

A Call to Defend Democracy

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens more than the lives and the livelihoods of people throughout the world. It is also a political crisis that threatens the future of liberal democracy.

Authoritarian regimes, not surprisingly, are using the crisis to silence critics and tighten their political grip. But even some democratically elected governments are fighting the pandemic by amassing emergency powers that restrict human rights and enhance state surveillance without regard to legal constraints, parliamentary oversight, or timeframes for the restoration of constitutional order. Parliaments are being sidelined, journalists are being arrested and harassed, minorities are being scapegoated, and the most vulnerable sectors of the population face alarming new dangers as the economic lockdowns ravage the very fabric of societies everywhere.

Repression will not help to control the pandemic. Silencing free speech, jailing peaceful dissenters, suppressing legislative oversight, and indefinitely canceling elections all do nothing to protect public health. On the contrary, these assaults on freedom, transparency, and democracy will make it more difficult for societies to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis through both government and civic action.

It is not a coincidence that the current pandemic began in a country where the free flow of information is stifled and where the government punished those warning about the dangers of the virus—warnings that were seen as spreading rumors harmful to the prestige of the state. When voices of responsible citizens are suppressed, the results can be deadly, not for just one country but for the entire world.

Democracy is not just a cherished ideal. It is the system of government best suited to addressing a crisis of the magnitude and complexity of COVID-19. In contrast to the self-serving claims of authoritarian propaganda, credible and free flows of information, fact-based debate about policy options, the voluntary self-organization of civil society, and open engagement between government and society are all vital assets in combating the pandemic. And they are all key elements of liberal democracy.

It is only through democracy that societies can build the social trust that enables them to persevere in a crisis, maintain national resilience in the face of hardship, heal deep societal divisions through inclusive participation and dialogue, and retain confidence that sacrifice will be shared and the rights of all citizens respected.

It is only through democracy that independent civil society, including women and young people, can be empowered to partner with public institutions, to assist in the delivery of services, to help citizens stay informed and engaged, and to bolster social morale and a sense of common purpose.

It is only through democracy that free media can play their role of informing people so that they can make sound personal and family decisions, scrutinize government and public institutions, and counter disinformation that seeks to tear societies apart.

It is only through democracy that society can strike a sustainable balance between competing needs and priorities – between combatting the spread of the virus and protecting economic security; and

between implementing an effective response to the crisis and protecting people's civil and political rights in accordance with constitutional norms and guarantees.

It is only in democracies that the rule of law can protect individual liberties from state intrusion and constraint well beyond what is necessary to contain a pandemic.

It is only in democracies that systems of public accountability can monitor and circumscribe emergency government powers and terminate them when they are no longer needed.

It is only in democracies that government data on the scope and health-impact of the pandemic can be believed.

Democracy does not guarantee competent leadership and effective governance. While democracies predominate among the countries that have acted most effectively to contain the virus, other democracies have functioned poorly in responding to the pandemic and have paid a very high price in human life and economic security. Democracies that perform poorly further weaken society and create openings for authoritarians.

But the greatest strength of democracy is its capacity for self-correction. The COVID-19 crisis is an alarming wake-up call, an urgent warning that the freedoms we cherish are at risk and that we must not take them for granted. Through democracy, citizens and their elected leaders can learn and grow. Never has it been more important for them to do that.

The current pandemic represents a formidable global challenge to democracy. Authoritarians around the world see the COVID-19 crisis as a new political battleground in their fight to stigmatize democracy as feeble and reverse its dramatic gains of the past few decades. Democracy is under threat, and people who care about it must summon the will, the discipline, and the solidarity to defend it. At stake are the freedom, health, and dignity of people everywhere.

List of signatories

Organisations

- African Movement for Democracy
- African Network of Constitutional Lawyers (ANCL)
- Alinaza Universitaria Nicaraguense (AUN)
- Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center
- Alliance of Democracies Foundation
- Asia Democracy Network
- Asian Network For Free Elections (ANFREL)
- Association Béninoise de Droit Constitutionnel (ABDC)
- Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT)
- Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE)
- Christian Democratic International Center
- Coalition for Dialogue in Africa (CODA)
- Colectivo Ciudadano Ecuador
- Council for Global Equality
- Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)
- Democracy International
- Democracy Reporting International (DRI)
- European Endowment for Democracy
- European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP)
- European Partnership for Democracy
- Forum 2000
- Freedom House
- Fundación Nuevas Generaciones
- Fundación Paraguaya de Cooperación y Desarrollo
- Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES)
- Human Rights Campaign
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Institute for Democratic Governance
- Instituto Venezolano de Estudios Sociales y Políticos (INVESP)
- International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)
- International IDEA
- International Republican Institute
- JuventudLAC
- Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
- National Democratic Institute
- National Endowment for Democracy
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- Olof Palme International Center
- Parliamentary Center of Canada
- PAX for Peace International

- PEN America
- Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland
- Prague Civil Society Centre
- Program on Democratic Resilience and Development, IDC Herzliya
- Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights
- Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe por la Democracia (REDLAD)
- Solidarity Center
- Swedish International Liberal Center (SILC)
- Taiwan Foundation for Democracy
- The Carter Center
- The Center Party's International Foundation (CIS)
- The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA)
- The Foreign Policy Centre
- The George W. Bush Institute
- The Inter American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH)
- The International Democrat Union (IDU)
- The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)
- The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Organization
- The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation
- The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)
- The McCain Institute for International Leadership
- The Nadav Foundation
- The Oslo Center
- The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida
- Transparency International
- Unión de Partidos Latinoamericanos (UPLA)
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- West Africa Civil Society Institute
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- World Movement for Democracy
- World Uyghur Congress
- World Youth Movement for Democracy

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KRISTOL	William	Director, Defending Democracy Together	USA
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KURLANTZICK	Joshua	Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations	USA
KWASNIEWSKI	Aleksander	Former President of Poland	Poland
LAFER	Celso	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil; Former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Brazil to the World Trade Organization and the United Nations	Brazil
LAGUMDZIJA	Zlatko	Former Prime Minister of Bosnia & Herzegovina	Bosnia & Herzegovina
LAMBERTZ	Karl-Heinz	Speaker of the Parliament of the German-Speaking Community; Former President of the European Committee of the Regions; Former Minister-President of the German-Speaking Community of Belgium	Belgium
LAMOUNIER	Bolivar	Director, Augurium Consultores and Advisor, the World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid	Brazil
LAMSAL	Pragya	Development professional and women's rights activist	Nepal
LANDSBERGIS	Vytautas	Former President of Lithuania	Lithuania

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LEE	Cheuk-Yan	Former Member of the Legislative Council; Secretary-General, Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions	Hong-Kong
LEE	Hong-koo	Former Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea	Republic of Korea
LEE	Martin	Founder, Democratic Party	Hong-Kong
LEE	Sook Jong	President, East Asia Institute	Republic of Korea
LETTA	Enrico	Former Prime Minister of Italy; Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po, Paris	Italy
LÉVY	Bernard-Henri	Member, Jcall Advocacy Group	France
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LIU	Xia	Artist and Widow of Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo	China
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MACRI	Mauricio	Former President of Argentina	Argentina
MADONSELA	Thuli	Former Public Protector of South Africa; Founder, Thuma Foundation for Democracy Leadership and Literacy	South Africa
MAGYAR	Bálint	Former Minister of Education of Hungary	Hungary
MALCORRA	Susana	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Argentina; Former Chef de Cabinet to the Executive Office at the United Nations	Argentina
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MECKEL	Markus	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Member of the Bundestag	Germany
MEIDANI	Rexhep	Former President of Albania	Albania
MEISTER	Stefan	Director, South Caucasus Office, Heinrich Boell Foundation	Germany
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MENCHÚ	Rigoberta	Nobel Peace Laureate	Guatemala
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MERINO	Beatriz	The President of the Council of Ministers of Peru and National Ombudswoman	Peru
MESA	Carlos	Former President of Bolivia	Bolivia
MIKULSKI	Barbara	Former United States Senator	USA
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MILLER	Robert C.	President, the Hurford Foundation	USA
MITOV	Daniel	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria	Bulgaria
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SALEM	Walid	Palestinian Intellectual	Palestine
SANDU	Maia	Former Prime Minister of Moldova	Moldova
SANGAY	Lobsang	President, Central Tibet Administration	Tibet
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TARASYUK	Borys	Director, Institute for EuroAtlantic Cooperation	Ukraine
TAUBINA	Natalia	Director, Public Verdict Foundation	Russia
TAWIAH	Esther	Founder and Executive Director, Gender Centre for Empowering Development (GenCED)	Ghana
THAE	Yong-ho	Member of National Assembly of the Republic of Korea	Republic of Korea
THOMAS-GREENFIELD	Linda	Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs	USA
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TSAKHIA	Elbegdorj	Former President of Mongolia	Mongolia
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VERVEER	Melanne	Former United States Ambassador for Global Women's Issues	USA
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WU	Joseph	Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China	Taiwan
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ZAKHAROV	Yevgeniy	Founder, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group	Ukraine
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ZEDILLO	Ernesto	Former President of Mexico	Mexico
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