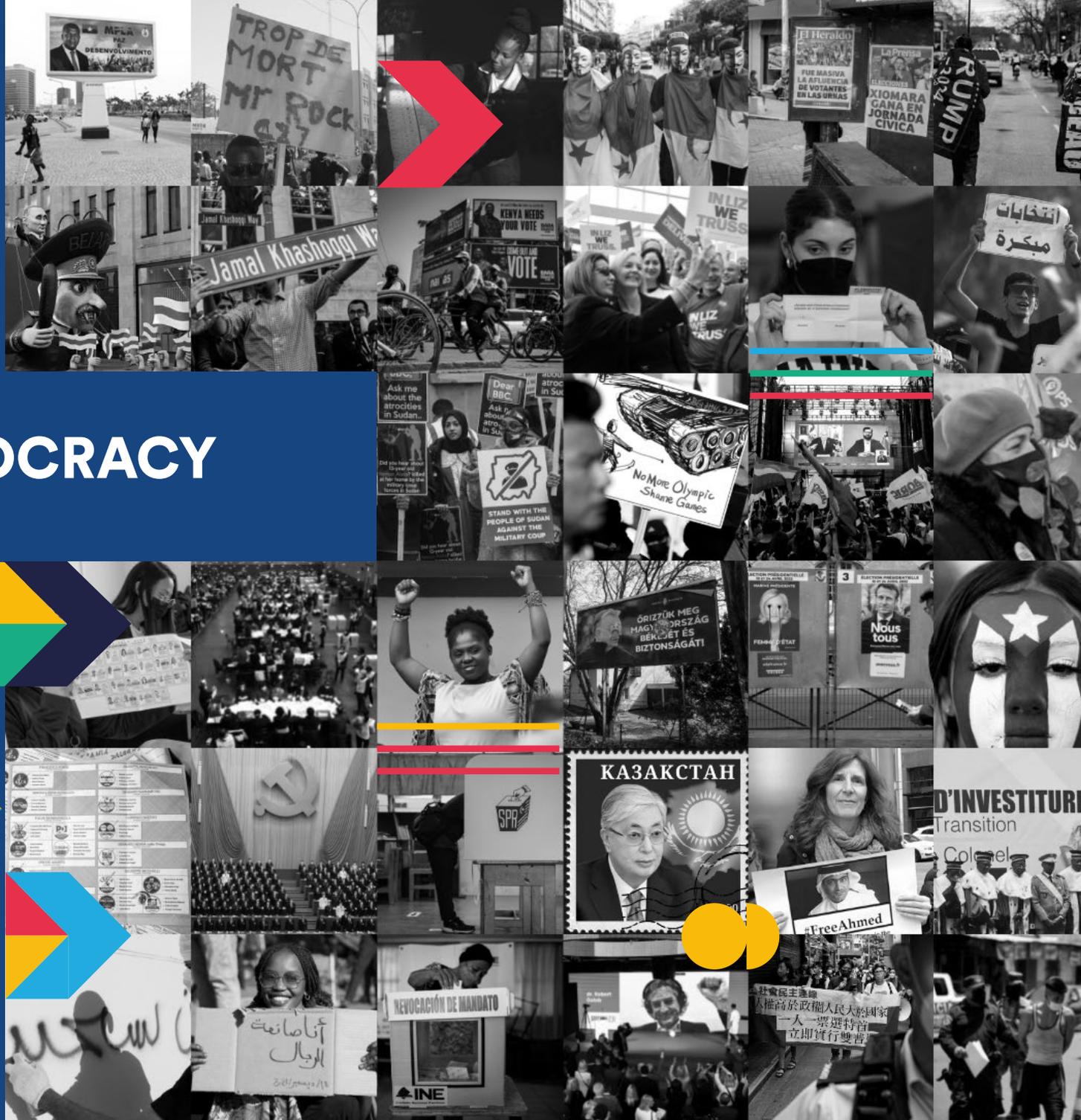




DEFENDING DEMOCRACY





Democracy remains contested and subject to pushback around the world. In some countries in 2022 democratic forces regained ground in the face of authoritarian threats. But no long-running autocracy made significant steps towards democracy and there were no handovers from military forces to civilian rule. Some deeply flawed democracies regressed further. Authoritarian regimes with broad international reach, notably China and Russia, acted as powerful international supporters of the denial of democratic freedoms.

Wherever elections were free and fair, the strongest global pattern was one of rejection of incumbency as people sought political novelty, embracing alternatives that promised a break with establishment politics many view as a failure. In making these switches, people hoped for solutions to longstanding problems that their political systems have proved unable to solve, such as insecurity, corruption, poor public services and economic inequality.

Sometimes this rejection of incumbency led to victories for progressive candidates, while other times it meant a regressive turn. Either way, victories often represent less of an endorsement of a particular political position than a verdict on

ineffective and disappointing incumbents. As a result, newly elected governments may have weak mandates. This means that where progressive turns have opened up opportunities for civil society, there's no guarantee these will last. In the many countries where people are at the end of their tether, further failures could lead to a loss of legitimacy not only of those in power but of democracy itself.

DEMOCRACY AND DISINFORMATION

Disinformation operations played a huge role in elections and in distorting public discourse across the board. Disinformation had an influence on Chile's referendum, which resulted in the rejection of a progressive constitution designed by the most inclusive process in the country's history. It fuelled attacks on women's rights in South Korea's election, as the winning candidate appealed to disaffected young men by conferring legitimacy in once-fringe myths that men are discriminated against. It also left its mark in Brazil's elections, on which former two-time leftist president Lula da Silva narrowly defeated the incumbent far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, following a polarised campaign in which he was forced to deny accusations he'd made a 'pact with the devil'.



CHILE'S CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS:
BACK TO SQUARE ONE?



SOUTH KOREAN ELECTION: WOMEN'S
RIGHTS THE BIGGEST LOSER



BRAZIL: WORLD AWAITS PIVOTAL
PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF VOTE

In the Philippines, disinformation enabled the resounding victory of Ferdinand Marcos, son and namesake of a brutal former dictator, backed as vice president by the daughter of the outgoing leader, an authoritarian president whose 'war on drugs' claimed tens of thousands of lives. While competition was far from fair and vote-buying played a role, the outcome owes much to an aggressive, long-term disinformation operation that rewrote history, convincing many that the dictatorship era was a time of prosperity and

security. Attacks on civil society have **continued** under the new administration.

“ I fear in a few months or years we will be living under a dictatorship. Marcos may even be able to stay in power for as long as he wants. It’s very scary because the human rights violations that happened during his father’s dictatorship are not even settled yet. More human rights violations are likely to happen.”

 **MARINEL UBALDO**
Living Laudato Si’ Philippines

PHILIPPINES: DEMOCRACY IN MOURNING

In country after country, disinformation shared and accelerated by social media normalised extremism and fuelled real-life violence. It can be expected to continue to pose a major threat to democracy in the years to come.

EXTREMISM NORMALISED

Anti-rights forces consolidated their reign in Hungary, whose authoritarian leader, Viktor Orbán, triumphed in April 2022 despite facing a united opposition and a campaign focusing on his close links with Putin. But another effort to mobilise a broad-based opposition to vote out a populist leader was successful in neighbouring Slovenia, when Prime Minister Janez Janša was defeated by a new party promising to respect the rule of law, uphold civic freedoms and lead a transition to a greener society.

HUNGARY’S ELECTION A GRIM DAY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

FRESH HOPE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: RIGHT-WING POPULIST DEFEATED IN SLOVENIA

Extremist political forces still however pressed ahead elsewhere. Sweden’s September election, following a campaign dominated by crime and immigration, saw the far-right Sweden Democrats, once on the political fringes, come second. The new coalition government that formed depends on their support. That same month, the Brothers of Italy, a far-right party that sprang from the neofascist movement, came first in Italy’s election to dominate the new government.

“ Hate speech and disinformation played a significant role during the campaign. Meloni’s entire propaganda is based on ultraconservative beliefs that she pushes by instrumentalising half-truths, a distortion of the facts and outright lies.”

 **OIZA Q OBASUYI**
Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights

ITALY: TRIUMPH OF THE FAR RIGHT

SWEDEN’S FAR RIGHT RISES

In November, Israel’s fifth election in two-and-a-half years saw former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu regain power after a spell in opposition. He did so by cultivating links with far-right politicians, resulting in the most extreme ultranationalist government in Israel’s history. Now he’s pressing ahead with moves to dismantle judicial checks and balances on government power.

ISRAEL: MOST EXTREME GOVERNMENT EVER ON THE CARDS

In many more places, extremist forces won in a less obvious but equally damaging way: by entering the mainstream and shifting the political centre. This often occurred as mainstream politicians adopted their rhetoric to win or shore up their support. This means extreme political forces can win even when their candidates lose, as established parties turn their proposals into policy.

Examples abound of the normalisation of extremist discourse, whether out of ideological or opportunistic motivations. Even in Portugal, a country long considered immune to such appeals, the January election saw far-right discourse embraced in electoral politics. In France’s presidential election, centrist candidates, President Emmanuel Macron included, competed to look the most anti-migrant in response to the threat of rising far-right challenger Marine Le Pen. While Le Pen lost the April runoff, she recorded the highest-ever far-right vote – and succeeded in entrenching racism and xenophobia in mainstream political discourse.



PORTUGAL: CONTINUITY COMES AS A SURPRISE



A CLOSE CALL FOR FRENCH DEMOCRACY

The problem transcends electoral politics: acts and threats of violence by people radicalised into extremism have become a growing problem in multiple countries, from Canada and the USA to Germany and New Zealand. Opposition to pandemic measures has often been the entry point for people to embrace conspiracy theories, but the phenomenon will outlive the pandemic: many other issues can fulfil similar functions, from abortion and trans rights to climate change.

In New Zealand, **protests** sparked by temporary vaccine mandates in February 2022 became a magnet for extremists expressing a wide variety of grievances and using increasingly violent rhetoric. Among those drawn in were people vehemently opposed to gun control policies introduced in 2019 in the aftermath of an unprecedented deadly white supremacist attack on two mosques.



FAR-RIGHT THREATS SPARKED BY PANDEMIC DENIAL

New Zealand's protesters found inspiration in the truckers' blockade in Ottawa, Canada that began



A supporter awaits the arrival of Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa at an election rally in Lisbon, Portugal on 28 January 2022.

Photo by Horacio Villalobos/Corbis via Getty Images

the previous month. A protest against proposed mandatory vaccinations for truckers crossing the Canada-US border quickly grew to accommodate an array of conspiracy theories and far-right views, receiving ready ideological and financial support from US-based Trump supporters. Some were prepared to move from violent words to deeds: an armed group connected to the protests was found plotting to kill police officers.



CANADA: TRUCKER PROTESTS SET OFF ALARMS

BRAZIL: INSTITUTIONS UNDER ATTACK

In Brazil, a tight presidential run-off in October ended four years of a far-right government that wreaked havoc on the environment, labour and social rights, and the rights of women, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ people.

Bolsonaro, a Trump-like figure who'd long sought to undermine the credibility of the voting system, only belatedly accepted the results, but never really conceded. Protests by his core supporters calling for military intervention grew following the election as he remained silent.

Barely a week after taking office on 1 January 2023, President Lula faced an insurrection by disgruntled Bolsonaro followers, who marched unimpeded for hours to the sites of federal power in the capital, Brasília, tore down fences under

the passive gaze of the police and invaded and ransacked key government sites.

Although Bolsonaro didn't personally direct the insurrection, he set the scene by consistently sowing disinformation, stoking doubts over the integrity of the election and demonising his opponents, making their rule illegitimate in the eyes of many of his supporters.

The Brazilian riots drew obvious parallels with the attack on the US Capitol two years before, but there were differences: in Brazil they were more extensive – they targeted not one but all three branches of government – although mercifully this time nobody was killed. But as in the **USA**, they pointed to the lingering damaging effects of far-right extremism, likely to survive the political leader who unleashed it.



BRAZIL: CAN THE FAR-RIGHT GENIE BE PUT BACK INTO THE BOTTLE?

PERSISTENT MILITARY RULE

None of the countries that underwent military coups in recent years – among them **Chad, Guinea, Mali, Myanmar** and **Sudan** – made progress towards civilian rule in 2022. In country after country, long-announced democratic elections were repeatedly postponed and democracy movements were heavily repressed.

“The degradation of the rule of law puts people's everyday life and livelihood at risk. Repression and fundamental rights violations make everyone feel unsafe and spread fear. The junta uses fear as a domination tool.”



ANONYMOUS CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST
Myanmar



MYANMAR: JUNTA'S ECONOMIC POWER IN THE FIRING LINE

In Guinea, the military junta in power since September 2021 announced its plan to rule for another three years. It followed this unilateral decision with a blanket protest ban and an order **dissolving** a major pro-democracy coalition. When democracy protests went ahead regardless, they ended in deadly violence and the detention of protest leaders. The army made clear it doesn't intend to abide by its Transitional Charter and promises of consultation, and only reluctantly agreed under pressure from the international community to shave a year off its latest timeline.

“The military are savagely repressing citizens who are mobilising for democracy and demanding a frank dialogue to agree on a reasonable timeframe for the return to constitutional order.”



ABDOULAYE OUMOU SOW
National Front for the Defence of the Constitution,
Guinea



GUINEA'S MILITARY IN NO HURRY TO RETURN TO THE BARRACKS

In Sudan, the military government in place since October 2021 has been met with fierce resistance and sustained protests. In December an **agreement** was signed between the military and social movements and political parties that is supposed to see a two-year transition towards elections. But Sudan's neighbourhood resistance committees have rejected it and there are concerns that even if the agreement leads to civilian rule – an outcome that can't be taken for granted – it could mean immunity for the military's killings of democracy protesters.

» We are back to the situation that preceded the revolution. We feel that the old regime is back; in fact, the military has started appointing people from the former regime everywhere. Activists, journalists and lawyers are being silenced because power went back to the military.

» **NAZIK KABALO**
Civil society activist, Sudan



BURKINA FASO: COUP-DRIVEN REGRESSION

In 2022, Burkina Faso experienced deep democratic regression with a double coup.

In January, the military took over, capitalising on people's anger at insecurity in the face of ongoing jihadist insurgency and the failure of the government

» **BURKINA FASO: SECOND COUP FURTHER DENTS HOPE OF DEMOCRACY**

to protect them. In September, one army leader replaced another on exactly the same grounds.

As in some countries that have experienced coups, these recent moves have been popular with many, including some segments of civil society. The failures of the ousted government caused some to reject the democratic system they invested such hopes in when they **overthrew autocracy** in 2014.

» The view of the recent coup as a significant setback for the democratic transition agenda is not unanimously held among civil society. Additionally, for a major segment of civil society security appears to be a more urgent and priority concern than democracy."

» **KOP'EP DABUGAT**
West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network

Addressing the security situation must be a top priority of any government, not least because of a hunger crisis it has contributed to, with over 630,000 people facing the prospect of starvation and jihadist blockades stopping aid getting where it's most needed.

But democratic accountability is the only way of preventing human rights abuses and holding perpetrators to account when they occur – and as a fresh **crackdown** on media freedoms and the right to protest has made clear, that isn't going to come with military rule.

LONG-TERM AUTHORITARIANISM

Longstanding autocracies saw no shift towards democracy in 2022 – although many held ceremonial votes in an attempt to acquire a varnish of legitimacy.

In Russia's satellite state of Belarus, a constitutional referendum held amid intense repression extended the powers of authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko. In Turkmenistan, a blatantly fraudulent election was used by the president to hand over power to his son while continuing to rule behind the scenes. In neighbouring Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev won a second term through a vote as flawed as all the country's past elections, running virtually unopposed after suppressing rare protests with **lethal violence**.

» Kazakhstan needs political reform. I do not expect the government to hold democratic elections anytime soon, but I am concerned about the space for independent media and journalists, for the growth of a democratic opposition and for the development of civil society."

» **YEVGENIY ZHOVTIS**
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law





A protester sprays the slogan 'People Want Freedom' as part of the uprising for democracy in Bahrain in 2011.

Photo by Hamad I Mohammed/Reuters via Gallo Images



TURKMENISTAN: TYRANNY MUTATES INTO DYNASTY

Similarly in Bahrain, a sham parliamentary election was held in which no members of the opposition were allowed to run, all expressions of dissent remained repressed and those daring to question this state of affairs were kept in prison.

“The only role of this election, like those of 2014 and 2018, is to provide a veneer of democracy. It’s make-believe. But let’s be clear: it is also an opportunity for us to work on our own renewal, to locate openings and fissures and pry them open.”



JAWAD FAIROOZ

Salam for Democracy and Human Rights



BAHRAIN: ELECTION WITHOUT FREEDOMS FALLS FAR SHORT OF DEMOCRACY

While there was scant possibility of real change in these countries, it seemed possible in Angola. But limited hopes were dashed when President João Lourenço, head of the party that has ruled for almost half a century, was re-elected in August. On a playing field heavily tilted in his favour, amid unprecedented abstention and claims of fraud, Lourenço achieved only 51 per cent of the vote. While power remained in the ruling party’s hands, the narrow margin of victory kept hopes of change alive.

Chances for real democracy in Angola are quite low due to the level of electoral corruption practised by the party-state."

 **PASCOAL BAPTISTINY**
MBAKITA, Angola

 **ANGOLA: THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION THAT NEVER WAS**

A glimmer of hope also came in crisis-ridden Lebanon, where several independent candidates managed to win parliamentary seats in the May election. The newly elected members of parliament, remarkably younger, more female and more diverse than established politicians, channelled the energy of the **2019 mass protest movement** to pose a new challenge to the traditional sectarian distribution of power.

This election has brought to the forefront new voices speaking about rights and pointing the way forward out of the current crisis."

 **LINA ABOU HABIB**
Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, Lebanon

 **ELECTIONS BRING A BREATH OF FRESH AIR TO LEBANESE POLITICS**

**CHINA:
REGRESSION BEYOND BORDERS**

When further restrictions on individual freedoms scarcely seemed possible in China, President Xi Jinping launched a further **crackdown** ahead of the Communist Party's National Congress in October, which confirmed him as head of the party-state for at least five more years. Censorship and **repression** of all forms of expression were ramped up to eliminate any competition for the unswerving loyalty the leader and party demand of their subjects.

 **CHINA'S XI JINPING AT THE PINNACLE OF POWER**

Unexpectedly, however, a rare wave of protests erupted in November against the government's stifling response to the pandemic, based on strict social control. While it unleashed its usual **repressive tactics** against protests, the government also did something unusual: it backed down and eased its pandemic rules. For once, Xi didn't look in charge of the situation, posing the question of whether Chinese people will keep testing the limits of freedom.

 **CHINA: PANDEMIC PROTESTS FORCE A RARE RETREAT**

But the risks of doing so were made clear by the **continuing repression** of Hong Kong's once flourishing democracy movement. Its leaders are

now in jail or exile, and the Chinese government is making Hong Kong indistinguishable from the mainland, unilaterally ripping up the guarantees made when British rule ended in 1997. Through a manoeuvre that qualified as an election in name only, in April 2022 a single candidate for chief executive was endorsed by a tiny, handpicked electorate sworn to fealty. The unsurprising winner, John Lee, is the security chief who oversaw the brutal suppression of democracy protests.

China also ramped up the rhetoric about Taiwan, making clear that force may be used to make it a part of China – a core goal of Xi's political project. Taiwan is a flourishing democracy and economic success story, and most of its people have no desire to lose their status as an independent nation.

In Hong Kong, China cracked down hard on civic movements and arrested people for even having a podcast. It shut down all forms of civic expression, including news agencies. China will do to Taiwan what it did to Hong Kong."

 **MIN-HSUAN WU**
Doublethink Lab, Taiwan

 **TAIWAN IN THE FIRING LINE**

 **HONG KONG: ANOTHER STEP CLOSER TO CHINA**

In the Americas, three authoritarian governments stood out for their efforts to consolidate their rule and protect themselves against any potential challenge.

Following his victory in the farcical November 2021 elections, President Daniel Ortega continued turning Nicaragua into a totalitarian wasteland, targeting any form of independent organisation – social, business, religious and educational – and any voice that even slightly diverges from ideological orthodoxy and the cult of its leader. During the year, his government dissolved **more than 3,000** CSOs, almost half the number of registered organisations. Repression drove displacement: **almost 330,000** Nicaraguans are estimated to have left the country in 2022.

In February 2023, the government made an unexpected decision to release 222 political prisoners. It seemed an act as arbitrary as the decision to imprison them in the first place. While the move was welcomed by Nicaraguan civil society and their international allies, there was a sting in the tail: those released were banished and stripped of their nationality and civil and political rights.

 Faced with a lack of legitimacy, the Ortega-Murillo regime has deepened its strategy of annihilating any form of citizen organisation that is not subordinate to its interests."

 **MARÍA TERESA BLANDÓN**
Feminist Programme La Corriente, Nicaragua

 **NICARAGUA'S CRACKDOWN: A BELEAGUERED REGIME CLUTCHING AT STRAWS?**

Another exodus, but on a much larger scale, has come out of Venezuela, where political repression, allied with corruption and mismanagement, have produced a complex humanitarian emergency that millions have fled.

 **VENEZUELA: THE END OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS WE KNOW IT?**

In Cuba, the authoritarian government put every effort into preventing a repeat of the unprecedented protests that rocked the country on **11 July 2021**. All year long, it relentlessly repressed and **criminalised** any expression of dissent, holding hundreds of protesters and activists behind bars, sentencing dozens to long prison terms and rewriting the Penal Code to criminalise every organisational and mobilisation tactic used to express dissent. Not surprisingly, Cubans are also fleeing their country in record numbers.

 Following the protests of 11 July 2021 and their repression, it became clearer than ever that the only three options available to Cubans are prison, exile, or submission."

 **CAROLINA BARRERO**
Civil society activist, Cuba

 **CUBA: A YEAR ON FROM HISTORIC PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTESTS**

 **CUBA: WHY FLEE PARADISE?**

DEMOCRACY ERODED FROM WITHIN

Elections are fundamental to democracy—but they're not enough. Democracy between elections relies on multiple means by which people can participate, seek to influence governments, scrutinise state actions and express dissent. But there's a current trend of leaders who could broadly be characterised as popular authoritarians coming to power through free and fair elections only to interpret their victories as a mandate to ride roughshod over constraints on their powers and rule as they please.

In El Salvador, currently under a long-running **repressive** 'state of exception' declared in response to a wave of gang violence, President Nayib Bukele's style of rule has been characterised as '**millennial authoritarian**' in nature, exploiting his social media reach and enduring populist appeal. In September he announced his intent to seek re-election in 2024. His move was enabled by a judicial decision that overran the constitution's explicit ban, taken by a Bukele-appointed Supreme Court following the dismissal of the old court by the Bukele-dominated Legislative Assembly.

Mexico offered another example of an elected leader gaming democratic mechanisms for his own ends: in April, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador bizarrely tried to boost his populist legitimacy by holding a recall referendum on himself. While the ruse backfired – he gathered a large vote from his core supporters but on an extremely low turnout, as most people stayed away to avoid legitimising the manoeuvre – government surveillance and other restrictions on civil society and the media continued. The military has moved into an increased public security role, putting further pressure on civic space.

The government has deepened militarisation not only de facto but also de jure, through the creation of a dense legal and institutional framework, making the trend difficult to reverse. The possible erosion of the military's subordination to civilian power opens up a question mark over the future of democracy."

 **SOFÍA DE ROBINA**
Centro Prodh, Mexico

 **MEXICO: RECALL REFERENDUM RUSE LEAVES NO ONE SATISFIED**

Across the Atlantic in Tunisia, President Kais Saied, who in 2021 dismissed parliament and took control of the judiciary, unilaterally pushed forward a process to rewrite the country's constitution. In July 2022 he rubber-stamped his changes through a constitutional referendum that saw a very low turnout. The new constitution removed checks and balances and downgraded the role of parliament, allowing Saied to further concentrate power. A parliamentary election followed in December under new rules that weakened political parties and fragmented parliament, further consolidating Saied's power – but again a paltry turnout signalled widespread disaffection.

Civil society will continue its pressure and mobilise against any deviations from democracy, given that the new constitution will guarantee the president extensive powers and open the doors for further violations."

 **AMINE GHALI**
Al Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center, Tunisia

 **TUNISIA: DISMANTLING DEMOCRACY, ONE STEP AT A TIME**

INSTABILITY AND VIOLENCE

Other political systems where democracy was already under strain faced further challenges in 2022. In Papua New Guinea, Prime Minister James Marape retained power following an election in which up to a million voters – a huge portion of the country's nine million population – were unable to vote due to failure to update the electoral roll. The ensuing frustration contributed to violence that left at least 50 people dead.

 **PAPUA NEW GUINEA: ELECTION CHAOS POSES INTEGRITY QUESTIONS**

In Peru, Dina Boluarte became the sixth president in six years as she was sworn in to replace President Pedro Castillo after he attempted a 'self-coup' by dissolving Congress. A wave of protests greeted her inauguration and was met with lethal repression that claimed dozens of lives.

Many saw Castillo's dissolution of Congress as a blatant violation of the separation of powers and therefore a presidential coup attempt. But those who pinned their hopes for a better life on Castillo, a leftist from humble origins, saw his removal as a coup, blamed Congress and demanded fresh

elections. These are necessary but on their own won't fix Peru's highly dysfunctional politics, where those elected to govern fail to do so and systematically fail people's expectations.

 **PERU: DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS**

Elections were rocky affairs in many countries across the world, characterised by elite disputes over results and outbursts of violence. In Iraq, election-related violence erupted almost a year after the election, as deadlock persisted over the formation of a government. Supporters of populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose party came first in the October 2021 vote, protested following his announcement of his withdrawal from politics. Violent clashes with supporters of rival parties left at least 30 dead.

 **IRAQ: ENDLESS POLITICAL CRISIS BENEFITS NO ONE BUT ELITES**

In Kenya, disagreements around the outcome of the 9 August election were solved peacefully and through institutional channels. In contrast with other elections in the past, when disputes dragged on, it took less than a month for the Supreme Court to **confirm** the victory of William Ruto, outgoing deputy president, with just over half of the vote. His opponent, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, had rejected the results with unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and fraud. While fears of electoral violence

didn't materialise, disaffection signalled by the low turnout is a problem that still needs to be addressed.

People are demotivated from voting because they do not see any change happening as a result of elections. Government corruption is pervasive no matter who is in the government, and economic performance is consistently poor. People are also discouraged from voting when they think their voices do not matter.

 **KEN OGEMBO**
Siasa Place, Kenya

 **KENYA: A PRESIDENT ELECTED
— OR PERHAPS NOT?**

Because often the problem is that election losers don't recognise the results, the **most important** development in Fiji was the peaceful transfer of power. Following the December election, Sitiveni Rabuka replaced long-time Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. It's a sign of the shaky foundations of Fijian democracy that both men had previously led coups to oust democratically elected governments. Concerns linger about the Fijian military's willingness to accept political change, not least given its deployment as government formation talks were underway.

 **FIJI'S NEW GOVERNMENT: A LESS
REPRESSIVE TRAJECTORY?**



People pass by electoral adverts ahead of a campaign rally in Jomo Kenyatta International Stadium in Kisumu, Kenya, on 4 August 2022.

Photo by Ed Ram/Getty Images

At least in Fiji and many other countries people had a chance to vote – which is an opportunity they're having to wait for in Solomon Islands. An election scheduled for 2023 was pushed back to 2024, ostensibly because the government can't afford to host the Pacific Games and hold an election in the same year. The decision, taken by an administration that has built much stronger relations with China, was preceded by **attacks** on media freedoms. It called into question how much the government truly values democracy.



SOLOMON ISLANDS: DEMOCRACY ON HOLD

PROGRESSIVE CHANGE

Potentially progressive change was also on the cards from Oceania to the Americas.

In Australia's May parliamentary election, the Labor Party defeated the ruling conservative Liberal-National coalition. The centre-left **government** inaugurated in June included a record number of women and brought the welcome promise of a U-turn on its predecessor's policies of climate denial.



CHANGE ON THE CARDS IN AUSTRALIA

In the November mid-term elections in the USA, abortion rights were high in many voters' minds, helping galvanise the progressive camp around the defence of rights under attack, expressed through a rejection of state-level anti-abortion measures and higher than expected support for the Democratic Party.



US MIDTERM ELECTIONS: A TEMPORARY RESPITE?

In Malaysia, change resulted from an election that saw a major extension of the franchise, with the voting age lowered to 18 following civil society campaigning. While no party won an outright majority, the process ended with long-time challenger Anwar Ibrahim sworn in as Malaysia's new prime minister. He came in promising reform, including a commitment to roll back **heavy restrictions** on freedom of expression – promises civil society will be urging him to deliver.

“Malaysian politics are dominated by old people. Now for the first time, young voters could be Malaysia's kingmakers. Change started happening even before the polls opened, as many senior leaders were replaced with younger candidates and parties had more youth-centric manifestos.”



THARMA PILLAI
Undi18, Malaysia



MALAYSIA: WILL NEW GOVERNMENT BRING REAL CHANGE?

Hopes for change rose in Latin America, where the year started with the inauguration of Honduras's first female president, Xiomara Castro, followed by the start of the term of Chile's **youngest-ever president**, former student leader Gabriel Boric, and ended with the return of Lula in Brazil.

Castro, of the left-wing Libre party, came to power more than a decade after her husband, former president Manuel Zelaya, was overthrown in a military coup. Her victory, in an election with record voter turnout, ended a long period of conservative dominance. Honduras's often troubled democracy appears to have passed the key test of a democratic transfer of power.



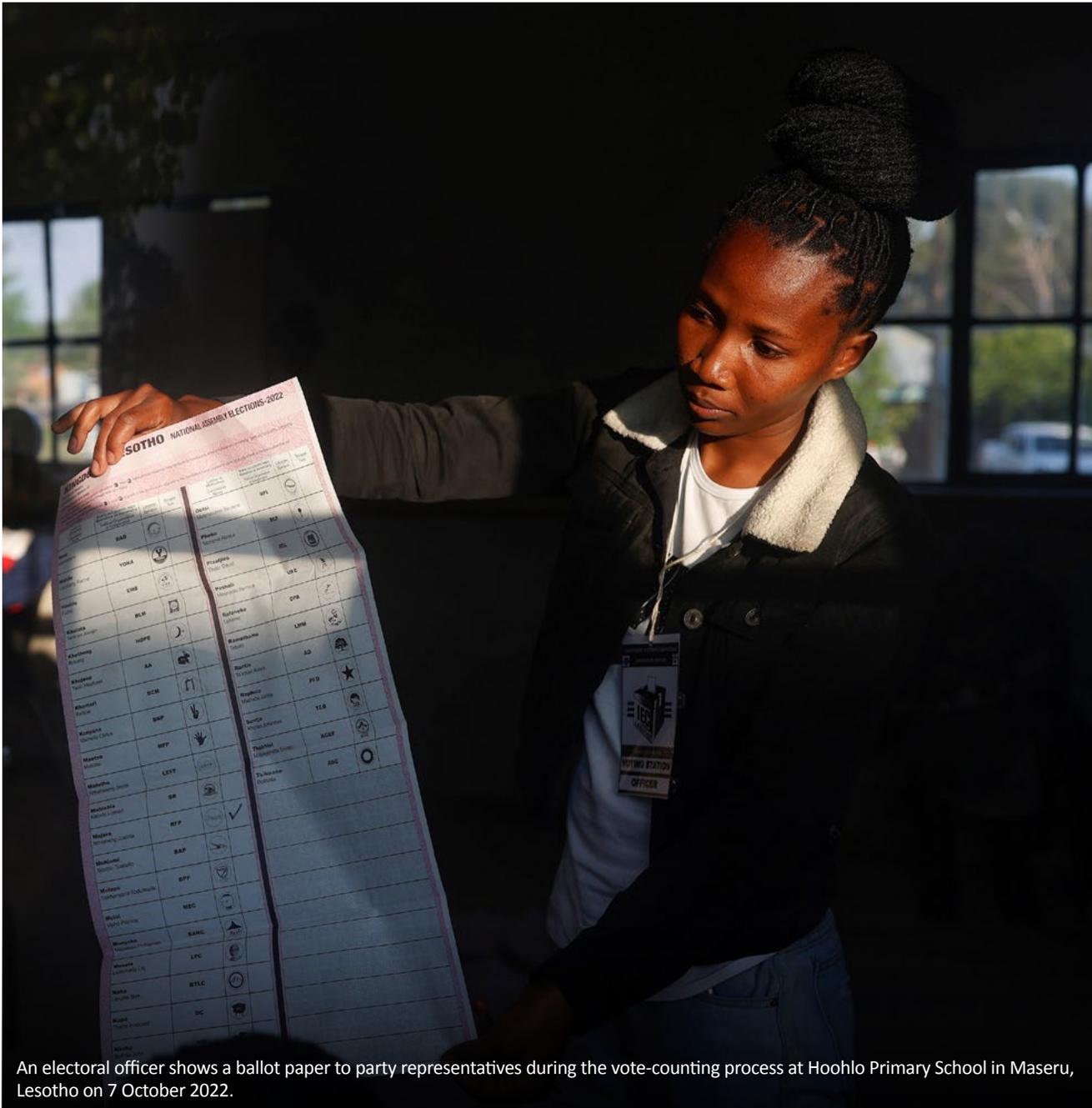
HONDURAS: THE END OF A CYCLE?

Halfway through 2022, Gustavo Petro was inaugurated as Colombia's first-ever leftist president, and Afro-Colombian environmental activist Francia Márquez became the first Black female vice president. Their victory spoke to the demands of the **protest movement** that has mobilised for change since November 2019.

“For the great expectations it has created not to wane, Petro's government will need to score some early victories, showing progress in advancing the peace process and decreasing the number of assassinations of social leaders.”



GINA ROMERO
RedLad



An electoral officer shows a ballot paper to party representatives during the vote-counting process at Hoohlo Primary School in Maseru, Lesotho on 7 October 2022.

Photo by Phill Magakoe/Gallo Images



COLOMBIA'S HISTORIC LEFT TURN

INCUMBENTS REJECTED

Countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Honduras, where governments promising to advance social justice came to power, weren't the only places where incumbents were rejected. Change also came in Costa Rica, where the April presidential election gave unexpected victory to an outsider, Rodrigo Chaves, who ran on an anti-corruption platform with a populist narrative attacking 'the corrupt political class'. The election was characterised by an apathy not even a close run-off contest could overcome.



COSTA RICA AT THE POLLS: VOTING OR GAMBLING?

Costa Rica exemplified a broader trend. In multiple countries people are deeply disenchanted with the performance of successive governments of various political colours. Some are expressing their disaffection by staying away from the polls, while others are abandoning their traditional political identities, eager to try anything new that promises to overcome failure. As a result, votes become increasingly fragmented, small changes in preferences can result in big shifts, election results become unpredictable and new political forces can emerge seemingly overnight.

This was seen in Lesotho, where the October election was won by a new party, Revolution for Prosperity, led by an outsider, business tycoon Sam Matekane. Change was born out of frustration with a political system marked by internal strife, dysfunction and failure to tackle deep economic and social problems. But now the new prime minister will have to prove that his move into politics was motivated by something other than his business interests.

One of the expectations voters place on political parties is that they will work on improving service delivery. Lesotho also has high rates of unemployment and widespread problems of gender-based violence and crime that people hope will be addressed by the new government."

 **LIBAKISO MATLHO**
Women and Law in Southern Africa, Lesotho



As elections increasingly resemble a game of chance, outcomes such as Chaves's victory are far from the worst possible: in Costa Rica, fundamentalist anti-rights forces are waiting in the wings. Public disaffection with the latest incumbents could catapult them to power. In Malaysia, a hard-line Islamist party gathered momentum at the last election and could stand to benefit from further disenchantment. The experience of several European countries has shown how easily disillusionment can be capitalised by deeply regressive forces.

Election winners should understand that their victories may have less to do with what they offer than with rejection of incumbents. As the new incumbents, they should be mindful that voters will judge them the same way. They must work to deliver on their promises while keeping in mind that no election gives a mandate to monopolise power: election winners have a duty both to those who voted for them and those who didn't, and must uphold and enable the democratic institutions and processes that brought them to power and could potentially result in their eviction.

3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 Free and fair elections are a vital component of democracy. To ensure elections accurately reflect voters' wishes, national and international civil society groups should work together to monitor elections and expose any wrongdoing.
- 2 A healthy civic space is the bedrock of a proper democracy. Civil society should work to defend civic space and checks and balances on political power. In doing so civil society will both prevent the erosion of democracy from within by democratically elected leaders and help preserve the conditions for civil society's existence.
- 3 Political shifts can bring both challenges and opportunities. When progressive political changes happen, civil society must help hold political leaders accountable for their promises, while guarding against the prospect of regressive backlash.



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