

International Day of Democracy 2020

We need democracy protection to counter autocratisation

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On 15 September, the world celebrates one of humanity's greatest success models: democracy. When the United Nations declared this date the International Day of Democracy 13 years ago, it was being carried along by a global wave of democratisation. Since then, democracy has found itself under pressure from both internal and external forces, and there are now more autocracies than democracies in the world for the first time in almost 20 years. The international community must act now and engage in democracy protection.

For two decades, the trend towards more and stronger democracies appeared clear and irreversible. Now, democracy is coming increasingly under pressure, and we are seeing a rise in autocracies across the world. In many countries, the global financial crisis of 2008 and "migration crises" in Europe have fuelled the emergence of populist and nationalist movements that reject fundamental democratic values such as political equality and the protection of minorities. Established democratic institutions and processes are coming under heavy attack in countries such as the USA, India, Brazil and Poland: amongst other things, the independence of electoral commissions is weakened, or legislation is used to restrict press freedom, discriminate against religious groups or persecute political opponents. And the SARS-CoV2 pandemic has played its part too: some governments are exploiting the exceptional circumstances to expand their powers and restrict the civic space.

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It is also new how countries autocratise, that is, how existing democratic institutions and processes are being dismantled. Unlike the traditional, coup-driven way of overthrowing a government, the processes we are observing at present are marked by the steady erosion of democratic institutions rather than their sudden collapse. Affected countries gradually transform into hybrid regime types. Although they hold regular elections, these countries neither respect nor protect citizens' rights, civil liberties or the rule of law.

How can and should the international community respond to this trend?

International efforts to promote democracy gained momentum in the 1990s. Recently, however, the issue has slipped

down many political agendas – not least due to a securitisation of foreign policy, as in the context of the fight against terrorism. Nevertheless, the current situation in which democracy finds itself around the globe shows the continued importance of democracy promotion and the need to protect what has been accomplished so far.

One key insight of democracy promotion is the fact that it is not enough to simply focus on elections. Autocratisation mainly happens between elections, as political participation – but also, and in particular, citizens' rights and civil liberties and the rule of law – are gradually restricted. Without these basic freedoms, however, going to the polls also becomes irrelevant. What is especially alarming is the fact that the erosion of these institutions and freedoms is also sapping democracy's defensive strength once the separation of powers is undermined and checks and balances between democratic institutions are suspended. Firstly, democracy cannot defend itself, as, for instance, parliament's monitoring function is restricted or the independence of the judiciary system has been eroded. Secondly, the population is in no position to defend democracy either, as democratic instruments such as legal challenges against unconstitutional measures, demonstrations or public criticism are no longer possible or will be met with reprisals. Here too, lockdowns imposed during the pandemic have played into the hands of the autocrats. The international community is therefore being called on to get involved in the protection of democracy at an early stage and to defend the fundamental pillars of democracy against subtle disintegration. How democracy can be protected effectively, however, is not an easy question and one that academics and decision-makers will have to answer together.

Across the world we see that citizens do not resign to autocratisation but are actively engaging for democracy, for example by taking to the streets, even if that often means risking their freedom or even their lives. They demand democracy. From Ecuador to Hong Kong, from Belarus to Sudan and Mali, people are fighting for their civil liberties and citizens' and human rights, for democracy and the rule of law. This shows that the idea of democracy is resilient and universal. If we are to reach out to these people, the international community will have to recognise that simply promoting democracy is not enough – it needs to be actively protected.