



### Endurance of Democracies

**The only sure bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over the government.**

*-Franklin D. Roosevelt*

Words very aptly put by Roosevelt about the proper working of a democracy. This sentiment has been echoed by numerous statesmen, philosophers, and scholars who have elaborated on the fundamental principles of a democratic nation. However, pinpointing the reasons behind a democracy's enduring success and prosperity over time remains a challenging task. Scholars agree that a literate population, minimal wealth inequality, universal franchise, transparent governance, a free press, and an independent judiciary are essential for protecting democratic values. Various global indices, such as the World Justice Project- Rule of Law Index, Reporters Without Borders-Press Freedom Index, and the Gini Index, attempt to quantify these parameters.

The index for World Justice Project and Rule of Law in democracies measures the strength of the judiciary and the legal framework in a country. The Reporters Without Borders measures the freedom of press in a country. The Gini index measures the inequality prevalent in countries of the world. Yet, despite their accuracy, these indices fail to fully capture the complexities of democracy or predict potential democratic backsliding. This is because they focus on individual aspects, whereas democracy is the culmination of how well these components function together.

Even the Democracy Index, which assesses the quality of democracy, has its limitations. A country ranked lower on these indices may, in reality, exhibit a more robust democratic system than one ranked higher. Conversely, nations touted as beacons of democracy may experience concerning incidents. Ultimately, the true test of a democracy and its strength lies in its people's ability to

ensure peaceful transfer of power through fair and just elections. This is the most crucial evidence that democracy is thriving in a country.

One of the most significant threats to a democracy is the rise of ambitious military leadership. Numerous countries that attempted to establish robust democratic foundations have fallen victim to military coups. A closer examination of these nations reveals common factors that contributed to these undemocratic takeovers. Firstly, these countries are often smaller in size, making it easier for an overambitious general to mobilize the military and its garrisons to support a coup d'état. In larger countries, such a feat is more challenging due to the sheer scale of the military system. Secondly, these nations often exhibit a tendency for civil administrations to rely heavily on the military for civic engagements, rather than other institutions like law enforcement agencies. Additionally, the role of civil society is typically limited in these countries. Lastly, elected representatives frequently involve military generals in political decision-making, and also intervene in promotions and appointments of military leadership, often bypassing established military norms laid out for such decisions. This is a critical factor in the erosion of democratic systems, as it creates an environment conducive to military overreach and undermines the democratic process.

A disturbing trend is emerging, threatening the future of democracy in the world. Political families are increasingly promoting their progeny and relatives to enter politics; leading to a dynastic stranglehold on power at all levels - national, state, and local. Although this phenomenon is most prevalent in South Asia, even advanced democracies like the United States are not immune to its influence. This trend undermines the infusion of fresh talent into the political system, leading to a dearth of capable leaders.

Many experts link democratic sustainability to economic progress and reduced inequalities as there are numerous examples of third world democracies ultimately succumbing to dictatorship. Here again there are notable exceptions like India- a country that has consistently defied this notion. Despite ranking 136th in nominal per capita GDP and 108th in Gini coefficient (2022), indicating significant inequalities, India has demonstrated robust democratic resilience. The 2024 general elections showcased a balanced mandate, curbing the ruling party's dominance and strengthening the opposition.

Strong institutions are often considered the bedrock of democracies, but even countries with exemplary political institutions can face challenges. The January 6th, 2021, US Capitol insurrection, for instance, put American democracy to the test. Fortunately, the US has emerged wiser and continues to be a beacon for democracies globally. This highlights that strong institutions alone do not guarantee enduring of democracies; other factors, such as citizen engagement and political behaviour and will, also play a crucial role.

At the core of every citizen lies a fundamental desire to have a say in choosing their leader, a trait that distinguishes humans from other animals. When this democratic process is undermined, threats to democracy emerge. A recent example of democratic backsliding occurred in France, one of the world's most progressive democracies. In the 2024 elections for the 17th National Assembly, the French electorate was poised to exercise their franchise on June 30 and July 7. The first round saw the right leaning and nationalist party RN and other nationalist candidates lead with 33.21% of the votes, followed by the leftist New Popular Front (NFP) with 28.14%, the pro- President Macron Ensemble with 21.28%, and LR candidates with 6.57% of votes. The elections also witnessed a record-high 66.7% turnout of voters.

However, in a surprising turn of events, before the final round of voting began the 134 NFP and 82 Ensemble candidates withdrew from the runoff despite qualifying, aiming to prevent the RN from securing an absolute majority. This move, by parties of left leaning ideologies and yet nurturing historical animosity amongst themselves, resulted in a hung parliament, with no party reaching the required 289 seats. The NFP won 180 seats, Ensemble secured 159, RN-supported candidates took 142, and LR candidates won 39. This engineered outcome exemplifies democratic backsliding, where rival parties manipulated the election from a three-way contest to a two-bloc showdown, culminating in a political crisis in France. The country is yet to decide on a working Prime Minister with the incumbent Gabriel Attal being asked to continue as a caretaker PM by President Macron so that a modicum of democratic stability is maintained.

The severity of the situation became apparent when a coordinated sabotage of the French railway system, coinciding with the start of the Paris Olympics 2024 on 26<sup>th</sup> July, brought the country to a standstill. Investigations suggest ultra-left groups, with sympathizers within the NFP, may have been responsible. This incident highlights how countries can lose their democratic resilience due to the short sightedness of political leadership.

Numerous examples of democratic aberrations can be observed in the daily lives of democratic nations, posing a significant threat to the system. Yet, despite these challenges, the democratic framework remains resilient in most countries. The United States, for instance, faced its most severe test during the Civil War, which pushed its fledgling democracy to the brink. However, the nation's emergence from this crisis, though scarred and bruised, can be attributed to the exceptional leadership that followed. This leadership effectively guided the country out of the depths of turmoil and restored stability.

The key to a democracy's survival lies in its strong foundations and the unwavering commitment of its citizens to uphold the principles and values enshrined in its constitution and envisioned by its founding fathers. This collective dedication serves as the bedrock for democracies to endure, even in the face of adversity. It is the minimum requirement for democracies to not only survive but also thrive.