

# Preventing the eventual “death” of our democracies

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Most of the world’s pressing issues of today will never be effectively resolved if we do not strengthen our democracies. Thus, the risk of collapse of democracies will also mean a risk of collapse of human societies resulting from our incompetence to effectively resolve global public policy problems.

One of the most quintessential global macro-political threats that today’s generation faces is the risk of democratic collapse. There are two symptomatic causes why we, in the democratic world, are at the edge of the cliff, confronted with the options of either strengthening the foundations of our democracy, or losing our grip on the democratic tightrope.

First, one of the most crucial risks today is the systemic disregard for civil liberties and human rights of citizens, not only in new democracies of the Global South, but also in the advanced democracies of the West. This specific risk is indeed political in nature: It results from a stark conflict of interests amongst citizens and groups within and amongst states being translated to a highly violent struggle leading to political violence among citizens.

Second, the growing material inequality within and among democratic states is causing dramatic dissatisfaction among the substantially growing number of disempowered and marginalized citizens both in the developed and developing worlds, thereby leading to massive protests as evidenced by the London riots in 2011 and the numerous Occupy demonstrations elsewhere – thus, lucidly showing how economic injustice can mobilize protests.

Considering these two symptoms of the risk of democratic collapse, are we going to allow political and economic threats in our democracies to be embedded as enduring features of a highly unjust political landscape? In other words, will we allow our naïveté to dominate over our genuine passion for human freedoms to flourish in a truly just political and economic community? How are we going to prevent the collapse of our democracies? Although a complete policy solution applicable for all struggling states in the Global South as well as the troubled countries of the Eurozone is beyond the scope of this essay, a few paradigmatic remarks are worth making.

## **Active political citizenship**

Emancipation from oppression, marginalization and the wider struggles in the political society begins with the individual, equipping oneself with the knowledge about one’s rights and obligations as a responsible citizen. The realization of oppression does not come primarily from the outside, but ultimately begins and ends within. The truth of the matter is that oppression does not come in neatly packaged boxes where its ultimate forms are easily identifiable. Indeed, various forms of suffering are deeply enmeshed in highly complex webs of “interlocking oppressions”, whereby the politics of class, race, identity, religion intersect. Thus a waged worker in Southeast Asia or South America may, in fact, be tied by various tightropes of oppression generated by race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or even political ideology, among others.

Moreover, as responsible political citizens in a democratic society we struggle on to escape from the cage of oppression at the individual level, and thereafter rationally deliberate with our fellow citizens on how we can improve the welfare of our immediate communities. Such political action requires the authentic passion to improve not only one’s lot, but also that of others; and to blame only others for one’s own misgivings is indeed a step forward not only from marginalizing oneself from the eschatological promise of democracy, but to betray our fellow political citizens’ aspirations toward an authentic democratic community. In other words, to be a responsible and active political citizen does not end with exercising one’s right to free speech, but also requires a reasonable amount of knowledge about a given societal issue and, more importantly, respect for the welfare of other citizens.

Thus, the systemic disregard of civil liberties and human rights in many struggling democracies, as in the case of

Muslim minorities in the south of predominantly Catholic Philippines or in the south of predominantly Buddhist Thailand, especially at the height of post-9/11 counter-terror operations, is truly reflective of how agents of states have lost control of what it really means for the state to promote active and responsible citizenship of an authentic liberal democratic type. This also goes for the seemingly thoughtless wealth generation and accumulation of the “top 1%” in advanced democracies, whereas the underprivileged “99%” are mired in the morass of potential impoverishment despite their hard work and promising talent. This systemic disregard for the welfare of fellow citizens is something we need to get rid of in order to strengthen the foundations of our democracy.

### **Strengthening the role of the state in providing public goods**

Democratic states, whether the social welfare states of Germany or Scandinavia or perhaps their capitalist variants in England or the United States – and more so the lean and reclusive states of the Global South, have to realize that the state, more than ever, is necessary in intervening in the economy in cases where markets fail to provide essential public goods. Hence, when markets fail to foster the common good for the society, the democratic state has to rectify the fundamental failures of the political-economic community, and thereafter consistently uphold the rule of law that mutually benefits not only the “haves” but also the “have-nots”.

Also, it is undeniably crucial for democratic states to re-institute just pathways through which the “have-nots” shall be able to embrace social and economic opportunities to improve their lot. A vibrant and consolidated democracy begins when the citizens’ stomachs are full, thereby giving them the chance to assert themselves politically. And this is where the rubber meets the road when new democracies are at the risk of backsliding: when material inequalities are becoming much sharper within societies while the state remains to be reclusive in taking a responsible intervention, large numbers of political citizens lose their ability to meaningfully participate in the democratic processes that essentially existed for their emancipatory well-being. Thus, the case of three Southeast Asian electoral democracies are provocatively telling: the top ten most affluent families in Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand own 58%, 53%, and 46%, respectively of the entire market capitalization of the country. This constrains the economic odds of the rest of the population to rise from poverty and to meaningfully engage in democratic politics. No wonder that these countries are facing a difficult task to consolidate their democracies due to the fact that a substantially large part of the citizenry are economically powerless, and therefore unable to reasonably wield their political rights against a highly hierarchical and economically harsh society.

### **Committing to global justice means committing to a longer life expectancy of our democracies**

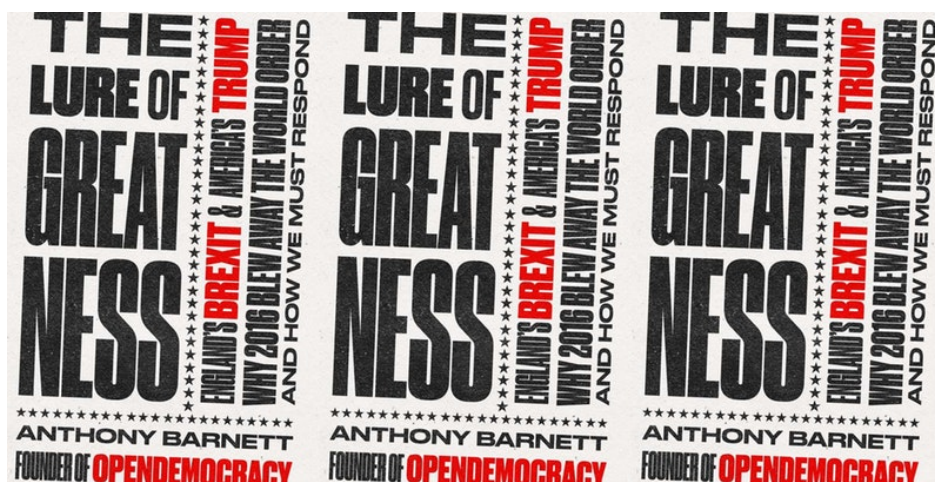
In its fullest sense, the first critical step in considering how to extend the life expectancy of democratic regimes is to invoke a transnational perspective. The old paradigm which posits the importance of the national citizenry (demos) as the primordial constituent of a democracy will not suffice in order for us to address effectively the complex challenges facing democracies today. Indeed, we need to re-calibrate our understanding of how to conceive democracy in a globalized world. As [James Bohman](#) argues, the transnational and global *démoi* should be the reference point of public policy decisions. With increasing global interdependence the nation-state is fundamentally constrained in upholding democratic values such as human rights and freedoms. To state the obvious, much of the developing world has been detrimentally impacted upon by the unfettered damages of badly managed aspects of globalization. This points to the growing need for a reform of the political structures of international regimes whereby increased political inclusion of stakeholders from the Global South will also mean increased potential for effective resolution of global issues that mostly impact the developing world.

### **From the risk of collapse to an increased life expectancy of our democracies**

Most of the world’s pressing issues of today, from global epidemics to climate change, will never be effectively resolved if we do not strengthen our democracies. Thus, the risk of collapse of democracies will also mean a risk of collapse of human societies resulting from our incompetence to effectively resolve global public policy problems.

Both developed and developing worlds’ democratic regimes are faced with the risk of collapse when they are unable to consistently uphold human rights vis-à-vis the state’s policing practices, and manage growing material inequalities that generate massive societal dissatisfaction and instability. But understanding and taking action to minimize these risks requires tremendous collective action at various political levels, thus necessitating

cooperation that encompasses commitment and concrete action on part of the citizenry, the states, and the global public. Through multi-scalar democratic cooperation, current and emerging risks that are substantially caused by multi-tiered democratic deficits can be addressed. This paradigm shift towards a multi-scalar strengthening of our democracies to minimize the prospects of their collapse is the first and most critical step in securing a more effective model of managing risks.



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