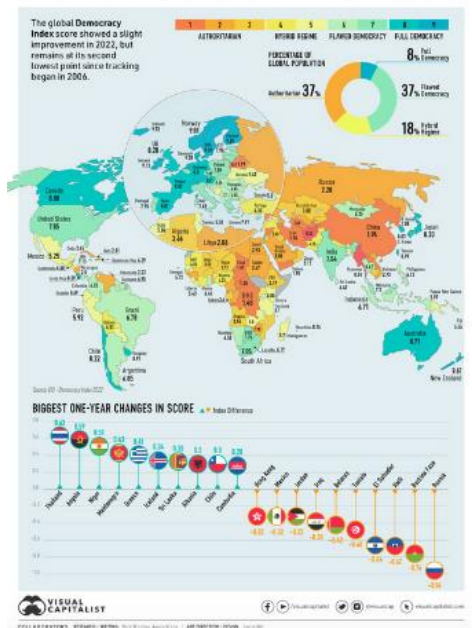


**TO ACHIEVE Sustainable Development Goals  
DEMOCRACY NEEDS A RETHINK**



THE STATE OF  
**DEMOCRACY** AROUND  
THE WORLD



## FROM THE EDITOR

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Welcome to the 27<sup>th</sup> issue of the Sustainable Development Observer for 2024 where we focus on the state of democracy with different shades and definitions.

In the articles we are presenting to you, we hope to raise questions - rather than answers - on how democracy could help in the achievement of the SDGs. We also look at the looming threats to democracy, especially with the links to non-IDN articles we provide in this issue.

In our first article we question whether India is really the world's biggest democracy and what is bugging its democratic credentials? We also look at how Japan's PM is struggling for survival.

In December I visited an interesting village community near Wuhan in China, where I witnessed an interesting model of grassroots democracy in China, which I thought was worthy of exploration by other countries, especially in the Global South. We publish here the report I did from there.

Zimbabwe was always in the news when Prime Minister Robert Mugabe was challenging the West. Since his demise, nothing much seems to have changed but we hardly hear about it. Here is a chance to get an update on democracy – or lack of it – in the southern African country – go to page 10.

In the immediate post-independence era, Nkrumah and other independent-minded pan-African leaders were often silenced by western powers. Now, a new generation of such young leaders, seem to be coming up. But, they are being silenced by Africa's own rulers it seems – go to page 11 for an update.

World's other poster boy of democracy is also in trouble as we know. We bring you a viewpoint on whether US democracy is heading towards a dictatorial model of "minority rules" politics.

Recently, during the elections in Bangladesh we heard a lot of reports via the western media in particular about how a "rigged election" has helped Shiek Hasina to continue her long reign as Prime Minister. Contrary to what the western media says, the very fact the opposition boycotted the elections may be because they knew they had no chance of winning. If you read the article we present on page 17 you would learn why.

Hope you will enjoy reading some diverse views on the state of democracy around the world.

Dr Kalinga Seneviratne – Editor, Sustainable Development Observer





## India: Is the World's Largest Democracy A "Mockery"?

By Kalinga Seneviratne

Singapore — India's national Parliament - known as Lok Sabha (Lower House of the People) - has become a "mockery of democracy," says the main opposition party Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge following a splurge of expulsions of their members from the chambers before important criminal law reform bills were debated and passed by the legislator.



Ravish Kumar, one of several high-profile Indian journalists, who have left mainstream media organizations over the past few years and turned to YouTube and other social media platforms instead. These journalists see their own channels as the only way to continue their work in a country where the government is hounding noncompliant media out of their jobs. Photo Source: Rest of the World

The Indian Parliament witnessed a historic number of suspensions earlier this month as 141 opposition lawmakers were suspended for disrupting proceedings, following an incident on 13 December where two intruders entered the Lok Sabha from the visitor's gallery, releasing some gas and shouting anti-government slogans, raising serious concerns about parliamentary security.

Opposition demands for the government to account for the security breaches were met by rowdy scenes in the chambers that resulted in suspensions extending to the upper chamber of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.

Kharge blasted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in a statement released on X (Twitter) for allegedly suppressing dissent and rushing important legislation without proper debate. "The suspension of a total of 141 Opposition MPs from Parliament reinforces our charge that an autocratic BJP wants to demolish democracy in this country. We all know that key Bills like the criminal law amendments, which unleash draconian powers and impede citizens' rights, are listed," he said on X.

### The wave of suspensions

The wave of suspensions thinned the opposition benches in the Lok Sabha, creating an almost empty assembly on a day dedicated to legislative reforms. The Parliament passed the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita Bill, 2023, which seeks to reform criminal laws by replacing some of India's existing British colonial-era criminal procedure laws. On 20 December, when the Lok Sabha passed some criminal reform laws, the Congress-led Opposition INDIA bloc had only 43 members in the legislative chambers.

The government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has justified the suspensions, arguing that the opposition MPs have insulted both the Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankar inside the parliamentary chambers.

Aurangzeb Naqshbandi, a veteran reporter of Congress affairs writing in Decca Herald, argues that the mass suspension of parliamentary members for the first time in India's history does not augur well for democracy in the country.

"The move exhibits the unbridled powers of a ruling party having a brute majority in Parliament. In the past, such large-scale suspensions took place when the Congress government led by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, had an overwhelming majority in Parliament," he noted, pointing out that 63 members were suspended on 15 March 1989 when they "created a ruckus" over the tabling of a report on the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (in 1984) where the panel has raised doubts on the role of two of her close associates and the government refused to conduct a thorough investigation into it.



Pro=Modi political rally in Delhi. Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

“More than 34 years later, the ruling BJP seems to be following in the Congress’ footage,” says Naqshbandi, who argues that the “conduct of the Opposition seeking a response from the Government can be questioned but at same time, their demand for the home minister’s statement cannot be termed unparliamentary.”

There are less than six months for national elections for the Lok Sabha, and with massive electoral victories in three crucial state

elections in Northern India in early December, the BJP is brimming with confidence while the opposition INDIA alliance is in disarray, even though Congress won two Southern Indian states.

“BJP is self-assured of returning to power,” notes political scientist Ajay K. Mehra, a senior fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. “However, the road ahead for India’s parliamentary democracy appears rugged and bumpy.”

### **An extreme measure**

“Expulsion of an elected member from either house is an extreme measure, and if not done prudently, it shows a brazen disregard of the popular will,” adds Mehra. “Let alone negotiating a strategy with the opposition benches for smooth functioning, the presiding officers of the two houses are summarily suspending the members for the entire session. Obviously, the impartial and efficacious conduct of the proceedings of the houses is in peril. Are the chairman of the Rajya Sabha (vice president of India) and the speaker of the Lok Sabha playing partisan cards?” he asks.

It is not only the Parliament that is being muzzled; the media is facing the same music, and YouTube is the only avenue remaining for independent journalism, say some senior mainstream media personalities who have recently left their jobs when business cronies of the Modi government have either taken over their media or have been intimidated to tow the government line.

One of them is India’s best-known TV current affairs journalist, Ravish Kumar, formerly of NDTV—for which he worked for 27 years. In the past year, he has been subjected to death threats from supporters of the Modi government, and NDTV was about to be taken over by a family oligarch known to be a very close associate of Modi when he decided to quit.

Thus, in August, he announced on his YouTube channel that he was leaving NDTV because he did not want to be part of what he calls the “Godi Media”—the media that sings praises of the Modi government.

“I feel like the bird that has lost its nest because someone else snatched it away,” he said. While thanking his viewers for decades of support, he warned his fans to be wary of the authoritarian forces dividing the country. “What we have [in India] today is truly the dark age of journalism,” he said. “Our media ecosystem has been gutted and destroyed.”

In a long feature report published on 19 December in [restofworld.org](http://restofworld.org), reporter Sonia Faleiro wrote that Kumar is one of several high-profile Indian journalists who have left mainstream media organizations over the past few years and turned to YouTube and other social media platforms instead.

“These journalists see their own channels as the only way to continue their work in a country where the government is hounding noncompliant media out of their jobs,” she noted, adding that when the

election campaign comes, social media may be the last space to share unbiased news. “The idea is to report the news the old-school way,”

Faye D’Souza, a former executive editor at the media company Times Network, told *Rest of World* that you need “to calmly tell people what is going on.” But going solo could be punishing work, and a YouTube channel or Instagram account offers different protections than working for a mainstream media company: There is little financial security, legal support, or physical protection, he noted.

Faleiro says, “Alone in their own homes, several of India’s best-known journalists told *the Rest of the World*, they are fearful for their future.”

[Transmitted on 28 December 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan.  
Photo Credit: CC BY 4.0

## Japanese PM Kishida Struggles for Political Survival

By Purnendra Jain and Takeshi Kobayash

ADELAIDE/TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are facing one of the worst financial scandals in decades, resulting in growing public distrust of the party and threatening the stability of his government.

The Kishida government, which took office in October 2021, was already facing headwinds as its cabinet’s popularity declined due to

concerns about the economy, social security and the LDP’s links to the Unification Church. The assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022 during an election campaign further complicates matters. The assailant claimed that Abe supported the Unification Church, which he said caused his family’s bankruptcy and forced his mother into making donations. Many other LDP parliamentarians are known supporters of the Church. Kishida and the LDP are yet to be transparent about this issue.

Despite falling popularity, the LDP’s approval ratings hovered in the 30s between October and November 2023. Analysts suggested that Kishida would continue despite his low popularity and that there were no imminent threats to his prime ministership.

That scenario changed dramatically at the close of November 2023. One poll suggests that Kishida’s cabinet approval rate has plummeted to 17 per cent, marking the lowest prime ministerial approval rating since the LDP regained power in 2012.

The drop in popularity occurred after it was revealed that LDP factions and the individual parliamentarians associated with them had failed to report all revenues from ticket sales at fundraising events. The slush fund, estimated to be millions of dollars, was used for political purposes, violating the Public Funds Control Law.

The Public Prosecutors Office has launched investigations into the LDP’s largest and most influential faction, the Seiwakai, commonly referred to as the Abe faction. Reports suggest that four other major factions, including the one led by Kishida, might also be implicated.

Kishida has replaced four key cabinet ministers from the Abe faction. The position of Chief Cabinet Secretary—which serves as the face of the government—has gone to Yoshimasa Hayashi. Kishida had removed Hayashi from his position as foreign minister and, facing difficulty in persuading other colleagues to assume the Chief Cabinet Secretary position, Kishida opted for Hayashi, a member of his own faction. The other three ministerial positions went to factions led by Taro Aso, Toshimitsu Motegi and Hiroshi Moriyama.

The cabinet reshuffle does not address the core problem—money politics. Money politics remains endemic in Japan’s political system, despite past reforms.

In the 1970s, former prime minister Kakuei Tanaka resigned due to a bribery scandal. Following Tanaka’s resignation, the LDP sought to regain public trust by turning to ‘Mr Clean’, former prime minister Takeo Miki. But it was not long before another large-scale financial scandal—the Recruit Scanda—emerged in the late 1980s. The scandal led to former prime minister Noboru Takeshita’s resignation, his secretary’s suicide and the resignation of many high-profile politicians. Takeshita’s successor, former prime minister Sosuke Uno, resigned within months following revelations of sexual misconduct.

Amid the scandals, the LDP called in another Mr Clean, former prime minister Toshiki Kaifu. But the LDP’s troubles persisted.

The 1993 Sagawa Kyubin financial scandal resulted in the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of LDP ‘strongman’ Shin Kanemaru on tax evasion charges. These scandals ultimately led to the LDP’s electoral defeat in 1993, marking what was supposed to be a new era in Japanese politics.

But opposition parties have struggled to win government and sustain it. The LDP regained power within two years of its 1993 defeat. Similarly, the LDP returned to government within three years by defeating the Democratic Party of Japan in 2012. Even during the Abe administration, reports of financial scandals emerged. But Abe’s strong popularity allowed him to survive.

The current fundraising scandal and its scale are still unfolding. More resignations are likely. Many details regarding the unlawful accumulation of political funds remain unknown. The Public Prosecutors Office may shed light on the scandal after its investigation.

Regardless of the outcome of the investigation, Kishida’s position appears untenable. Though not directly implicated like Tanaka, Takeshita and Uno in the past, the public expects Kishida, as President of the LDP, to own up to the rot in the party and step down. Despite the reshuffle of his cabinet and his statement committing to spearhead reforms in the LDP, it will be a political miracle if he survives this scandal ahead of the LDP presidential election in September 2024.

The LDP and its Prime Minister face a choice. They can follow the same path as their predecessors by temporarily presenting a ‘clean’ face and then reverting back to business as usual. Alternatively, the new generation of LDP politicians can challenge the established path and set a different course for the party, one that is policy-focused, transparent, less factional and not hereditary. But it remains uncertain whether the new generation of LDP politicians is inclined to take on this challenge.

The opposition parties remain weak, fragmented and unable to replace the LDP. Yet they play a crucial role in keeping the LDP government accountable. Without the Japanese Communist Party’s scrutiny, the present fundraising scandal might never have come to light.

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This article was originally published by East Asia Forum - Original link: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/12/20/japanese-pm-kishidas-struggle-for-political-survival/>

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The grassroots democracy practised at the village level is “self-autonomy” that existed before the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949 by Mao Zedong. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne.

## China’s Grassroots Democracy Paves Path to Sustainable Development

By Kalinga Seneviratne

HUANGSHI, Hubei Province, China — About 30 minutes drive from this city in Hubei Province are villages that are providing a model of village-based grassroots democracy that is paving the path to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, which China supported.

The SDG agenda of the UN stresses governance and partnerships involving public and private actors as key elements for achieving the goals by 2030. This model of village development, which has been implemented at least since 2017, provides a good example of China’s growing engagement in sustainable development through the concept of collaborative governance.

“Success for this strategy has two main reasons,” explained Prof Ji Li of the Journalism and Communication School of Wuhan University, who took me on a tour of three villages accompanied by two government Town Officials from Huangshi city.

“One is people have built up a trust (living together) over the years. Second is they see benefits if they make profits (from society enterprise). So they follow government strategy (for village development). It took time to build trust between the government and the village people,” added Prof Li, who has been involved in development communication projects in China for a long time.

### ***“Self-autonomy”***

The grassroots democracy practiced at the village level is “self-autonomy,” which existed before the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949 by Mao Zedong, said a local town official, who did not want to be named as she is not authorized to speak to the media as an official representative. But, she



The ancestral worship temple that existed before the PRC was established in 1949 by Mao Zedong. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

emphasized that at this level of village development, “the government tries very hard not to dictate”.

“The village head is elected by villagers. Outsiders will not take part in it,” explained the town official, adding, “government doesn’t want to select leaders. They want the villagers to elect their leaders, some are women”.

Each village has a colourful ancestral worship temple, a tradition that existed before the communist revolution. It is here that the villagers meet, elect their leaders and discuss village affairs. Each temple has a central enclosed area for these meetings. The town officials also meet the villagers at these venues when they need to discuss development strategies and government funding.

“At these meetings, when the government offers the money, the villagers could refuse if they don’t want to work on a proposed development project,” the town official told IDN. “It is the role of the village head to make the villagers trust the project, for them to join in.”

To qualify as a village leader, the person needs to be voted by most villagers and recognized by town officials as a trusted person for government funds to be invested in the village.

### ***The volunteer army***



Li Meng Wenweaving a mat outside his home.  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

At Liu Village in Yangxin County, IDN met Liu Dong Dong, a 31-year-old village head. He has worked in the volunteer army and after returning to the village, he has become a farmer and also runs a village shop.

“I lead the village to help people to expand the economy and get them out of poverty (and) to improve our happiness index, as well as make our village clean. I also help villages to negotiate better (with town officials) when they have a problem or a disagreement,” Dong told IDN.

With financial assistance from the government, the village has set up a grape orchard. “Every day about ten people work in the farm. Grapes are used to make wine,” he explained.

Established in 2015, the vineyard covers an area of 100 mu (6.67 hectares). By 2017, the harvesting income was over 300,000 Yuan (USD 43,000) and the sales income of traditional winemaking is now over 700,000 Yuan (USD 98,150).

The Chinese concept of grassroots development democracy is based on a synergy of government

funding, grassroots consent and transparent spending to realize the SDGs.

Before receiving the government funding the village has to establish what they call a “Village Collaborative Society”. It functions like a company. The village appoints two people to administer it and villagers are paid by the society to work on the project. The head of the society is a member of the village elected by the villagers.

The villagers use the land in the village for the development project. Profits go to the society and village members share the profits. A village does not have to pay back to the government the money given to start the project. If it makes a profit it is left alone. “But if you are making losses, the government will send Town Officials to find out the problem. If someone has made a serious mistake, this person will have to pay for it”, Dong explains further.



## Tea plantations and oil production

In the adjoining village, oil tea plantations and oil production are the main sources of income. The high-yielding oil tea plantations were begun in 2010, and now these span an area of 2000 mu (120 hectares). The cooperative has its oil tea processing plant under the trademark “Defu Village”. The processing plant works for about two months a year after harvesting in November.

In addition to the government, 38 families have invested in the company in the form of mortgaging their land to invest in tea plantations. They get 1,500 Yuan (USD 210) per year in return.

At the entrance to the plantation, there is a large notice board detailing the investments in the venture. The yellow box lists the workers and how much they get. The Green box gives a detailed list of how much villagers get (as shareholders), and the Blue box lists the landholders. The system seems very transparent.

The billboard is titled "德夫村乡村振兴产业简介" (Introduction to Defu Village Rural Revitalization Industry). It is divided into three main sections: "基本情况" (Basic Situation), "产业带动情况" (Industry Driving Situation), and "产业带动情况" (Industry Driving Situation). The "基本情况" section includes information about the village's location, population, and economic structure. The "产业带动情况" section includes a table with columns for "带动对象" (Driven Object), "带动方式" (Driven Method), "带动金额" (Driven Amount), and "带动人数" (Driven Number of People). The table lists various types of driven objects such as "贫困户" (Poor Households), "低收入户" (Low-income Households), "留守儿童" (Left-behind Children), "留守妇女" (Left-behind Women), "留守老人" (Left-behind Elderly), "残疾人" (Disabled Persons), "大病户" (Large Sick Households), "特困户" (Special Difficult Households), "低保户" (Minimum Living Guarantee Households), "建档立卡户" (建档立卡的户), "贫困户" (Poor Households), "低收入户" (Low-income Households), "留守儿童" (Left-behind Children), "留守妇女" (Left-behind Women), "留守老人" (Left-behind Elderly), "残疾人" (Disabled Persons), "大病户" (Large Sick Households), "特困户" (Special Difficult Households), "低保户" (Minimum Living Guarantee Households), and "建档立卡户" (建档立卡的户). The table also lists the driven methods, driven amounts, and driven numbers of people for each category.

Billboard at the entrance to the plantation. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

“If you rent your land, you get twenty percent more share from the society,” Li Yudou, a local told IDN. “I work here and get money from the society. This is a way to live out of poverty. Society would prefer the poor people to work and get money”.

But, Li Meng Wen, a 72-year-old villager weaving a mat outside his home, told IDN that his kids support him. However, he grows sweet potatoes, some vegetables for his consumption. “Mat weaving is a hobby,” he said.

In 2019, the local village coop earned more than 800,000 Yuan (USD 112,254). During the fruit picking period in November every year, nearly 100 villagers from adjoining areas work in the oil tea and grape plantations.

## A tourism venture

Another village IDN visited is Li Village, where the local community has set up a tourism venture in a scenic area of mountains, paddy fields, and waterways. During the summer, the tourists come to trekking, hire bicycles for riding, and also taste special local cuisine at a newly built restaurant that resembles the old village house architecture.

Chen Yang Fan, Tourism Development Officer of the Town Office who accompanied IDN to the village, said that his role is to help villages develop their economies. “We develop strategies for the development of the town. From time to time, we visit village heads to get advice on the development strategies for their village,” he explained. “We ask for feedback from heads. When agreed, I oversee the disbursement of funds to the village.”

Though the town officials described the villages as “poor”, most people live in concrete houses, some two or three stories. IDN was told that most 30-50-year-olds go to the cities to work but invest money to develop their family homes. Also, 30 percent of the profits from the village collaborative ventures need to go to the poor families in the village. The villages have schools and health clinics that the government funds.

During the village visit, Prof Li pointed to IDN, a saying engraved on the wall of an ancestral temple. It says, as a principle, not to go to courts. Try to find a solution by yourselves by discussing with the head of the village and among themselves. Do not get others involved to solve your problems.

“Democracy here is, don’t go to other people to solve your problems. Discuss and solve yourselves,” she explained.

*This article was produced as a part of the joint media project between The Non-profit International Press Syndicate Group and Soka Gakkai International in Consultative Status with ECOSOC on 12 January 2024.*

[Transmitted on 12 January 2024 by IDN-InDepthNews]



Zimbabwe’s popular opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa. Photo Source: Global Information Network

## **Zimbabwe Opposition Leader Quits, Blames Election Fraud**

By Lisa Vives

NEW YORK — Zimbabwe’s popular opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa, has resigned from the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), saying his party had been “contaminated” and “hijacked” by an imposter who fraudulently removed dozens of his party members and councilors without the party’s consent.

“I will have nothing to do with sewer politics,” he declared. “The original CCC idea has been contaminated, bastardized, hijacked by ZANU PF through the abuse of State institutions.

“Further, CCC has now been rendered an extension of and been taken over by ZANU PF. CCC has, to all intents and purposes, been criminally handed over to ZANU PF,” he claimed in a 13-page written statement.

Chamisa, 45, was the main rival of President Emmerson Mnangagwa in the 2018 and 2023 disputed elections. After the last poll, he accused Mnangagwa of ZANU-PF of decimating his party opposition by fraudulent means.

In last year’s voting, Chamisa’s party won all major cities and towns and enough parliamentary seats to deny ZANU-PF a two thirds majority.

That’s when a party hack stepped in, claiming to be the party’s secretary-general. He began removing elected officials with support from parliamentary authorities, the government and the courts. According to Chamisa, his party didn’t even have a position of secretary-general and he described the man, Sengezo Tshabangu, as an imposter and fraudster.

Chamisa told the speaker to ignore Tshabangu’s claims but it was Chamisa who was ignored and the positions were promptly made vacant in the cited constituencies.

The recalled MPs turned to the courts to challenge their removal but President Mnangagwa got there first, announcing by-elections in the affected constituencies before the MPs hearings. This was proof, according to the CCC, that Mnangagwa was confident the judges would go his way - which they did. The courts threw out the challenge and a subsequent appeal on legal technicalities.

### ***Unsuccessful***

Tshabangu then began to claim more scalps - dismissing or recalling more CCC MPs and local council members. While unavailable for interviews with international media, Tshabangu told local media that he took over the post on an interim basis after Chamisa failed to create party positions.

Chamisa has been unsuccessful in stopping the recalls of elected MPs and councilors.

Earlier this year, Zimbabwe's parliament barred criticism of the government ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled in August. CCC spokesperson and lawyer, Fadzayi Mahere, described the law as "dangerous" and said it aimed at closing the democratic space ahead of elections.

"ZANU-PF has reduced our great nation into an outpost of tyranny," Mahere told Reuters.

[Transmitted on 29 January 2024 IDN-InDepthNews]

### **Ghana Blocks Student Confab of the 'Nkrumahs of Africa'**

By Lisa Vives

NEW YORK/ACCRA — Ghana's political leaders are facing heat for their last-minute cancellation of a conference of students and populist leaders, one activist called "the Nkrumahs of Africa."



Locked out students. Photo Source: Global Information Network

After receiving news of the last-minute cancellation, hundreds of student leaders, locked out of the conference, rallied at Independence Plaza in Accra. According to organizers, they received approval for the event in November 2023. Nana Oye Ankrah, a freelance journalist, opined: "Ghana's government is clearly unwilling to accommodate events that could make them look bad in an election year."

"The move to use security forces to enforce the cancellation suggests a deeper fear that the populism gripping some young people elsewhere in the continent could spread to Ghana." Ghana is currently grappling with the worst economic crisis in a generation in which the skyrocketing cost of living is leading to widespread frustration. The fact that just two parties have governed since the move in 1922 to multi-party democracy means that young adults who have never experienced another form of leadership could be hungry for change.

Among the invited speakers to the conference were Prof. P.L.O. Lumumba, director of the Kenya School of Law, Dr. Arikana Chihombori-Quao, medical doctor, educator, and former Permanent Representative of the African Union to the U.S., former governor of Anambra State. Peter Obi of Nigeria, and Julius Malema, founder and leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters of South Africa.

"Let me be clear," said one Ghanaian activist. "Our Nkrumah is gone. But there are other Nkrumahs. Julius Malema is one. Professor Lumumba is one. "These are the Nkrumahs of Africa. Now we're here and we're told the conference is cancelled. Why? We are bitter, we are pained, we are very sad."

In a letter to event organizers, Ghana's Chief of Staff, H.M. Wood, explained that cancellation of the conference was necessitated by "an unforeseen State Event scheduled to take place at the same venue... Under the circumstances, the amount of 10,000 Ghana cedis paid by your office for use of the venue will be refunded." The event was also intended to unveil the proposed candidacy for president of Nana Kwame Bediako, also known as Freedom Jacob Caesar or Cheddar. A wealthy young Ghanaian businessman and property developer, Bediako's picture and message "Nana Kwame Bediako for President #thenewforce has now been posted across Accra. His New Force campaign aims to challenge Ghana's two main parties.

Oye Ankrah expressed doubt that a new party bringing a new president to power could succeed. "It would take time, money and a nationwide party infrastructure to break the political duopoly enjoyed by the main parties," he said. "But Ghanaian authorities have reasons to be worried."

[Transmitted on 22 January 2024 by IDN-InDepthNews]





Cropped cover of the book "Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point". Image Credit: Amazon

## Is the USA Heading Towards the Dictatorship of a Minority?

By Jan Servaes

MIAMI — It increasingly looks like Donald Trump will win while American democracy is faltering. This is what Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt contend in their new book "Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point"<sup>1</sup>.

In "Tyranny of the Minority," the authors primarily examine the United States, but their provocative arguments have broader implications. Comparisons with other countries - Argentina, France, Hungary, Russia, Spain, Thailand - are also used to put American exceptionalism into perspective.

This is a follow-up to their excellent bestseller, "How Democracies Die" from 2018, which I have already reviewed here<sup>2</sup>. In "How Democracies Die," they studied how democracy was being undermined elsewhere and defined the threat of Trumpism as an attack on the Constitution, the rule of law and institutions. Two so-called 'norms' - tolerance towards opponents and tolerance in the exercise of power - that are fundamental to constitutional democracy, are eroding, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt. "How Democracies Die" was therefore a loud call to defend liberal democracy against the risks arising from the global wave of populism and authoritarianism.

### ***Ideological polarization***

The current political climate, particularly in the United States but also in other Western democracies, is characterized by increasing ideological polarization. What causes or initiates this erosion of democratic institutions? The four main indicators, or "norms" of authoritarian behaviour, that Levitsky and Ziblatt outline in "How democracies die" are (1) the rejection, in word or deed, of the democratic rules of the game, (2) the denial of legitimacy of political opponents, (3) the tolerance or encouragement of violence, and (4) the willingness to restrict the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.

There is little discussion of these standards in the new book. The main threat to the system is no longer demagogues or autocrats but basic institutions such as the Constitution. If the United States wants to remain a democracy, or truly become one, Americans must stop treating the Constitution "as if it were a sacred document."

### ***The Constitution***

The 2018 book raised a troubling question: If populist administrators have dismantled democracy in several other countries, could Trump succeed in undermining it in the United States as well? By systematically examining these important questions and developing many penetrating insights, Levitsky and Ziblatt provided the most prominent and best warning about the most important threat to political freedom in the third millennium.

They make two main arguments and support them with plenty of insightful reasoning and relevant evidence:

First, the Republican Party (GOP) has become a haven for (non-urban) whites who fear loss of status as a result of America's move toward multiracial diversity. But because this social transformation

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/706046/tyranny-of-the-minority-by-steven-levitsky-and-daniel-ziblatt/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://indepthnews.net/are-democracies-slowly-dying-in-the-age-of-authoritarianism-and-populism/>

has strong demographic roots and will therefore certainly continue, the Republican Party has shrunk into an electoral minority. In response, large parts of the party have become undemocratic and are trying to thwart the emerging multiracial majority through illiberal means, the authors argue.

Second, the American institutional framework has an exceptional set of counter-majoritarian features, which were intended to prevent the unfettered domination of the current majority and provide political minorities with institutional mechanisms to defend their fundamental interests and rights. The Electoral College in presidential elections, the Senate with its disproportionate representation of small states and its filibuster, and the Supreme Court with its judicial review and lifetime appointees all served this function.



Donald Trump speaking with supporters at a campaign rally at the South Point Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. Phot Credit: Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia Commons

But, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, the attempt to prevent a “tyranny of the majority” by perpetuating this globally unique institutional arrangement has gone too far: it has enabled the nationally increasingly uncompetitive Republican Party to establish a “tyranny of the minority.”

The Constitution’s most influential authors were terrified of democratic majorities, notes Corey Robin in *The New Yorker*. So, a government was devised with a series of filters to keep the majorities on side.

Congress has two of the filters. A bicameral legislature is one; the Senate is the other. Many countries have learned that in a true democracy, upper chambers do not exist or have very limited powers. The US Senate has not just power equal to (and in some cases greater than) the House of Representatives; it also represents states rather than individuals. Wyoming, with a population of about 580,000 inhabitants, has the same number of votes as California, which has nearly forty million residents. There’s a reason most democracies don’t work this way: it’s undemocratic. This has been known for centuries.

If the House and Senate agree on a bill, they still need the approval of the president, who is chosen not by the voters, but by the Electoral College. That’s the third filter. With a preference for smaller states and a winner-take-all structure, the Electoral College could send the loser of the popular vote to the White House. This has happened twice in this century alone.

American democracy has long been studied and used as a model for others. The founding documents are cited and praised for striking a balance between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and between state and federal power; to protect individual freedoms and prevent electoral majorities from trampling on electoral minorities; and for prescribing the peaceful, orderly transfer of political power.

Because they were created in a pre-democratic era of monarchies, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have taken on an almost mythical resonance. Uncle Sam firmly believes that he/she lives in the best of worlds, and still wants to spread that belief worldwide.

However, we forget that the American Constitution is a product of compromise, concessions and political opportunism. In terms of democracy, it is imperfect because it contains counter-majoritarian elements and is extremely difficult to change, writes Mary Jo Murphy in *The Washington Post*.

In the 21st century, these structural deficiencies have become more striking and fundamental. The framework that once seemed capable of providing reasonable political stability now facilitates a host of undemocratic and anti-majoritarian practices that undermine the will of the majority on issues such as reproductive rights, health care, gun control, taxes, elections, immigration and labor rights, and environmental protection.

According to them, the main culprit is the American Constitution, “a brilliant work of political craftsmanship” that has nevertheless made the country susceptible to abuse by a few. After all, American citizens are averse to amendments and that is a huge problem. Americans, the authors write, like to think of the Constitution as a “carefully crafted blueprint for a functioning republic,” one that prioritizes self-government and civil liberties. But, “institutions that function well in one context can become ineffective and even dangerously dysfunctional in another context,” Levitsky and Ziblatt notice.

The authors therefore state without hesitation: “The United States, once a democratic pioneer and model for other countries, has now become a democratic laggard.” - “Flaws in our Constitution now imperil our democracy”.

### ***The Grand Old Party (GOP)***

Today’s Republicans—many of them white and living in rural areas – cling to the Constitution to protect against Democratic majorities. Those majorities increasingly live in big cities, where the job opportunities are, and many of those cities are in densely populated, democratic states. The Republican Party has turned gerrymandering into a dark art, distorting congressional districts so that incumbents and candidates choose their voters rather than the other way around. Someone elected in a manufactured district becomes largely untouchable and unapproachable, and in the absence of competitive pressure to broaden his appeal or moderate his rhetoric, he pays no political penalty for excess, radicalism, or negligence. The way eight extreme members of the GOP forced the impeachment of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy is a prime example of this dynamic.

Like many analysts, Levitsky and Ziblatt believe that today’s right is driven by a primitive fear. Conservative voters fear the simple fact of demographic change. As immigrants, people of color, women and sexual and gender minorities gain greater visibility, dominant groups—straight, white, native men—fear a loss of status. The fear of erasure is fueling the Republican Party’s “turn toward authoritarianism.”

Holding on to government power is an ‘existential’ necessity for the party, the government and the groups it represents.

The combination of these factors makes blue voters (the Democrats) vulnerable to apportionment in the states, where they unnecessarily stack their votes in cities, and in the Senate and Electoral College. “A minority of voters can now inflict a legislative blow of racism, sexism, nativism, homophobia, transphobia and economic misery on the rest of us – and never have to pay for it at the election.”

This argument, now ubiquitous on the left, appears to be a natural law of the political universe, describing our most basic drives of identity and fear. It makes sense for conservatives to believe this, as they have been addressing this since the French Revolution. But it poses a problem for the left, and for Levitsky and Ziblatt in particular.

If dominant groups can get members of subordinate groups to identify with them, they may not need minority tyranny to stay in power.

That scenario isn’t as far-fetched as it sounds. Small shifts of nonwhite voters away from Democrats and the rise in Republican candidates of color suggest that this phenomenon remains salient, even in the age of Trump. In today’s environment, where elections are won by the margins, the consequences can be deadly. This is the “tyranny of the minority” that Levitsky and Ziblatt rightly



fear. Not a lawless strongman or populist autocrat, “it is a product of the constitution we have learned to admire.”

If the laws of identity and fear are as primal and powerful as many progressives believe, opposing those laws could risk turning the left’s project into a purely moral crusade. Although Levitsky and Ziblatt call themselves political realists, they often resort to moralism to explain the world.

### ***The assassination of democracy***

The ‘silent assassination’ of democracy is organized both hard and direct, but also soft and indirect. Even well-drafted constitutions “inevitably contain ambiguities and potential loopholes, are open to multiple interpretations, and can be enforced in a variety of ways,” the authors argue. The law is often used as a political weapon in four ways: (1) the use of ‘gaps’ in the law, (2) the excessive or unjustified use of the law, (3) selective enforcement of the law, and (4) ‘lawfare’ (pp. 50-64).

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, for example, is playing what the authors call “constitutional hardball.” Orban took advantage of Hungary’s “first past the post” electoral system, which allows a party’s representation in parliament to be disproportionate to its population, to make his party’s supermajority permanent. He then rewrote the constitution, purged and occupied the courts, and took control of the public and private media—all largely as a result of Hungary’s legitimately instituted electoral system.

Even the European Parliament has now apparently woken up to question Hungary’s democratic values.

### ***Hope***

Readers must reach the final chapter to find any hope for American democracy. The chapter is to some extent prescriptive, listing fifteen reforms that would go far toward “democratizing our democracy.”

The reforms, which are mostly well-known and seem to emphasize circular reasoning, include passing a constitutional amendment establishing voting rights for all citizens; making Election Day a Sunday or a national holiday; making the Senate “more proportionate to the population of each state”; abolishing the filibuster; setting term limits; and making it easier to amend the Constitution by eliminating the states’ ratification process.

Take for example the right to vote, the most fundamental democratic activity. In no other democracy is casting a vote as fraught, complicated or tedious as it is in many parts of the United States.

In an interview with Harvard Magazine, Ziblatt and Levitsky continue to insist on the importance of voting: “In the short term, voting is crucial. And specifically, don’t vote for people who violate democratic norms. In the long term, we need to change the structure of our politics. We propose a series of institutional changes in the book, but institutional reforms do not happen overnight. It requires mass mobilization—generations of people pushing for institutional change. One of the most inspiring examples for us was following the rise of the women’s suffrage movement in the 19th century. It took generations of women to change voting rules to change in the United States .

Don’t get tired. Don’t lose your patience. Reconsolidating our democracy will take years and perhaps decades. There will be victories. There will be losses. The women’s suffrage movement and the civil rights movement show how difficult, long and slow this process can be.”

And voting is just the tip of an anti-majoritarian iceberg. Partisan gerrymandering is practiced by both Democrats and Republicans. There is also the Electoral College, which allows losers of the popular vote to claim the presidency. The US Senate also distorts democracy because it is blatantly maldivided, with all states receiving equal representation regardless of population. Furthermore,

the filibuster, a supermajority rule, allows a partisan minority in the Senate to permanently block legislation proposed by the majority.

At no point in this century have Republicans in the Senate represented a majority of the population. While it is not entirely unhealthy for political minorities to occasionally or temporarily frustrate or block a majority, it is, as Levitsky and Ziblatt write, “another thing for a partisan minority to consistently defeat larger majorities or impose policies and, worse yet, using the system to anchor its benefits. When this happens, you have a minority government, not a democracy.”

Levitsky and Ziblatt repeatedly emphasize three basic principles that staunch democrats must adhere to, regardless of party affiliation: First, they respect the outcome of free and fair elections, win or lose. Second, democrats unequivocally reject violence (or the threat of violence) as a means to achieve political goals. Third, they do not support or defend antidemocratic forces.



Yellow Shirts protestors in France. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The January 6 attack on the legislature was both a rejection of the outcome of the 2020 election, which was demonstrably free and fair, and an attempt to achieve a political goal through violent means. We should also not forget that later that same day, more than 140 Republican representatives refused to certify Joe Biden’s victory.

While *Tyranny of the Minority* is a warning of the political moment we live in, the book also calls on us to reimagine our democracy through “more democracy, not less; through inclusion rather than exclusion; tolerance instead of intolerance”.

The solutions offered can only be achieved by a large and broad social movement that is prepared to fight for as long as necessary.

“Social movements enable change by transforming ideas into tangible public policy and law. Such a movement has not yet emerged, and that is one of the reasons why this book is so important and essential. Ideas, ideals and ambitions fuel and support social movements. Not only is building this movement the way we hope to restore health and balance to our democracy, but it may also be our best hope for addressing the complex environmental, political, and economic challenges we face today to solve,” concluded Brian Tanguay in *The California Review of Books*.

But given the current polarizing situation, there is still a long and difficult road ahead of us.

**Reference:** Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority*. How to reverse an authoritarian turn and forge a democracy for all, Viking-Penguin Books 2023, 368 pp. ISBN: 978-0-241-58621-1

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/706046/tyranny-of-the-minority-by-steven-levitsky-and-daniel-ziblatt/>

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Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressing the UN General Assembly on 22 September 2023 at the UN Headquarters in New York. Photo Credit: UN Photo/Laura Jarriel

## **Sheikh Hasina's Leadership Turns Bangladesh into a Geopolitical Powerhouse**

By Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury

DHAKA — In the complex chess-game of global geopolitics, Bangladesh has emerged as a significant player under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Over the years, her astute governance and strategic vision have propelled Bangladesh to new heights, making it a key actor in South Asia. This article explores the factors contributing to Bangladesh's geopolitical importance, the challenges faced, and the trajectory set by Sheikh Hasina's leadership.

Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh has experienced remarkable economic growth and development. Her administration's commitment to economic reforms, infrastructure development, and the promotion of industries has turned Bangladesh into one of the world's fastest-growing economies. The ready-made garment sector, remittances, and the expansion of the agricultural and IT sectors have played pivotal roles in fostering economic prosperity.

Moreover, Sheikh Hasina's focus on poverty alleviation and social welfare programs has not only uplifted millions from poverty but has also strengthened the nation's social fabric. The World Bank and other international institutions have acknowledged Bangladesh's socio-economic progress, further enhancing its standing on the global stage.

Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh has actively pursued a diplomatic agenda emphasising friendly relations with neighbouring countries and active participation in regional forums. Hasina's approach to foreign policy centres around peaceful coexistence, economic cooperation, and collaborative efforts to address regional challenges.

One significant example of Bangladesh's diplomatic success is the resolution of longstanding border disputes with India and Myanmar. The Land Boundary Agreement with India in 2015 marked a historic moment, strengthening ties between the two nations. Bangladesh's constructive engagement in regional forums like SAARC and BIMSTEC has positioned it as a key player in shaping South Asian dynamics.

Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change has prompted Sheikh Hasina to advocate for climate action globally. With a significant portion of its population at risk due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events, Bangladesh's call for international cooperation on climate issues has garnered attention worldwide. Hasina's commitment to sustainable development and environmental conservation has established Bangladesh as a leader in climate diplomacy.

As the Chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), Sheikh Hasina has actively campaigned for the rights of climate-vulnerable nations and has urged developed countries to take responsibility for



their historical contributions to climate change. Bangladesh's involvement in international climate agreements and Sheikh Hasina's speeches at global forums have amplified the nation's voice in the fight against climate change.

A robust stance against terrorism and extremism has marked the Bangladesh Prime Minister's tenure. Bangladesh has faced internal security challenges, including militant attacks, and Sheikh Hasina's government has taken decisive measures to combat these threats. The crackdown on extremist groups and intelligence-sharing agreements with regional and international partners have showcased Bangladesh's commitment to regional and global security.

Bangladesh's strategic partnership with China has deepened under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, with both nations engaging in mutually beneficial collaborations. The China-Bangladesh relationship has gained prominence through infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and investment initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a focal point of this collaboration, with Bangladesh actively participating in infrastructure development projects, including constructing roads, bridges, and ports.

As part of the BRI, the Padma Bridge project stands out as a symbol of Sino-Bangladeshi cooperation, enhancing connectivity and trade prospects for Bangladesh. The economic benefits derived from these collaborations have positioned Bangladesh as an attractive investment destination and a vital player in China's regional connectivity ambitions.

While Bangladesh's rise on the geopolitical stage is evident, it is not without challenges. The nation grapples with political polarization, concerns over human rights, and environmental threats. The Rohingya refugee crisis, stemming from Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya minority, has posed a humanitarian challenge for Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina's diplomatic efforts to address this crisis while maintaining regional stability underscore her leadership's resilience in the face of complex challenges.

### ***Maintaining a diplomatic balance between India and China***

Maintaining a delicate diplomatic balance between two major powers, India and China, is a challenging feat that requires strategic finesse and nuanced policymaking. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has successfully navigated this complex geopolitical terrain through astute diplomacy, economic pragmatism, and regional cooperation. Here's an exploration of how Sheikh Hasina has maintained a diplomatic balance between India and China in her foreign policy:

**India:** Sheikh Hasina has prioritized economic cooperation with India through various initiatives such as the Land Boundary Agreement and the establishment of joint economic ventures. Promoting cross-border trade, connectivity, and infrastructure development has been instrumental in fostering stronger economic ties.

**China:** Similarly, Bangladesh has engaged in significant economic collaborations with China, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Padma Bridge project and other infrastructure developments highlight the economic synergy between Bangladesh and China.

Sheikh Hasina has adhered to a non-aligned foreign policy, emphasizing Bangladesh's commitment to maintaining its sovereignty and not aligning excessively with any particular power bloc. This strategic autonomy allows Bangladesh to pursue its national interests without becoming overly dependent on either India or China.

Actively participating in regional forums like SAARC and BIMSTEC, Sheikh Hasina has pursued a balanced regional engagement strategy. By involving Bangladesh in multilateral platforms, she ensures that the nation's interests are not solely tied to bilateral relations with any single country.

Bangladesh's membership in regional organizations provides opportunities for collaboration with both India and China on common regional challenges, promoting a sense of shared responsibility.

Sheikh Hasina's government has prioritized addressing security concerns and maintaining stability in the region. Collaborative efforts with India on counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing demonstrate a shared commitment to regional security.

At the same time, maintaining an open channel of communication with China on security matters ensures a comprehensive approach to addressing shared concerns.

Sheikh Hasina has maintained a cautious approach while actively participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Bangladesh carefully evaluates projects to align with national interests and development goals. This cautious stance helps prevent over-dependency on any single external actor.

The Rohingya refugee crisis posed a challenge to regional stability, with implications for both India and China. Sheikh Hasina's diplomatic efforts involved engaging with both nations to address the humanitarian crisis. This demonstrated Bangladesh's commitment to regional stability and garnered support from India and China.

Sheikh Hasina's approach emphasizes people-centric diplomacy, focusing on the well-being and prosperity of the citizens. Economic cooperation, trade agreements, and cultural exchanges with both India and China contribute to a positive narrative that transcends political differences.

Sheikh Hasina's diplomatic strategy revolves around maintaining a delicate equilibrium between India and China. By prioritizing economic cooperation, regional engagement, and strategic autonomy, she has successfully avoided being drawn into the geopolitical tensions between the two neighbouring giants. Sheikh Hasina's pragmatic and balanced foreign policy has positioned Bangladesh as a key player in the region while safeguarding its national interests and sovereignty.

Should Bangladesh refrain from involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, has adopted a prudent and strategic approach to foreign policy, emphasizing regional stability, economic development, and diplomatic neutrality. In light of this, refraining from involving Bangladesh in the Israel-Palestine conflict aligns with several key considerations:

1. Bangladesh maintains a non-aligned foreign policy, emphasizing independence and neutrality in global conflicts. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine issue may compromise this stance and lead to alignment with specific geopolitical blocs, potentially affecting relations with other nations.
2. Sheikh Hasina has successfully navigated delicate diplomatic relationships with major powers like India and China. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict might strain relations with certain countries that have strong positions on the issue, potentially jeopardizing Bangladesh's diplomatic equilibrium.
3. Bangladesh faces numerous internal challenges, including economic development, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure improvement. Sheikh Hasina can prioritize the nation's resources and efforts toward addressing domestic issues and fostering national growth by refraining from involvement in external conflicts.
4. The Israel-Palestine conflict is highly sensitive and evokes strong emotions globally. Involvement may lead to polarization within Bangladesh, potentially causing internal strife. Maintaining a neutral stance helps prevent unnecessary divisions and ensures focus on national unity.
5. The Israel-Palestine conflict involves complex historical, political, and humanitarian issues. Engaging in the conflict without a clear strategic objective may not align with Bangladesh's foreign policy priorities, which include contributing to global peace and humanitarian efforts through established channels.
6. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict may attract security risks and threats from various quarters. Sheikh Hasina's administration has prioritized maintaining national security and stability. Refraining from involvement in external conflicts contributes to minimizing potential security risks.

7. Bangladesh is a diverse nation with a rich cultural and religious tapestry. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict might have repercussions on interfaith relations within the country. Sheikh Hasina's government has consistently emphasized religious tolerance and harmony, which could be jeopardized by taking sides in a deeply divisive global issue.
8. Bangladesh has cultivated a positive global image by actively participating in peacekeeping missions, disaster relief efforts, and sustainable development initiatives. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict might alter the perception of Bangladesh as a neutral and constructive actor on the global stage.

### ***Possible consequence if Bangladesh is involved in Israel-Palestine conflict***

Involving Bangladesh in the Israel-Palestine conflict could have several significant consequences, impacting the nation's diplomatic, economic, and domestic spheres. Here are some potential outcomes.

Bangladesh has historically maintained a non-aligned foreign policy. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict might strain diplomatic relations with countries that have strong positions on the issue. This could lead to losing trust and cooperation with nations with different perspectives.

Bangladesh is situated in a region with complex geopolitical dynamics. Taking sides in the Israel-Palestine conflict might contribute to regional instability, potentially affecting relations with neighbouring countries. This instability could have implications for trade, security, and overall regional cooperation.

Bangladesh's economy heavily relies on trade and foreign investments. Involvement in a contentious global conflict could lead to economic repercussions. International partners may reconsider economic ties and trade relationships might suffer, impacting the nation's economic growth and stability.

Deep-seated tensions and occasional outbreaks of violence characterize the Israel-Palestine conflict. Bangladesh's involvement could attract security threats from various quarters, including extremist groups or individuals sympathetic to one side of the conflict.

The Israel-Palestine issue is emotionally charged and evokes strong sentiments globally. Involvement could lead to internal polarization within Bangladesh, causing divisions among the population. This may result in social unrest and challenges to national unity.

The conflict often results in humanitarian crises and large-scale displacement of populations. Bangladesh's involvement may lead to an influx of refugees or internally displaced people, adding strain to already limited resources and complicating efforts to address domestic issues.

Bangladesh is known for its active participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict could affect the country's credibility and neutrality in global peacekeeping efforts, potentially limiting its role in future missions.

Bangladesh has cultivated a positive global image through its contributions to peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and sustainable development. Involvement in a contentious conflict may tarnish this image, impacting the nation's soft power and influence on the international stage.

Bangladesh is a diverse nation with a majority-Muslim population. Involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has religious undertones, might affect interfaith relations within the country. It could potentially lead to tensions and challenges in maintaining religious harmony.

Involvement in a global conflict could divert attention and resources away from pressing domestic priorities. Bangladesh might find itself entangled in the complexities of the Israel-Palestine issue, impacting its ability to focus on economic development, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure improvement.

In brief, involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict could have multifaceted consequences for Bangladesh, affecting its diplomatic standing, economic stability, internal cohesion, and global reputation. The potential risks underscore the importance of maintaining a cautious and non-aligned approach in foreign policy decisions.

As Sheikh Hasina's leadership has propelled Bangladesh into a position of tremendous geopolitical importance, the country's policymakers must take cautious steps while addressing sensitive issues. Moreover, in recent times it is observed with gravest concern – a number of key policymakers in the Awami League government, while pointing to the Israel-Palestine conflict, have made extremely offensive, crude, cruel and unacceptable remarks by branding Jews as evils, monsters, murderers etcetera—without realizing a fact that such remarks would create generate extreme adverse effect on Bangladesh, while Jewish entrepreneurs being felt offended at such remarks may even stop economic interactions with Bangladesh and refrain from buying any goods – including readymade garments. Most importantly, such remarks can be cashed by political opponents of Awami League, where, for example – Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its lobbyists in the West may begin propaganda stating members of the ruling party in Bangladesh are Jew-haters.

Undoubtedly, such BNP bids would result in catastrophic consequences for Bangladesh. For national interest, leaders of the Awami League, particularly those in the government, should bear these key issues in their minds.

We need not forget that under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has become a key player in shaping South Asian dynamics through economic growth, diplomatic engagements, environmental advocacy, and strategic collaborations. It is expected – while challenges persist, Sheikh Hasina's resilience and vision for a prosperous and secure Bangladesh shall continue to guide the nation toward a future marked by influence and significance on the global stage.

*\*Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury is an internationally acclaimed multi-award-winning anti-militancy journalist, writer, research scholar, and editor of Blitz, a newspaper published in Bangladesh since 2003. He regularly writes for local and international newspapers. Follow him on X [@Salah Shoaib](#)*

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Dhaka Port – Transporting produce to city from the fields. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne



Challenges Of Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) In The Post-COVID Era  
**DEMOCRACY WITH DIFFERENT SHADES Snippets Of News Items from Non-IDN Sources**



**India: Dictatorship is inevitable if PM Modi is re-elected, asserts Kharge**

The forthcoming general election is going to be the last election in India if Prime Minister Narendra Modi is re-elected, said Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge in Bhubaneswar on January 29. Mr. Kharge was addressing the Congress workers convention in the eastern Indian city of Bhubaneswar.

Source: The Hindu

Link: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-more-elections-will-be-held-in-india-if-modi-wins-2024-lok-sabha-polls-mallikarjun-kharge/article67788797.ece?utm>

**Germany: The far right AfD is thriving despite scandal**

The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party now polls above 20% in Germany – and it is showing no signs of going away. Earlier in January, AfD politicians met with rightwing extremists and neo-Nazi activists to discuss a “masterplan” for mass deportations. The party is on track to win three major state elections in the east of Germany during 2024.

Source: The Guardian

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/22/first-edition-germany-far-right-afd>



**Thailand: Defective democracy defines political future**

The 2023 Thai election, which ousted the pro-military government and replaced it with a coalition led by opposition party Pheu Thai, has only resulted in the continued influence of the monarchy and military. Yet the remarkable rise of the progressive Move Forward Party, which secured more seats than any other party, forebodes a possible shift in Thailand's political future, despite the various challenges faced by the current Prime Minister as well as the military and monarchy's enduring grip on power.

Source: East Asia Forum

Link: <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/02/defective-democracy-defines-thailands-political-future/>



**Sri Lanka: Controversial bill to regulate online content passed by parliament**

Sri Lanka's lawmakers passed a bill on Wednesday regulating internet use among its citizens, in a move that has sparked fears among rights groups of a free speech crackdown. The Online Safety Bill, which passed with 108-62 votes, aims to “make provisions to prohibit online communication of certain statements of fact in Sri Lanka”

and “prevent the use of online accounts and inauthentic online accounts for prohibited purposes.”

Source: CNN

Link: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/25/media/sri-lanka-online-safety-bill-pass-intl-hnk/index.html>

**Southeast Asia: Real Risks On The Prowl**

When the world was ushering in 2024 cautiously amid rife speculative analysis of the global security ahead in a relatively pessimistic mood, the foiled attempt of purported “colour revolution” in Belgrade, believably with the US fingerprints abound, cast a long shadow on the prospect of world peace. Though geographically, Balkans is half a world away from Asia Pacific, a live tinderbox in the



contemporary power play theatre, the message resonating across the world is loud and clear that the reigning hegemon would less likely scale down its “regime change” agenda through “colour revolutions”, albeit after setbacks in Hong Kong, Belarus and Serbia.

Source: Countercurrents

Link: <https://countercurrents.org/2024/02/real-risks-on-the-prowl/>

### **Pakistan: Elections go according to the script written by the Army**



The back-to-back jail sentences former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was handed out in two different cases just a week before the February 8 parliamentary elections, show how roles have been reversed in Pakistan’s convoluted political space dominated by the shadow hands of the establishment. In 2018, when Mr. Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was elected to power, the Opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People’s Party had accused the military of electoral rigging in favour of the former cricket star, who was the preferred choice of the generals. A year earlier, Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N leader, had to resign as Prime Minister over the Panama Papers

allegations and later go into exile after his conviction and disqualification. Today, Mr. Khan has been disqualified and is serving lengthy sentences, while Mr. Sharif is back, leading the PML-N. Given the way how the military and other state institutions went after Mr. Khan and his party, there was little surprise in the court proceedings and the verdicts. On Tuesday, he was sentenced to 10 years by a special court in what is commonly called the ‘Cipher case’, on charges that he leaked state secrets, while on Wednesday, another court sentenced him and his wife to 14 years in the Toshakhana case, for keeping some of the gifts they had received while he was in power. Mr. Khan was forced out of power in April 2022 after falling out with the military establishment.

Source: The Hindu

Link: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/winners-and-losers-on-pakistan-democracy-imran-khan-and-nawaz-sharif/article67796910.ece?utm>

### **India: Like, subscribe, and vote: 2024 elections depend on YouTube**

YouTube has emerged as an important tool for electoral campaigning in India, with political parties dedicating resources to livestreams and ads on the platform. Opposition parties like the Indian National Congress have said they prefer to speak to YouTube influencers, instead of mainstream journalists, to avoid misrepresentation.

Source: rest of world

Link: <https://restofworld.org/2024/india-election-2024-youtube/>



### **Indonesia: Jokowi faces backlash over support for Prabowo's presidential bid**

President Joko Widodo is facing mounting backlash over his support for Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto ahead of Indonesia's presidential election next week, as academic communities join growing critics accusing the president of undermining democracy. Over the past week, academics from dozens of universities in Indonesia have called out

Jokowi, as the president is popularly known, for controversial moves seen aimed at supporting the election bid of Prabowo, 72, his former rival and the current frontrunner in Indonesia’s presidential race.

Source: Nikkei Asia

Link: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Indonesia-election/Jokowi-faces-backlash-over-support-for-Prabowo-s-presidential-bid?>

### International IDEA - Democracy Tracker

The Democracy Tracker provides event-centric, monthly information on democracy and human rights developments in 173 countries. Event reports include a description of the event, indications of the specific aspects of democracy that have been impacted, the magnitude of the impact, links to original sources and keywords to enable further research. Click on the country hexagons below to read the most recent developments.

Source: International IDEA

Link: <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/>



### Council of Europe: State of democracy, human right and the rule of law 2023 - Annual report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (2023)

In the annual report, Council of Europe says the Organisation’s standards need to be applied across every aspect of Europeans’ lives. She also stressed the deep impact of Russia’s brutal, illegal and ongoing aggression against Ukraine. “The aggression against Ukraine has caused extraordinary suffering: hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, horrifying stories of torture, rape and loss. We yearn for a return to peace: a sustainable peace based on justice”.

The report, with a first section looking at strengths and weaknesses in democratic institutions and a second focusing on the quality of the democratic environment, highlights challenges.

Source: Council of Europe

Link: <https://edoc.coe.int/en/annual-activity-report/11589-state-of-democracy-human-right-and-the-rule-of-law-2023-annual-report-of-the-secretary-general-of-the-council-of-europe.html>

### ILO : Global unemployment rate set to increase in 2024 while growing social inequalities raise concerns

Labour markets have shown surprising resilience despite deteriorating economic conditions, but recovery from the pandemic remains uneven as new vulnerabilities and multiple crises are eroding prospects for greater social justice, according to a new International Labour Organization (ILO) report. The ILO’s *World Employment and Social Outlook Trends: 2024* finds that both the unemployment rate and the jobs gap rate – which is the number of persons without employment who are interested in finding a job – have fallen below pre-pandemic levels. The 2023 global unemployment rate stood at 5.1 per cent, a modest improvement from 2022 when it stood at 5.3 per cent. The global jobs gap and labour market participation rates also improved in 2023. However, beneath these numbers fragility is starting to emerge, the report finds. It projects that the labour market outlook and global unemployment will both worsen. In 2024 an extra two million workers are expected to be looking for jobs, raising the global unemployment rate from 5.1 % in 2023 to 5.2 %.

Source: ILO

Download Link: [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/WCMS\\_908143/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/WCMS_908143/lang-en/index.htm)







United Nations Headquarters building in Manhattan, New York City, on December 21, 2021. Photo Credit: © 2021 Sergi Reboredo / VWPics

## New Cybercrime Treaty Facilitates Crackdown on Human Rights — with UN Blessings

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS — A new international treaty against cybercrimes, which is expected to be finalized in February 2024, has come under heavy fire.

A group of over 100 civil society (CSOs) and human rights organizations has warned that cybercrime regimes around

the world have been misused to target and surveil human rights defenders, journalists, security researchers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, in blatant violation of human rights.

“The draft convention’s overbreadth also threatens to undermine its own objectives by diluting efforts to address actual cybercrime while failing to safeguard legitimate security research, leaving people less secure online,” the group said.

Louis Charbonneau, UN Director for Human Rights Watch (HRW), said negotiations on a draft Cybercrime Treaty at the UN are coming to a close. But “the draft, in its current form, risks facilitating domestic and transnational rights abuses.” In a statement released on January 23, HRW said the proposed treaty risks facilitating the domestic and international crackdown on human rights with the blessings of the United Nations.

The concluding session of negotiations will be held from January 29 to February 9, at the UN headquarters in New York. The states negotiating at the UN should ensure that the proposed Cybercrime Convention is narrowly focused on tackling cybercrime and should effectively incorporate strong and meaningful human rights safeguards, or they should reject it, the groups said in a statement released on January 23.

“Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, fundamental flaws continue to plague this proposed cybercrime convention, which poses a significant risk to human rights and fails to effectively tackle cybercrime,” said Deborah Brown, acting associate technology and human rights director at HRW. “If states cannot agree on vital human right safeguards and a narrow scope, then we urge them to reject it,” she declared.

The group’s joint statement points to “critical shortcomings” in the current draft of the Cybercrime Convention, which threatens freedom of expression, privacy, and other human rights. The draft convention contains broad criminal provisions, which are weak - and in some places nonexistent - on human rights safeguards and provides for excessive cross-border information sharing and cooperation requirements, which could facilitate intrusive surveillance.

The draft convention’s overbreadth also threatens to undermine its own objectives by diluting efforts to address actual cybercrime while failing to safeguard legitimate security research, leaving people less secure online.

The joint statement says the treaty should be rejected if there are no meaningful changes to address the shortcomings.



“We, the undersigned organizations and individual experts call on the state delegations participating in the concluding session of the United Nations (UN) Ad Hoc Committee to ensure that the proposed Cybercrime Convention (the Convention) is narrowly focused on tackling cybercrime, and not used as a tool to undermine human rights.

Civil society groups have contributed time and expertise to improve the draft and fully align it with existing human rights law and standards, the principles of the UN Charter and the rule of law, as well as best practices to provide legal certainty in efforts to improve cybersecurity.

Our concerns about the proposed text of the Convention are informed by our experience and human rights advocacy around the world.

National and regional cybercrime laws are regrettably far too often misused to unjustly target journalists and security researchers, suppress dissent and whistleblowers, endanger human rights defenders, limit free expression, and justify unnecessary and disproportionate state surveillance measures.

Throughout the negotiations over the last two years, civil society groups and other stakeholders have consistently emphasized that the fight against cybercrime must not come at the expense of human rights, gender equality, and the dignity of the people whose lives will be affected by this Convention.

It should not result in impeding security research and making us all less secure. Robust and meaningful safeguards and limitations are essential to avoid the possibility of abuse of relevant provisions of the Convention that could arise under the guise of combating cybercrime.

Regrettably, the latest draft of the proposed Convention, which is due to be finalized by February 2024, fails to address many of our significant concerns.

We believe that if the text of the Convention is approved in its current form, the risk of abuses and human rights violations will increase exponentially and leave us with a less secure internet. We are particularly concerned that the latest draft of the Convention:

- Remains over-broad in the scope of the range of the activities it requires states to criminalize. It includes cyber-enabled offenses and other content-related crimes and creates legal uncertainty through an open-ended reference to crimes under other “applicable international conventions and protocols.” This overbroad scope gives rise to the danger that the Convention will be used to criminalize legitimate online expression, which is likely to create discriminatory impacts and deepen gender inequality;
- Fails to incorporate language sufficient to protect security researchers, whistleblowers, activists, and journalists from excessive criminalization;
- Contains insufficient references to states’ obligations under international human rights law, includes weak domestic human rights safeguards in its criminal procedural chapter, and fails to explicitly incorporate robust safeguards applicable to the whole treaty to ensure that cybercrime efforts provide adequate protection for human rights and are in accordance with the principles of legality, non-discrimination, legitimate purpose, necessity, and proportionality;
- Lacks effective gender mainstreaming which is critical to ensure the Convention is not used to undermine people’s human rights on the basis of gender;
- Proposes to create legal regimes to monitor, store, and allow cross-border sharing of information in a manner that would undermine trust in secure communications and infringe on international human rights standards, including the requirements for prior judicial authorization and the principles of legality, non discrimination, legitimate purpose, necessity, and proportionality;
- Permits excessive information sharing for law enforcement cooperation, beyond the scope of specific criminal investigations and without specific, explicit data protection and human rights safeguards.

The Convention should only move forward if it pursues a specific goal of combating cybercrime without endangering the human rights and fundamental freedoms of those it seeks to protect nor undermining efforts to improve cybersecurity for an open internet. The present draft text falls far short of this goal and these basic minimum requirements, and must be comprehensively revised, amended, or rejected.

Therefore, we call on all state delegations to:

- Narrow the scope of the whole Convention to cyber-dependent crimes specifically defined and included in its text;
- Make certain the Convention includes provisions to ensure that security researchers, whistleblowers, journalists, and human rights defenders are not prosecuted for their legitimate activities and that other public interest activities are protected;
- Guarantee that explicit data protection and human rights standards – including the principles of non-discrimination, legality, legitimate purpose, necessity, and proportionality – are applicable to the whole Convention. Specific, explicit safeguards, such as the principle of prior judicial authorization, must be put in place for accessing or sharing data, as well as for conducting cross-border investigations and cooperation in accordance with the rule of law;
- Mainstream gender across the Convention as a whole and throughout each article in efforts to prevent and combat cybercrime;
- Limit the scope of application of procedural measures and international cooperation to the cyber-dependent crimes established in the criminalization chapter of the Convention;
- Avoid endorsing any surveillance provision that can be abused to undermine cybersecurity and encryption. As the UN Ad Hoc Committee convenes its concluding session, we call on state delegations to redouble their efforts to address these critical gaps in the current draft.
- The final outcome of the treaty negotiation process should only be deemed acceptable if it effectively incorporates strong and meaningful safeguards to protect human rights, ensures legal clarity for fairness and due process, and fosters international cooperation under the rule of law.

The proposed Convention must not serve as a validation of intrusion and surveillance practices harmful to human rights. Absent these minimum requirements, we call on state delegations to reject the draft treaty and not advance it to the UN General Assembly for adoption, concludes the joint statement.

For current list of signatories go to link:

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2024/01/Joint.Advocacy.Statement-Cybercrime.Convention-Jan.23.2024.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/01/Joint.Advocacy.Statement-Cybercrime.Convention-Jan.23.2024.pdf)

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