



World Forum
for
Democracy

DEMOCRACY
=
PEACE



World Forum for Democracy 2023

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Final report

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The 11th World Forum for Democracy took place between 6 and 8 November 2023, in Strasbourg, centring around the theme of “Democracy = Peace?”. Regrettably, this topic bears a painful relevance in today's global landscape. The prevailing concern over democratic backsliding, coupled with persistent conflicts worldwide resulting in an alarming loss of lives, emphasises the critical inquiry into the capacity of democracy to foster peace in such challenging times.

Can democracy deliver peace?

On the surface, the correlation between democracy and peace appears logical. Deliberative processes and voting provide avenues for expressing dissent without resorting to violence. Ideally, democracy serves as a mechanism to navigate conflicts through non-violent means. On the international stage, this should manifest as a democratic global order that averts wars and seeks alternative conflict resolution methods. However, the relationship between democracy and peace is complex.

Numerous speakers underscored a vital point: democracy alone does not ensure peace. Countries transitioning to democracy do not automatically experience peace. The Forum's discussion on the derailed democratic transition in Sudan and the ongoing armed conflict there exemplify the challenges of ensuring peace in such transitions. Instead of a simple formula like democracy equals peace, the reality is more nuanced. The absence of democracy can lead to a lack of peace, and conversely, in the absence of peace, the establishment of true democracy becomes problematic. Moreover, in the context of democratic transitions, transitional justice plays a pivotal role in navigating the delicate balance between peace and democracy, with the inherent moral tensions.

Even in countries under consolidated democratic rule, the spectre of war remains a possibility. While it holds true that democratic nations often exhibit a predisposition toward peace, underlying factors such as ethnic, historical, and geopolitical tensions can escalate into armed conflicts. In essence, while democracies may demonstrate a reduced proclivity to initiate wars with other democracies, peace is not an automatic by-product of democracy. The interest of citizens and the policies that benefit them are the primary drivers of foreign policy in democracies.

Furthermore, the imperative to foster peace extends both in relations between states and within the borders of each country. Many societies are grappling with rising levels of polarisation and the ascent of leaders who pose a threat to democratic principles. Safeguarding peaceful societies demands a commitment to protecting human rights, upholding minority rights, and ensuring equitable income distribution, among other essential factors. Simultaneously, it is crucial to maintain vigilance to ensure that democratic institutions remain effective and true to their purpose. Instances have been

observed where the rule of law, a fundamental aspect of liberal democracy, has been misused to suppress workers' rights, discriminate against racialised citizens, and marginalize several minority groups.

A global order rooted in democratic principles

Numerous pleas have been made to the international community to address and assist citizens living under authoritarian rule and in regions affected by conflict. This prompts the question: What form of global order can prevent or suppress wars? It is manifest that we have yet to establish an effective and truly democratic system of global governance.

International institutions confront a significant challenge to their credibility when their rules are perceived as applied selectively, resulting in a gradual erosion of trust among the global community. The idea of Universality, applied to values such as human rights and the consistent application of international norms, encounters a substantial setback due to the prevalence of double standards. Establishing trust and fostering solidarity requires a fervent call for international institutions to uphold uniform standards, irrespective of a state's geopolitical alignments. Furthermore, there is a growing demand for substantial reforms within international organisations to prevent the wielders of veto power from rendering these institutions ineffective.

In the broader context of democratic governance, both at the national and international levels, a critical examination of issues related to anticolonialism and injustice has been demanded. The unaddressed challenge of decoloniality looms large and requires a comprehensive and nuanced discussion to navigate the complexities of historical injustices and their impact on contemporary global governance. This recognition underscores the need for a holistic approach to democratic governance that addresses historical inequities and actively works toward a more just and inclusive global order.

Information and Freedom of Press

Over the course of the three-day World Forum for Democracy, a plethora of proposals, projects, and concerns have been presented, spanning a diverse array of topics aimed at fortifying democracy. Amidst this rich tapestry of discussions, one dimension has emerged as particularly prominent—the pivotal role of information.

First and foremost, the Forum has recognised the role of journalists and cartoonists. The invaluable contributions of Cartooning for Peace were manifest in their artistic expressions during sessions, underlining the significance of their work. Also, dedicated talks delved into the topic of press freedom. Regrettably, the intended participation of Mohammed Al JaJa and Belal Jadallah Salem, experts in organisational development

focusing on freedom of expression and journalist protection, was not possible by tragic circumstances. Both were killed by Israel's bombardment in Gaza, which highlights the extremely dangerous conditions journalists are facing there.

These losses serve as a poignant reminder of the risks that journalists undertake globally, as demonstrated by the Democracy Innovation Award winner, "DDL Living Archive - Defensores de la Democracia". This ground-breaking initiative serves as an online repository preserving the work of slain journalists in Mexico. Beyond honouring their legacy, the archive acts as an analytical tool to discern trends, enhancing our comprehension of violence patterns against reporters.

In addition to the information shared by journalists, there is a critical need for information to circulate beyond mainstream media. Empowering citizens with knowledge about their rights is essential for a thriving democracy. Understanding our rights forms the bedrock of democratic principles, and there are noteworthy citizen initiatives actively addressing this imperative. Another crucial dimension is the significance of history and collective memory. Drawing lessons from the past enables the application of democratic principles in our societies and, importantly, guards against the repetition of past mistakes. Various projects globally, including those in Mexico and Ukraine, are actively involved in digitalizing this collective memory in diverse forms.

The Forum has featured revealing discussions about disinformation, particularly in the era of social media. The rapid dissemination of false information is a concerning trend. Additionally, the role of AI has been touched upon, although more attention is needed to understand the challenges that recent advances pose to democracy and peace.

Building stronger democracies

In addition to the freedom of press and the importance of information, the discussions of the Forum have stressed the importance of a number of areas through which democracy and peace can be strengthened:

- **Economic Equality:** Economic inequality and crises can be significant sources of conflict. Ensuring a fair distribution of income and wealth is paramount for stability within and between borders.
- **Social Justice:** Promoting social justice and guaranteeing access to fundamental needs like healthcare and clean water lay the foundation for a just society.
- **Climate Crisis:** The climate crisis, a global challenge, demands immediate and collaborative action. The link between democracy and the environment was a central theme in the 2021 World Forum for Democracy, emphasizing the intertwined nature of addressing climate change and democratic

responsibilities. In the latest edition, the urgency of this crisis was emphasised again.

- **Gender equality:** Women often face worse conditions than men, especially in situations of war and under authoritarian regimes. Gender equality is fundamental and we have also seen initiatives that reinforce the role of women to promote both democracy and peace.
- **Combatting Discrimination:** Combating racism, supporting LGBTQ+ rights, and championing women's rights are crucial in the fight against discrimination and hate crimes. This fight directly contributes to peace by reducing violence and fostering understanding among diverse communities.
- **Missing Persons:** The issue of missing people, particularly due to war or involuntary circumstances like migrants fleeing their homes, has gained prominence. States have a responsibility to search for missing individuals and conduct investigations into missing persons cases, irrespective of ethnic, religious, or national origin.

The international scope of the discussions conducted holds significant value, acting as a reminder of humanitarian crises frequently neglected. While many interventions referred to the dramatic situation in Palestine, there were countless “what about us” interventions bringing attention to often overlooked crises elsewhere. The participation of individuals from diverse global regions not only enables a positive impact globally but also enhances and elevates the discourse at the European level.

Like in previous years, this edition had a Gender Rapporteur, Parvana Bayramova, who noted that, while wars are mostly initiated, developed and implemented by men, women bear the brunt of their consequences to a larger extent. Women should take an active part in creating peace and participating in negotiations. Their voices need to be heard, and she observed that this edition of the Forum achieved gender parity. However, perspectives on gender equality still need better integration into discussions and panels that are not explicitly devoted to the topic.

Narayan Khanal served as the Youth Rapporteur, and emphasized the pivotal role played by Youth Delegates in the Forum, asking important questions and participating as discussants. He also called for future editions of the Forum to enable youth participation as moderators and panellists. More generally, he expressed the desire of younger citizens to have the right to vote earlier so that they can not only have their voices heard but also be part of the decisions that will shape their future.

In essence, our discussions and recommended actions here encompass far more than just democracy or peace in abstract terms. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, we are not only fortifying our democracies but also paving the way for a more peaceful, just, and inclusive world.

Agenda for the Future

From the discussions at the forum, several recommendations emerge, directed towards various stakeholders.

To international organisations:

1. There is an imperative to guarantee protection under international law, achieved either through the establishment of **new organisations or comprehensive reforms to enhance existing ones**, thereby bolstering their capabilities to safeguard democracy and peace. In particular, **veto power** in international organisations was questioned.
2. **Reliability in responses to aggression** is essential, requiring a consistent approach from international organisations to counteract threats.
3. A pivotal debate surrounds the nature of these **sanctions**. It is crucial to acknowledge that they have significant repercussions on populations, and the exclusion of states from international organisations comes with its own set of costs. A nuanced approach is needed to balance effectiveness with minimizing negative consequences.

To national governments:

1. **Protecting Peace in the Multipolar International Order:** Individual states are crucial contributors to preventing the escalation of conflicts within the multipolar international order.
2. **National-Level Priorities:**
 - **Sanctions for Deterrence:** Consideration of sanctions as a means to reduce the potential gains from war.
 - **Democratic Education:** Fostering education systems that equip citizens with the tools and skills essential for active participation in democracy.
 - **Community Protection:** Providing effective protection for ethnic and religious minorities, women, racialised individuals, LGBTQ+ members, as well as political dissidents and journalists.

To the regional and local governments:

1. **Promoting Interregional Cooperation:** Encouraging collaboration between regions and cities, fostering decentralized cooperation for mutual benefit.
2. **Preserving Collective Memory:** Supporting initiatives that focus on the preservation and digitisation of collective memory, ensuring lessons from the past contribute to present and future democratic principles.

To the civic society:

1. **Strengthening Intergenerational Dialogue:** Promoting understanding and cooperation across different age groups, recognizing, and addressing their diverse needs.
2. **Emphasizing Community Care:** Building networks of cooperation and solidarity within communities, fostering empathy and strong connections among neighbours.
3. **Remaining Vigilant Against Desensitisation:** Staying alert to the risks of desensitisation to violence and war crimes, especially in the age of widespread media coverage.
4. **Influencing Policymakers and Holding Representatives Accountable:** Exploring effective ways to influence policymakers and developing tools to hold representatives accountable. Acknowledging the power of public mobilisation and activism in shaping both national and international politics.