

Is democracy not worth dying for?

The Sydney Festival of Dangerous Ideas hosted a discussion on the state of democracy in an era of political turmoil.

NEHAD KENANIE and OLGA YOLDI report.

In a world seemingly on the brink of democratic decline, the Sydney Festival of Dangerous Ideas – founded to encourage debate and critical thinking – hosted a thought-provoking panel discussion on the state of democracy. Chaired by ABC journalist Geraldine Doogue, it featured prominent international writers such as: Russian-born journalist, author and translator, Masha Gessen; historian and author, Paul Ham; and David Runciman, journalist and author. They delved into the complexities and contradictions of a system that has long been lauded as the pinnacle of governance.

Former US president Abraham Lincoln’s enduring definition of democracy as “a government of the people, by the people, for the people” has echoed through history, inspiring generations to strive for a just and equitable society. For the past two centuries, democracy has been hailed as the ideal form of government, a beacon of hope in a world often marred by tyranny and oppression. In the 1990s, this optimism reached fever pitch, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of democratic movements around the globe fuelled the belief that democracy would usher in a new era of peace, prosperity, and human rights.

The US State Department, in its 1999 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, went so far as to identify democracy and human rights as a third “universal language”. That report envisioned the building of a universal network of human rights actors becoming “an international civil society that would support democracy worldwide and promote the standards embodied in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights”.

However, with the Middle East in turmoil and widespread poverty in many democratic countries, there is a perception that democracy is under threat. There are 73 democracies in the world, yet according to the Bertelsmann Foundation’s latest report, there is a global shift away from democratic governance, exacerbated by recent geopolitical events. There is also widespread disillusionment, among young people in particular. Democracy is now contracting in every region in the world.

But what has caused this shift? English philosopher, academic and podcaster David Runciman, a former Cambridge University professor of politics and author of six books, said the biggest threat is that our



democracies are quite tired. “We rely on a range of institutions to keep them functioning, but we don’t reform or change those institutions, we just keep going through the motions, trying to squeeze a challenging democratic future through a set of institutions that have been around in mature democracies for 200, 100 or 50 years,” he said. “We don’t change the way we do it. We just keep swapping the politicians in and out in the hope we’ll find the one that knows how to make democracy work.”

Masha Gessen noted that there are places where people are dying for democracy, such as Ukraine, a country that was in the process of inventing itself as a democracy when attacked by Russia. She noted that while people are dying for democracy, we rarely have a clear view of the threat.

“When we talk about Ukraine for example, it is clear to me what Ukrainians mean by ‘democracy,’” Gessen said. “It is a dream. I think democracy is always a dream. The question we have to ask ourselves is, are we getting any closer to the dream? Or are we retreating from it? I believe in the US we retreated from it, certainly under Trump we did. But that retreat has been

happening for most of the last half-century at least.

“We are never going to achieve that dream. I think the founding fathers were not really committed to it and created a set of institutions that have made it very difficult for the United States to achieve that dream. America’s reluctance to reform or even question the democratic institutions is contributing to the retreat from that dream, as is the growing movement toward Originalism [interpretation of the Constitution on the original understanding at the time of its adoption] that crosses party lines in ways that we don’t always perceive.”

For Ham, the biggest threats to democracy are complacency, corruption, bribery and ignorance. In his view, the problem is that over the past 100 years, democracy has been a victim of its success, rather than its failures, because it has been almost too successful in the 20th century. “Democracy started off in 1900 ... the most democratic nation at that time was Germany as it extended suffrage to all men and developed a prototype of a welfare state to represent workers,” he said.

“It may be a dream but there are values wrapped in democracy, such as universal suffrage, equality before



Masha Gessen



Paul Ham



David Runciman

the law, freedom of speech and expression and freedom to worship, that we should cherish. It is complacency that is crippling us.” The problem is not so much democracy but the will of the people, Ham said, so the world needs to keep working at it.

There is no doubt that without the rule of law, the right economic and social policies and basic freedoms, democracy won’t work. According to Ham, democracy is delivering in its essentials, but it’s not delivering in the policies. “It is the policies that have let many people down. In the last 50 years democracy has not worked for most people and we have seen a divide between the rich and poor and that to me is the real crisis we face. We see this in Britain and in the US. The public believes the democratic ideal is not delivering.”

Runciman reminded the audience democracy is a relatively new political system, only 200 years old or, in many nations, 50 or less. “There may be some complacency, but there’s a lot we could still do. If we think this is the limit of democracy, we’re kidding ourselves,” he said. “A political system that’s been around for 50 years might have another 50 years of life left in it. It is very unlikely we are at the beginning of a very

long story. We may be in the middle of it. If so, we may be talking about a few more decades until democracy shifts into a different mode.

“The challenge is that we still think we have to keep doing it the same way and squeeze democracy through elections. I’m keen on elections. I think democracy without elections is a terrible idea and doesn’t work. But we are so fixated on elections, on getting a new leader as the means by which we will reinvigorate democracy, rather than thinking about the different ways citizens might be involved in different kinds of decision making, different ways of organising political parties, information, or political financing. We are stuck in this narrow window. All people want to know is who is going to win the next election. That is too thin a version of democracy.”

Yet, people are willing to risk their lives for democracy. Gessen mentioned two freedom fighters, Russians Vladimir Kara Murza and Alexei Navalny. Dissident, historian, politician and author Kara Murza, Putin’s most vocal critic, was held in solitary confinement in a high-security jail after receiving a 25-year sentence on charges of high treason, but was freed in the

biggest prisoner swap since the Cold War. However, Kara Murza has vowed to return to Russia soon, putting at risk his life again.

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny is another example of someone who was prepared to die for democracy after surviving an assassination attempt. “Navalny thought that he had a fighting chance of outliving Putinism and was hoping to outlive prison, that’s also true of Kara Murza,” Gessen said. “They consciously stayed in Russia knowing they would be imprisoned in the hopes that even if their chances were much worse than 50-50, they might still be alive in prison. I admire it. I don’t aspire to it though.” All those who knew and loved Navalny tried to convince him to stay outside the country, but he decided to go back to Russia knowing he would be imprisoned.

“When people are forced into exile their life’s work is taken away from them ... I was raised in and around dissident circles in Russia who believed that you don’t die for democracy. If you are threatened, you have the option of leaving the country. Nothing is worth dying for. You will be more useful alive than dead. That is the peacetime paradigm. You can say to a totalitarian regime: ‘I am not engaging with you on these life and death terms. I am going to go into exile and try to do something from there,’” As a journalist, Gessen spent many years covering the rise of totalitarian rule in Russia, and is the author of 11 books, among these are National Book Award recipient, *The Future of History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. Following the lives of four people after the fall of the Soviet Union in the early years of democracy, Gessen describes how they navigate a regime that will eventually crush them with the re-emergence of the old Soviet order, which has been described as “a mafia state”.

In *Surviving Autocracy and the Ministry of Truth* Gessen analyses the democratic decline of the US, particularly during President Trump’s first term. A transformation took place within a few years from a “people who saw themselves as a nation of immigrants to a populace haggling over a border wall and run to a

degraded sense of truth, meaning and possibility.”

Gessen highlighted the inadequacy of language in the face of rapid change and deterioration of rules: “We don’t have a way of doing politics if we don’t have a language for doing politics. But when language is degraded as it was in Russia under the totalitarian regime, and again with Donald Trump during his presidency, we lose the only tools we have for creating politics.”

The writer noted that under Putin, government officials were using the language of western liberal democracies, describing this as problematic enough when applied to western liberal democracies, but hugely problematic when applied to a country such as Russia

that was just emerging from an era of totalitarianism. “All you could write about was things that weren’t in place, like freedom of speech, or free and fair elections.”

“In my book *Surviving Autocracy* I wrote about the confusion, the political mess the Western media found itself in. How should they have described Trump? The words they used normalised and legitimised him. They used words like policy or diplomacy to describe what he was doing, but in fact it had nothing to do with either policy or diplomacy. As a result, these words became

degraded and some degree of normalisation happened.”

There was consensus among the speakers that the lack of reform of our democratic system and institutions presents a major obstacle in the face of rapid social, economic and technological change. Even as societies are in constant transformation, the political system has remained unchanged. “In Britain,” Runciman said, “elections sometimes feel as they were held 400 years ago – same party, same electoral system, same unreformed House of Lords. They were promising to reform it in 1918, and here we are, they haven’t quite got around to it yet. So, it seems like there’s a mismatch here between the pace of change, the possibilities, the experimentalism of our lives and the stagnation of the political system.

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— Masha Gessen

Democracy is a government of the
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- *Abraham Lincoln*



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sorts of crazy stuff and our politics have shrunk to a narrower and narrower space. We've got to open it up. It doesn't mean we have to die for democracy, but we've got to open it up."

Yes, but how? In his view, the problem is that in a representative democracy, the basic principle is that someone else does it for you and then you judge whether or not you're happy with it. There are a hundred different ways citizens could be consulted and have an input into the way their lives are lived, locally and nationally.

He suggested one way to increase participation in democracy could be through modern technology, the internet. "The internet revolution was going to be transformative in terms of democracy ... Part of the reason is we really haven't tried the democratic potential of a technology that puts the power in the hands of citizens to express themselves ... It turns out the people who are incentivised to use the technology to improve their political prospects are the autocrats."

According to Gessen, autocrats succeed because they're addressing very real anxieties, talking to people who feel uncertain and dislocated. "We are living through a period of mass dislocation, mass displacement, as described by Hannah Arendt when she wrote in the 1930s –homelessness on an unprecedented scale, ruthlessness ... We are living through a time that lends itself to autocratic leaders."

There was consensus that online politics requires effort and consistent engagement. It is hard work, as Runciman said: "It takes a lot to ask a citizen to trawl through the online records of their local council to work out which politician is doing a good or bad job"

So, more power needs to be placed in the hands of citizens. Runciman said that even in democratic societies such as the UK and Australia, there is a division between the general population and the activists or the people who are interested in politics. "[The activists will] do it without being required to do it. And to be frank, the majority won't. And that is a big divide and one that skillful politicians must work out how to bridge."

For all its challenges, problems and limitations, said Ham, democracy is still the best political system in the worst of situations. "The election of our leaders is an incredibly rejuvenating process. It injects new blood into the system. You only have to look at Britain at the end of 14 years of conservative rule to see the sclerotic, corrupt and divisive government that was in power and had to be thrown out and now we have new blood.

"I think we long for absolutes, perfection and utopias

when democracy is a muddled-through process. And that may not be satisfying for many of us but if we've got other things in our lives – love, friendship and family – we can make do with democracy. I think it is a work in progress with endless refinements."

Will democracy survive? The past year was critical for democracy – in 2024 many countries voted for a new government. The outcome of these elections will have a profound impact on the future of democracy, shaping whether it thrives or withers. For many democracies the biggest challenge may be how to build democratic resilience in the face of increasing threats and challenges. Observers says this will require innovative approaches to decision-making to empower citizens to have a greater say in the governance of communities and the world. The fate of democracy hangs in the balance and the choices we make today will determine its future. R

2024: A defining year for democracy



It was described as the largest election year in history when 70 countries, containing more than half of the world's population, held national elections for an estimated 2 billion eligible voters.

They included the most heavily populated, fragile and authoritarian states in many regions of the world. *Time* magazine proclaimed it a “make-or-break year for democracy”.

These elections also tested the strengths and weaknesses of global democracy. Analysis of the International IDEA's voter turnout database shows that on average, voter turnout rose for the first time in almost 20 years.

In many countries the campaign debates centred on immigration reform, inflation and cost-of-living pressures. The question of what should be done about the Russian invasion of Ukraine was hotly debated,

creating ideological divisions within parties. Support for Ukraine diminished among right-wing parties, while the Israel-Hamas war generated tensions within the ideological left, according to the Pew Research Centre.

Of the 70 countries, half experienced a change in government, a new leader and sometimes an inconclusive result. The most high-profile was the US election. Most commentators say inflation shaped voting, as a high cost of living affects everyone across the globe in all constituencies. Inflation drove voters to punish their leaders, whether they were of the Left or Right. As a result, many incumbent governments lost power. New leaders were elected in Indonesia (from two new candidates), Pakistan, the United Kingdom and US, and weaker performances were registered by the ruling parties in France, Japan, India

and South Africa, with two exceptions being Mexico and Ireland – which both experienced positive economic performance relative to other nations.

“Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 incumbents have been removed from office in 40 of 54 elections in Western democracies,” said Steen Levitsky, a political scientist at Harvard University. According to Vision of Humanity, a platform developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the world’s economies have been marked by persistent inflationary pressures and uneven recovery from the pandemic: “Many countries have experienced sustained high inflation rates eroding purchasing power, causing wage stagnation, increased wealth inequality and challenges in housing affordability and job market stability. These economic strains have directly translated into voter dissatisfaction, with citizens demanding concrete solutions from their political leadership.”

Discontent about political systems, growing intolerance for perceived corruption and administrative inefficiency also influenced how people voted. “There is an overall sense of frustration with political elites, viewing them as out of touch, that cuts across ideological lines,” says Richard Wike, director of Global Attitudes Research at the Pew Research Centre. He noted that a Pew poll of 24 countries found that the appeal of democracy itself was slipping, as voters reported increasing economic distress and a sense that no political faction truly represented them.

According to Professor VEDI Hadiz, director of the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, all major Western democracies have experienced democratic backsliding that includes the rise of right-wing populations, anti-immigration sentiment and the decline of the welfare state. “One needs to be careful about saying that people have given up on democracy, but I think they have less expectations of what it can deliver,” Hadiz said. He noted that the creeping influence of billionaires in government and on the electoral process itself was felt strongly by voters, from India to Thailand to the US. He added that plutocrats could be a powerful force in engendering apathy towards democracy.

Another trend during 2024 was the rising incidence of election interference and disinformation campaigns. “It is well known that cyber-attacks and information influence operations by authoritarian states, particularly Russia, China and Iran, have become a major threat to election integrity across democracies,” writes Niranjana Sahoo on the

Democracy without Borders site “The good thing, however, was that election management institutions and tech platforms were able to find solutions to reduce the extent of disruptions from foreign actors and their manipulative tools.”

If 2024 was a defining year for democracy, what is the state of global democracy in 2025 following the election marathon? Not enough research has been conducted or data compiled yet. However, each year the Economic Intelligence Unit of *The Economist* grades 167 countries and territories on a 10-point scale according to the strength of their democratic practices. Its latest report, *The 2024 Democracy Index*, shed some light on where things stand.

It says the global Democracy Index score has fallen from 5.52 in 2006 to an historic low of 5.17 in 2024, when 130 countries of the total 167 covered by the index either registered a decline in their score or made no improvement.

As many as 60 countries are now classified as “authoritarian regimes” and more than a third (39.2 per cent) of the world’s population live under authoritarian rule.

The report says no country improved its position by more than half a point. Western Europe remains the most democratic place on Earth, with Turkey considered a hybrid regime. The US continues to be classified as a “flawed democracy” ranking 28th. Nordic countries continue to dominate the Democracy Index ranking, with New Zealand claiming second place and Switzerland moving up to fifth. Australia is ranked 11th. Norway retains its position as the world’s most democratic country for the 16th year in a row. France was downgraded from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy” in 2024 as was South Korea, while Portugal, Estonia and the Czech Republic were upgraded to “full democracies”.

Afghanistan continues at the bottom for a third consecutive year. The scores of every other region declined, sub-Saharan Africa dropping to its lowest since the index began in 2006 and Latin America also declined.

While the 2024 elections may have redefined the political landscape, democracy is not being written off. “Democracies are under stress, but they are not about to buckle,” write Jason Browlee and Kenny Miao in the *Journal of Democracy*. “The erosion of the norms and other woes do not spell democratic collapse. With incredibly few exceptions, affluent democracies will endure, no matter the schemes of would-be autocrats.” R