

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, Wolfgang Merkel provides an insight into the AfD's recent victory in Saxony-Anhalt. Larbi Sadiki examines democratic resilience in Tunisia and Jordan Ryan visits Dag Hammarskjöld's grave in Uppsala. This edition also features Marietje Schaake's book *The Tech Coup* and concludes with a reflection from John Keane on his recent book *Demagogues and Despots: Democracies on the Brink*.

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[DEMOCRACY LIGHTHOUSE](#)

Germany at a Crossroads - Wolfgang Merkel

In an interview with Democracy Lighthouse, Wolfgang Merkel, Professor Emeritus at Humboldt University Berlin explores the wider implications of AfD's victory in Saxony-Anhalt. An extract from the interview is included below. The full conversation is available on the Democracy Lighthouse website and YouTube, or by following the link below.



Wolfgang Merkel

There are two ways of looking at the AfD's victory in Saxony-Anhalt. There is the optimistic view and the pessimistic one.

The optimistic view is that Saxony-Anhalt is one of 16 states within Germany, and it is a small state. It has a population of around two million people, which represents only about 2.5% of the German population. This is not very much. In Germany we have a second chamber of government which represents the individual states. Within this institution, there are 69 votes across all 16 German states, and Saxony-Anhalt has only four of those 69 votes.

This tells you immediately that the AfD will not have a major, direct impact on federal policy. Therefore, we should be relaxed. This is the optimistic view.

There is also a pessimistic view. Germany is not a country like any other country. It bears responsibility for some of the most horrific episodes of modern history. It was involved in initiating the First World War, and then, between 1933 and 1945, it started the Second World War, set the globe on fire and, in the most horrific crime, murdered six million Jews.

Therefore, after the Second World War, when the political elites began to create a new democratic constitution, they shaped it according to what we call "militant democracy." This means that the state has the right to ban political parties. This is contained in Article 21 of the German constitution. It is a power that not many constitutions have, and it has to be understood in the context of the horrific historical episode I was talking about.

In the history of the Federal Republic, beginning in 1949, the Constitutional Court has only banned political parties twice. The first was a neo-Nazi party in the early 1950s, and then a neo-Stalinist communist party was banned as well.

I consider this a problem because political parties can re-emerge. This was the case with the Communist Party. After a few years, some of the same functionaries and political elites re-established a party with a similar communist identity.

Germany at a Crossroads - Wolfgang Merkel

Another important note is that right-wing populist parties have already governed in 14 of the 27 EU member states, participating in more than 30 governments. In Germany, however, there has been no far-right party in government at the federal, regional or municipal level since 1949.

This tells you that Saxony-Anhalt is, so far, a deviant case. But the pessimists argue that it could be a turning point. If you move your perspective from the Saxony-Anhalt level to the federal level, opinion polls tell us that around 25 to 27% of Germans are prepared, or inclined, to vote for the far-right party. This is certainly something that democrats cannot accept in Germany.



[WATCH THE FULL VIDEO HERE](#)

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Democratic Resilience: The Case of Tunisia, 2011-2021

BY LARBI SADIKI

Larbi Sadiki provides a conceptualisation of ‘democratic resilience from below’ through a Tunisian lens. He provides empirical analysis of the Tunisian case, briefly setting the scene with an overview of the political turbulence in Tunisia since July 2021.

[READ FULL ARTICLE](#)



At Hammarskjöld's Grave, Sixty-Five Years After Ndola

BY JORDAN RYAN

Last month Jordan Ryan visited Dag Hammarskjöld's grave in Uppsala, a quiet place, a long way from New York and from the wars the United Nations exists to prevent.

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The Tech Coup is published by Princeton University Press.

politicians to show how technologies—from social media to artificial intelligence—are undermining the pillars of our democracies. To reverse this existential power imbalance, Schaake outlines some potential solutions to empower elected officials and citizens alike. Democratic leaders can—and must—resist the influence of corporate lobbying and reinvent themselves as dynamic, flexible guardians of our digital world.

FROM THE SHELF

The Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley

BY MARIETJE SCHAAKE

Over the past decades, technology companies have successfully resisted regulation and have even begun to seize power from governments themselves. Facial recognition firms track citizens for police surveillance. Cryptocurrency threatens the stability of the global financial system. Spyware companies sell digital intelligence tools to anyone who can afford them. This new reality—where unregulated technology has become a forceful instrument for autocrats around the world—is terrible news for democracies and citizens.

In *The Tech Coup*, Marietje Schaake offers an account of how technology companies crept into nearly every corner of our lives and our governments. She takes us beyond the headlines to high-stakes meetings with human rights defenders, business leaders, computer scientists, and

Democracy Watch

*Professor John Keane considers his latest book *Demagogues and Despots: Democracies on the Brink*. This is an extract from a video that Professor Keane recorded for Democracy Lighthouse which can be viewed [here](#)*

Since the recent publication of my book *Demagogues and Despots*, I've been asked by a few people: why did you write it?

Democracies almost everywhere are plagued by demagogues: Netanyahu, Marine Le Pen, Farage, Donald Trump. Power-hungry leaders who, when they get their hands on the levers of government, slowly but surely destroy constitutional, power-sharing democracy. And they do so in the name of the people, in the name of democracy.

Elsewhere, we see despotic regimes. Putin's Russia, Lukashenko's Belarus, Xi's China, the Central Asian republics—in which strong rulers govern over millions of people in the name of the people and, again, in the name of democracy.

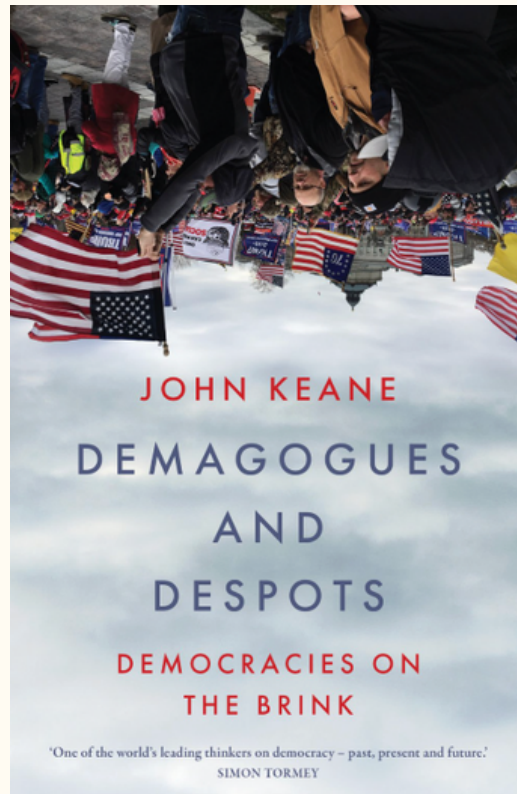


John Keane

This strange convergence of demagoguery and despotism is at the core of the book, and the book goes on to say that, to understand these trends, we need to abandon dog-tired words like tyranny, autocracy, illiberal democracy, authoritarianism, populism, or even fascism.

What is needed is a kind of Confucian rectification of names, fresh categories for making sense of these profoundly anti-democratic trends of our times.

Demagogues and Despots is published by Hurst.



[WATCH THE FULL VIDEO HERE](#)

Democracy Lighthouse

*a research and publications platform and global guide
to the organisations, networks, and scholars currently
rethinking and advocating democracy*

