Toda Peace Institute

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Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Edited by Leo Shanahan

INTRODUCING

The Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Democracy Needs Your Voice!
We're launching our Democracy Lighthouse Speakers' Corner today — and we'd love you to be part of it.

At a time when democracy faces serious challenges around the world, we need more spaces where people can exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, share experiences and imagine new possibilities.

That's why we're launching Speakers' Corner, an open forum where everyone is welcome to join the conversation about democracy and its future. Whether you're an activist, scholar, student or simply someone who cares about democracy, we want to hear from you.

What concerns you most about democracy today? What gives you hope? What needs to change?

Speakers' Corner is a place to share your thoughts, respond to others and help build a lively international conversation.

👇 Scroll down to learn more about Speakers' Corner and find out how you can join the conversation. It will only take a few minutes to get started.

Also in this edition are the latest articles from Layla Saleh and Daniela Campello, a look at Jakob Huber's new book Democratic Hope: Imagination and the Political Future, and an update from Debasish Roy Chowdhury on the latest anti-government protests in India.

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If you would like to sign up to the monthly Democracy Lighthouse Digest you can subscribe, for free, at the link below.

DEMOCRACY LIGHTHOUSE

The Democracy Lighthouse Speakers' Corner

Introduction by Professor John Keane

Our Democracy Speakers' Corner is an exciting new Democracy Lighthouse initiative. It's a space designed to encourage dialogue, disagreement and informed reflection and commentary about democracy and its future. Democracy Speakers' Corner aims to bring together activists, scholars, policymakers, and citizen voices to share different experiences and competing views about the serious challenges and openings confronting democracy everywhere on our planet. We encourage our visitors to add spice and life to the platform by making written, audio, or visual contributions united by a common commitment to democratic values, intellectual seriousness, respectful exchanges and deeply felt concerns about the tough and turbulent times through which our world is passing.

We intend Democracy Speakers' Corner to be a small but significant contribution to the spirit of democracy. In the long history of democratic politics, saying the unsayable, exposing secrets and silences, making public things of public importance have always been fundamental principles. Public assemblies of citizens in ancient Syria-Mesopotamia and Greece, speeches about morals delivered from inside chapels, synagogues and mosques, constitutional conventions, trade union strikes, and occupations of public squares by angry and disaffected citizens are among the best-known practical examples of these principles. To the list must be added speakers' corners, places where in the past crowds gathered to hear speakers rant and rave about matters of the day - carnivalesque spaces where, in the presence of others, people put their bodies and voices on the line, praised or mocked and walloped the rich and powerful, denounced devils, recommended different ways of thinking and called for radical changes in the way we dwell on this small planet we call home.

Speakers' corners so named are a mid-nineteenth century invention that has survived into our times. The most famous case is the Hyde Park Speakers' Corner located a stone's throw from London's Marble Arch. But there have been many other less well-known experiments which embraced the name: the Speakers' Corner in Singapore's Hong Lim Park, Woodford Square (known locally as the 'people's parliament') in Trinidad and Tobago's Port of Spain, and the oval-shaped Sanam Luang in the heart of old Bangkok, for instance. And there are the gli angoli degli oratori in Tuscany, Rome and Venice, the Spreeksteen in Amsterdam, and many speakers' corner experiments in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia.

Despite police harassment and court bans, the practice of speakers' corners has gone global and even survived the transition from an age of newspapers, pamphlets, books, soapboxes, radio and television to an era of digitally networked, multi-media communications. In our age of reels, memes, tweets and Reddit- and Substack-style blogs, speakers' corners live on in more quarrelsome, decentred and disembodied multi-media forms. More platforms aren't of course synonymous with more informed debate, wise judgments or common agreements. But, like the speakers' corners of yesteryear, the new speakers' corners spring up whenever people are drawn together by matters of common concern. They are assemblages of ironists and comics, the wondrous and the worried, the frustrated and the furious. As we hope to show by example in our new initiative, speakers' corners are lively gatherings of people who care about the ways of our world, who ask tough questions and who daringly make the case for reimagining and defending democracy because they suspect that far too many of the wealthy and powerful leaders in charge of our planet are the new horsemen of a frightening apocalypse.

How to use the Speakers' Corner!

Getting involved in Democracy Lighthouse's Speakers' Corner is easy. Follow these steps to join the discussion and share your views.

- **Visit Speakers' Corner**. Click **HERE** to access the forum or find it through the Democracy Lighthouse website.
- **Create an account.** Click "Join" in the top-right corner and follow the instructions to register.
- **Read our principles.** Familiarise yourself with the principles that guide respectful and constructive participation in the forum.
- **Choose a discussion:**
  - For general comments and discussion, click "This Month's Discussion."
  - To view upcoming events and projects from other organisations, click "Partner Organisations."
- **Create a post.** Click "New Post" in the top-right corner.
- **Share your views!** Join the conversation by posting your thoughts, experiences and perspectives on the issues that matter to you.

We look forward to seeing your contributions!

Syria's Political Transition: Towards a New Personalist Politics?

BY LAYLA SALEH

Layla Saleh assesses the institution building that has taken place in post-Assad Syria over the past several months. She asks in the burgeoning personalist politics of the new Syria, has the country advanced beyond authoritarianism through "election fetishism" of the pre-2011 era?

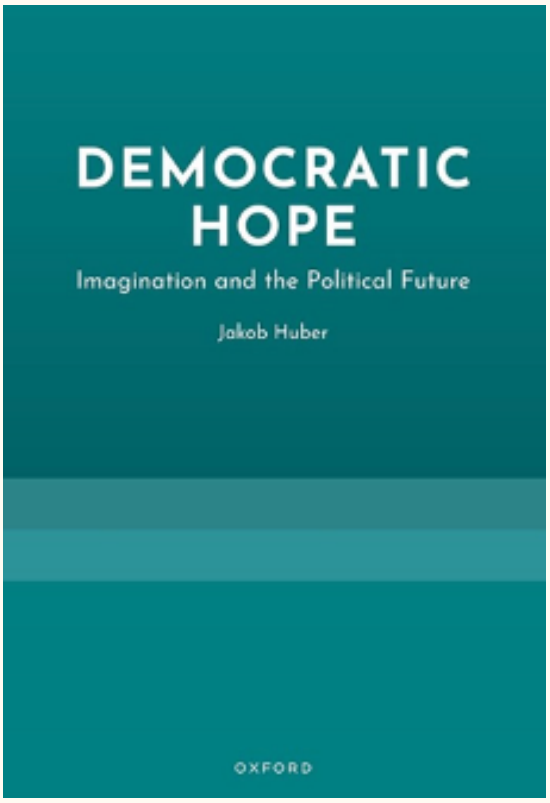
READ FULL ARTICLE

After Democratic Erosion: Resilience and Democratic Distortion in Brazil

BY DANIELA CAMPELLO

Daniela Campello discusses Brazilian democracy which survived Bolsonaro but did not return to its previous equilibrium. Campello argues that breakdown was avoided through a combination of contingency and institutional resistance.

READ FULL ARTICLE



Democratic Hope is published by Oxford University Press.

FROM THE SHELF

Democratic Hope: Imagination and the Political Future

BY JAKOB HUBER

Huber's book develops a systematic political philosophy of hope for an age of democratic crisis. It argues that hope is not merely a psychological attitude but a political necessity: democracy requires that citizens understand themselves as co-authors of their shared future, and this self-understanding depends on the capacity for imaginative hope.

The book identifies two crises: hope is increasingly unavailable to citizens who lack positive visions of the future, and hope faces theoretical suspicion from scholars and activists who warn that it breeds complacency or distorts our grasp of reality.

In response, Huber develops an account of imaginative hope as politically indispensable, showing how it enables political agents to overcome demoralization, constitute effective collectives, and achieve orientation about their goals.

Huber's account of democratic hope culminates in a conception of 'diachronic democracy': a conception of democracy as an inherently temporal practice through which citizens collectively negotiate their shared future, providing both a response to the crises of hope and a new account of what democracy fundamentally is.

Democracy Watch

Debasish Roy Chowdhury, author (with John Keane) of To Kill a Democracy, discusses the Cockroach Movement's message for the world.

Debasish Roy Chowdhury

Not too long ago, Narendra Modi's party and supporters took great delight in gramophoning dubious 'surveys' declaring the Indian prime minister as the most popular leader among democracies, with supposedly 70 percent approval ratings. Fortress Delhi in recent days, however, betrays a nervous king hiding from his own people rather than an elected leader enjoying extraordinary support.

Modi turned the Indian capital into a semi-militarized zone last weekend to prevent protests against a highly contentious voter verification process that has disenfranchised 130 million people. A ruthless crackdown followed, exposing the regime's declining confidence in its power of persuasion and its opting for violence as the last resort to contain dissent.

The government pulled out all stops to stifle protests as opposition parties, a newly minted Gen Z grouping satirically named Cockroach Janta Party—born out of a social media meme—, student groups, farmers' unions and myriad other civil-society bodies have upped the demand for the sacking of the chief election commissioner and called for public demonstrations in Delhi. It cordoned off the city centre with several layers of barricades, cancelled trains and stopped buses heading to Delhi, flooded the capital with police and paramilitary forces, and suspended mobile internet and public transport in and around the capital's designated protest site, putting the capital virtually under a lockdown.

Thousands of peaceful, unarmed protesters were detained, rounded up, and often mercilessly beaten. Women faced sexual attacks at protest areas. There are multiple accounts of protesters subjected to vicious assaults inside police buses and vans. Female protesters said police hit them "on their breasts and targeted their private parts." Three women journalists filed sexual harassment charges against Delhi Police. Dozens of journalists were detained to prevent them from reporting.

Detainees were mostly bundled into dark buses and taken far away from the capital's designated protest site, with much of the brutality taking place inside the buses to hide it from public view. Some recounted "blood-curdling screams" ringing out of the buses as police personnel assaulted protesters "as if they had a personal grudge." Even an opposition Member of Parliament was not spared.

What emerged from the crackdown was a pattern of police impunity that would not have been possible without express directive of the government, especially the home minister, who controls the capital's police and is Modi's closest aide. But a more menacing aspect of the crackdown was the way Hindu supremacist vigilante groups were unleashed on the protesters to work in lockstep with police.

The full version of Deb's article is available on the Democracy Lighthouse website.