, Poland, and Hungary, right-wing populist parties have recently lost elections. Democratic parties have come to power. It proves that we do not live simply in times of democratic backsliding, but also in times of growing democratic resilience. The right-wing populist enemies of liberalism and democracy were ousted from power through democratic means. Now it is crucial to re-democratise the illiberal strongholds in the state, administration, and judiciary, as well as in politics, the economy, and society. That will not be easy and has to be done democratically.

This will also require a government that delivers the goods and opportunities that citizens expect. Three functions are of particular importance here:

- Governments must have knowledge and understanding of the future and the options for action, and they must utilise them.
- They must show citizens that they can solve difficult problems in economy and society.
- They must make fair decisions that distribute the burdens of transformation equitably across all classes, ethnic groups, and communities.

It is not enough for democratic governments to merely return to the status quo ante that existed before the authoritarian episode. All too often, during the era of neoliberal globalisation over the past four decades, the rich have grown richer while the middle and lower classes have grown poorer. Democratic resilience is not determined solely within democratic institutions. It also requires the implementation of the grand social-liberal ideal of “equal life chances” for all, especially for the less fortunate in our wealthy societies. Without equal life chances, there can be no resilient democracy. It is not only a matter of defending democracy, but also—and always—of “democratising democracy.”