



More Troubled Democracies, More Determined Freedom Fighters: A Concerted Global Effort Toward Exposing Autocratic Regimes

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Abstract

There is currently a great deal of relative inequality and a lack of liberties for individuals residing in troubled democracies and authoritarian regimes. The entire democratic governance ecosystem is under pressure, including crucial components like civil society, independent media, and the rule of law. Given this dire situation, people in these countries often face oppressive and sometimes life-threatening circumstances. The deliberate use of antidemocratic tactics by a wide range of internal and external contexts and actors tends to be eroding democratic institutions in many countries and thereby enhancing the triumphalism of authoritarian regimes. However, there appears to be a correlative relationship between the increase in troubled democracies or authoritarian regimes across the globe and the growing number of determined freedom fighters, who strive to protect democracy and ensure that citizens' right to freedom is respected. The article reviews this global trend within the context of the 2023 Oslo Freedom Forum (OFF) which offers varied thematic panel discussions, action-oriented workshops, art exhibitions, and theatre lectures around issues of freedom, human rights, and democracy for its participants worldwide.



“Those who fall asleep in a democracy might wake up in a dictatorship”

- Otto Gritschneider

1.0 Introduction

The theme of the 15th edition of the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2023 is "Celebrating Solidarity" to underscore the enduring alliances, partnerships, and support for human rights and democracy activists since the forum was initiated in 2009. It features insightful commentary from renowned academics, thought leaders, journalists, political dissidents, change agents, artists, technologists, security specialists, and a number of activists. The forum undoubtedly offers a distinctive global platform for people and organizations wanting to contribute to the burgeoning struggle against tyranny. It is organized into a variety of thematic panel discussions, action-oriented workshops, art exhibitions, theatre lectures, and live music performances, among others.

Being an internationally recognized conference for democracy and human rights, the Oslo Freedom Forum (OFF) has continually strived to amplify the voices of courageous dissidents while equally exposing the threats to liberal democracy across the globe. As a result, many people look forward to this annual event for the special networking opportunities, rich empirical revelations (on a variety of issues), and innovative solutions it offers with a view to promoting human rights and democracy in their countries as well as creating freedom movements and exposing injustice wherever it occurs.

The 2023 OFF draws representatives from various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Communities working on peace, freedom, human rights, and democracy issues. This is because civil society organizations and frontline human rights defenders often seize the opportunity to expand their collaborative reach through strategic engagements and efforts to raise awareness about what they do or events in their countries. The African Media Association, Malta (AMAM), which is supported by SOS Malta through the *Iceland-Liechtenstein-Norway Active Citizens Fund*, is a participant at this year's forum. During the conference, AMAM has the exceptional opportunity to participate in the complete series of interactive



sessions, stage talks, and other relevant dialogues as a recognized member of the media.

Speakers for the 2023 Oslo Freedom Forum include *Francis Fukuyama*, a renowned scholar and author, *Gulbahar Haitiwaji*, a Survivor of a Chinese concentration camp, *Philippa Thomas*, an international journalist and academic known for her high-profile career with the BBC, *Víctor Navarro*, a Venezuelan journalist, human rights activist, and former political prisoner, *Lisa Yasko*, a member of Ukraine's Parliament, *Mzwandile Masuku*, a Swazi Human Rights lawyer, *Nazanin Boniadi*, a British actress and activist, *Toribia Lero Quispe*, a Bolivian politician and activist for indigenous rights and democracy, *Abraham Jiménez Enoa*, a freelance Cuban journalist, *Pastor Seungeun Kim*, a prominent human rights advocate and the head of Caleb Mission in South Korea, among many others.

2.0 Freedom endangered; democracy imperilled: The stubborn realities

From Myanmar to Venezuela, from Libya to Nicaragua, from Uganda to Bangladesh, from Brazil to Turkey, from Cuba to Sudan, and from Russia to Eritrea, the struggle for freedom and democracy has grown increasingly precarious. Though almost all these countries claim their regimes are “democratic,” on the basis of the periodic elections they hold, they are variously referred to as “electoral autocracy” or “flawed democracy”. It suffices to note that democracy and rights-based governance are “under both literal and figurative assault” (Casas-Zamora, 2022) around the world. Democracies are trapped in a cycle of setbacks and partial recoveries (Csaky, 2021), as various authoritarian and autocratic powers equally contend for control with West Asia and North Africa as the “most authoritarian region in the world” (International IDEA, 2022). Whereas there is little agreement regarding the occurrence of democratic backsliding and its causes, extant literature often mentions how political instability, lack of adherence to democratic principles, and economic hardship, among other variables, have continually troubled many democracies.

There is currently a great deal of relative inequality and a lack of liberties for individuals residing in troubled democracies and authoritarian regimes. The entire democratic governance ecosystem is under pressure (Berthin, 2022), including crucial components like civil society, independent media, and the rule of law. Given this dire situation, people in these countries frequently face oppressive and



sometimes life-threatening circumstances, while in some countries, citizens are subject to unjust laws and a variety of other abuses of power that rob them of their rights and freedoms. Thus, among many pertinent issues generating diverse interests and conclusions, there is a strong consensus among the 2023 OFF participants that democracies are under stress across the globe and need a concerted action of individuals, movements, institutions, and all supporters of liberal democracy to restore its health.

Statistically, nearly one in five democracies have witnessed a gradual erosion in its quality over the past decade (BTI 2022), while some democracies that appeared to be doing well have encountered censorship problems, endangering their fundamental foundation. The health of democracy is often measured on the basis of political participation, the electoral process and pluralism, democratic political culture and civil liberties, and the functioning of government (The Economist, 2023) among other indices. The deliberate use of antidemocratic tactics by a wide range of internal and external contexts and actors appears to be eroding democratic institutions in many countries and thereby enhancing the triumphalism of authoritarian regimes as evidenced by sham elections, weakened democratic checks and balances, high levels of inequality, and enfeebled rule of law.

One of the keynote speakers, Francis Fukuyama, admits that Western liberalism, which essentially protects diversity and acknowledges equal dignity of every human being, has really been under serious attack in recent times. Despite an end of systemic ideological competition that Fukuyama's seminal article, "The End of History and The Last Man", had predicted 34 years ago, liberal democracies "are challenged on two parallel fronts: by a new, self-confident form of authoritarianism; and by Islamic fundamentalism" (Fücks, 2015). One is not sure if the distinguished scholar subscribes to the notion that such unpleasant development evokes claims of democracy's inherent inferiority, fuels distrust and leads to widespread suspicions about democracy as the best form of government or undermines its much-celebrated values.

What is not in contention, however, is that democratic setbacks, even without forceful authoritarian takeovers or coup d'états as we have in a few African countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Mali), are becoming more prevalent in established democracies- from 13 countries in 2002 to 42 countries in 2022 (Papada et al, 2023). In recent years therefore, more countries are autocratizing (42 countries which account for 43% of the world's population, mostly economically



powerful, influential regional and global powers) than democratizing (14 countries which account for only 3% of the world's population), as revealed in the 2022 Democracy Report.

Today, there are compelling strategies such as toxic levels of polarization, repression of civil society organizations, disinformation, and media censorship as well as FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt), being employed by contemporary autocratic powers to erode the foundations of democracy. Consequently, the import of authoritarian resurgence is better acknowledged in the 5.7 billion people (72 percent of the world's population), who live under authoritarian rule or 2.2 billion people (28 percent of the world's population) who live in closed autocracies (Papada et al, 2023), signifying more troubles for democracies across the globe with grave implications for the cause of human freedom, consensus-based governance, and democratic institutions.

Expectantly, support for democratic institutions and practices, citizen-centred and inclusive governance in both emerging and long-standing democracies may translate into more organised networks against illiberal actors, authoritarian foes as well as "other actors who are willing to trample democratic principles in the pursuit of power" (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021). Human rights advocates have always adopted a variety of effective strategies, not only to reverse existing negative political developments but also to increase citizen engagement in achieving the ultimate goals of such struggles. This is true even though corrupt elites and authoritarian rulers continuously mount pressure on democratic principles, reinforcing deep-seated decades of ideological antagonism. Nevertheless, more strategic, and long-lasting alliances will be necessary to reverse the rapidly declining quality of democracy and confront autocratic laws, and as Marianne Borgen, the Mayor of Oslo, emphasized, "We can only do this in solidarity with all those who oppose authoritarian regimes."

3.0 Emerging concerns and essential takeaways

One of the essential takeaways from the Oslo Freedom Forum is that over thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which symbolized the triumph of democracy, this system of government is currently entangled in perennial blatant attacks. Assumptions about the future trajectory of liberal democracy have been challenged by emboldened autocrats and burgeoning populists, both in countries where it has yet to thrive and those where it appeared to be firmly established. Thus, for



numerous critical intellectuals, independent media, civil society and democracy defenders, the ongoing tensions between democratic countries and autocratic ones continually serve as a reminder of the Cold War. Today, the degree of contentment with democracy differs considerably between and even within countries. For instance, people's assessments of how well democracy functions vary greatly, considering their partisan affiliations and economic beliefs.

Another takeaway is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the long-term decline in global freedom, democratic recession (stagnations, breakdowns, erosions) or the deepening of democratic culture or coordinated struggle against authoritarian foes and state-sanctioned human rights violations. Nevertheless, informed, and active citizenry, dogged civil society organisations as well as independent media are regarded as key pillars for the advancement of universal human rights. In pursuing this, liberal democracy is also considered a necessary foundation, particularly in how the global fate of freedom is shaped. Diverse roadmaps to reversing the deterioration of democratic norms and institutions or building democratic resilience must be given serious consideration including global leadership and solidarity from democratic states. As earlier pointed out, there are many interesting sessions at the Oslo Freedom Forum on a variety of pressing issues affecting the human rights and democracy community. In the next section, this essay highlights four abridged thematic areas for further analysis with a view to offering new insights into the state of global freedom, human rights, and democracy.

3.1 The relationship between artificial intelligence and authoritarianism

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been used and can be used to fuel authoritarianism given the potential of AI systems to enable authoritarian regimes to increase their ability to control and manipulate their citizens, target, and monitor dissidents, implement harsh punishments, and create a digital surveillance and population control system. The role that private companies, governments, and non-state actors play in this regard, surely has implications for democracy, human rights, and freedom in terms of increased surveillance, interference with civil rights, and manipulation of information.

With specific reference to China, panellists at the Oslo Freedom Forum contend that AI is being increasingly employed by the Chinese authorities to promote their



agenda, both domestically and internationally. In recent years, Chinese companies have invested heavily in AI research and development, leveraging the country's vast population of tech-savvy citizens to become the world's pre-eminent AI hub. Given how Russia, China and Iran, among other states, use “cyber techniques to thwart dissidents and opponents of their own regimes” (Hynes, 2021), this suggests that AI is likely to become an increasingly powerful tool in the coming years, as its use becomes more widespread, and its capabilities become more sophisticated.

It is argued however, that progress (that technological advancement symbolises) cannot be stopped, but people can control and apply technology for positive results, at least, making it “difficult for oppressive regimes to cover up violations and misdeeds” (Dobson, 2013). In this regard, the international community must act if it wishes to protect human rights and civil liberties not only in China but in the totality of an increasingly authoritarian political landscape.

3.2 The interface of corrupt networks, modern slavery, and human rights defenders

The linkages between contemporary forms of slavery (domestic slavery, involuntary servitude, forced labour, organ harvesting, sexual slavery, human trafficking) and corrupt networks have been established. Corruption facilitates organized crime and plays a determinant role as an enabler or a root cause of modern slavery and other forms of exploitation because it creates the environment of impunity required for modern slavery facilitators to prey on vulnerable people on a massive scale (UNDP 2021). Modern slavery is the world's third most profitable criminal enterprise (United Nations University, 2022) behind illegal drugs and arms, generating US\$ 150bn annually (Beaver, 2016) more than one-third of which (\$46.9bn) is generated in developed countries. It has emerged in virtually all regions of the world having an estimated 50 million people (UNDP 2021) trapped in various forms of modern slavery, with the largest estimated numbers of people in ten countries- India, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Türkiye, Bangladesh, and the United States (Walk Free, 2023).

Through the control and delivery of individuals for labour, the recruitment business continues to maintain the conditions for exploitation. This is facilitated and thrives on corrupt practices involving immigration officers, local law enforcement, traffickers, and other interested government officials and actors (Baudelaire, 2015) within the supply chain which varies in scale and complexity. It is revealed, for



instance, that countries with high levels of official corruption tend to make the least effort to fight human trafficking (Zhang and Pineda, 2008). Thus, calls for the establishment of a tough enforcement mechanism to combat global corruption and dismantle human trafficking's linkages to the corrupt system have been prominent in the last decade.

While certain actors, institutions, and organizations create and perpetuate these networks that allow for or even explicitly facilitate the exploitation of vulnerable populations in varied forms of contemporary slavery, human rights defenders are also attempting to break these systems through anti-trafficking and anti-corruption activities. Therefore, modern slavery and its related systems of oppression tend to further energise human rights activists and gender advocates. Having realised the centrality of corruption to this criminal enterprise, they clamour for the enthronement of the rule of law, due process, transparency, and accountability in their countries and how policies and strategies to combat such practices can be formulated by appropriate authorities. The emphasis has often been on how businesses and organizations may adopt a due diligence strategy, ensuring that high standards for human rights and environmental protection are met in global supply chains, especially in countries where various legal frameworks have been put in place

The current status of modern slavery and corruption is gradually being exposed through media documentaries, anecdotal stories as well as several news reports, periodic monitoring reviews by international organizations. These reports usually provide details of current statistics in combating modern slavery and lessons learned, sharing best practices in protective measures for civil society activists, media practitioners, and whistle-blowers who are engaged in the fight against corruption. Activists have also criticized governments for their lax implementation of laws against modern slavery and asked for streamlining the legal system to increase the conviction rate. Having identified corruption among a wide range of individual, family, community, and structural factors that drive modern slavery, human rights advocates can adopt an approach that identifies the nexus of these factors, prioritises synergy with other antislavery actors, identifies new policies and initiatives that can fit into the effective implementation of existing international frameworks.

Future studies can further unravel other entrenched ways in which the global spread of corrupt practices interacts with various forms of exploitation and how such practices can be expunged from business relationships and transactions, thereby



facilitating an enabling climate to combat modern slavery. Similarly, based on new research findings, emerging trends, patterns, and challenges around antislavery across geographic and sectoral contexts- “conflict and humanitarian crisis, supply chains, migration, and the rule of law and governance” (OECD, 2019)- can be identified and contextually responsive solutions developed.

3.3 Peaceful resistance and grassroots alliance against modern dictators

Since 2010, about 7,000 protests have erupted in 153 countries (Haddad, 2021) across all regions of the world, in every form of political context and in a variety of regime types with 13% having more than 10,000 participants, challenging “fundamental policies or structures of power” (Carothers and Youngs, 2015), with profound outcomes in many countries. Triggered by numerous motivations with diverse tactics, the protest wave has been a combination of violent and nonviolent approaches but with one common goal: meaningful change.

Nonviolent civil resistance- variously tagged unarmed struggle, nonviolent action, or people power, constitutes 90 % (Haddad, 2021) of these protests, strikes, and demonstrations. In a world where digital media and online platforms are becoming more pervasive, freedom fighters, human rights defenders, the independent media, civil society organisations, and democracy activists are taking advantage of these resources. These platforms are utilised to better engage citizens, hold those in power accountable for their actions, challenge the more oppressive forms of government, and ultimately create opportunities for transformational political change by bringing political power closer to the people, as they anticipate a new era of democratic politics. Through structured international collaboration and new global alliances, a world that is more peaceful, democratic, and resilient can be created.

Given its capabilities, networks and knowledge, a strong civil society is much desirable as a driving force in countries where democracy is under pressure, particularly where human rights challenges are prevalent. As observed in Brazil, South Korea and Kenya, pro-democracy movements can, through protracted civil resistance campaigns and consistent struggles, with grassroots embeddedness, pressure autocratic governments to initiate democratic reforms (Zunes, 2022). During such struggles, pro-democracy activists influence the mindset of the people towards their goals. In some other countries of recent, such as Sudan, Ghana,



Eswatini, and Libya, the legitimacy and authority of governments have been challenged with varied successes (International IDEA, 2022). In similar other political entities where rights are denied or threatened by oppressive rule, such campaigns have also exposed the atrocities of autocratic rulers.

In addition to promoting the rule of law, human rights and democratic development as well as acting as a catalyst or a watchdog for the authorities, civil society organisations can also mobilise and organise broad grassroots alliances among various sectors of the population in their countries, coalescing the activities of youth groups, human rights defenders, women associations, trade union representatives, journalists, and bloggers. In essence, one of the approaches to advance the cause of liberty and combat authoritarian threats in many countries is through the promotion of economic, social, political, and cultural rights.

3.4 Financial freedom for democracy movements and human rights defenders

Since 2002, at least 21 countries have imposed limits on foreign funding of democracy-related initiatives, focusing in particular on assistance to civil society (CSIS, 2021). Repressive regimes cite this support as evidence that democracy advocates are foreign agents or spies undermining national security since civil society organizations mostly rely on foreign donor assistance to carry out their democratic activities. Consequently, in countries under authoritarian regimes and other forms of hostile and unpredictable environments, providing financial assistance for frontline activists, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations has been a consistent subject on the global democracy promotion agenda.

Paradoxically, however, according to Cheeseman et al (2022), 79 percent of aid funds by pro-democracy governments went to autocracies in 2019 as against 64% in 2010. This calls to question the existing methods and strategies being employed by Western governments in either engaging with authoritarian states or measures geared towards democracy strengthening. Reasons adduced to the growing authoritarian aid recipients worldwide include the success of their development



models¹ as exemplified in countries such as Rwanda and China, tolerance of authoritarian regimes by pro-democracy governments based on reduction in the level of corruption, and how autocrats now select from a wide range of partnerships “that require them to implement the least threatening set of political reforms” (Cheeseman and Desrosiers, 2023). However, beyond aid funds and requirements for engagement or disbursement, the Oslo Freedom Forum mainly focuses on how independent journalists, human rights advocates, and democracy movements around the world use decentralized communications tools, privacy technology, and Bitcoin in their work as an alternative to existing systems.

The fight for democracy requires that human rights defenders carry out their work by communicating digitally and storing information in a secure manner with a view to reducing threats and mitigating the impact of potential attacks across the digital ecosystem. While advocating for the respect of people’s rights and freedoms, documenting human rights violations, seeking remedies for victims, particularly in the way societies, businesses, and governments interact with individuals, and in funding protests against authoritarian governments, human rights defenders are also acquiring knowledge in Bitcoin technology as a tool against dictatorships.

Even countries considered relatively democratic such as India, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Kenya, Peru, Honduras, and Bangladesh have all made attempts at limiting external resources and support for civil society organizations, “depicting such aid as foreign political meddling” (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). It is in this regard that Bitcoin, despite the lingering controversy and scandal that surrounds it, has been acclaimed as a libertarian landmark given how it eliminates dependency on a third party as users are accorded full control of their money and relieved of governmental oppression (Cox, 2013). Given the tendency of autocrats to freeze or loot activists’ bank accounts, raising funds through cryptocurrency is described as one of the most democratic tools to “shift money away from the government’s control” (Posch, 2022) and secure their money from confiscation.

¹ Joseph Siegle (2006) argues that authoritarian governments tend to grow their economies more rapidly even with meager institutional, human, and financial capacity. Spared of unlimited circles of participatory dialogue and buy-in as well as the distractions of periodic elections, they can unwaveringly carry out a consistent, long-term development vision while keeping down wages, generating more savings, and creating an alluring investment climate. He however concludes that such cases should not be supported as a governance prototype for other developing countries to emulate.



4.0 More freedom fighters, more lessons to learn

There appears to be a correlative relationship between the increase in troubled democracies or authoritarian regimes across the globe and the growing number of determined freedom fighters, who strive to protect democracy and ensure that citizens' right to freedom is respected. A significant representative of this beleaguered community- young persons, women, men and LGBTQIA+- at the Oslo Freedom Forum attests to this fact, showcasing how the actions of certain human rights activists, and civil society leaders have brought about greater freedom and equality in some countries, and how their work can be replicated or further enhanced in other countries.

The anonymous whistle-blower of brutal conditions for migrant labourers in Qatar. The survivor of solitary confinement in Nicaragua. The elegiac narration of a close friend and colleague of the late Al Jazeera Palestinian-American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh. The chilling account of survivors of China's genocide and eyewitnesses to the camps. The serial persecution of women's rights, and pro-democracy advocates from Bolivia. The arbitrarily detained journalist from Venezuela. And many more. Their stories encapsulate the resilience of freedom fighters and pro-democracy activists across regions and political systems. It is a lesson of determination, courage, and compassion in the face of incredibly challenging circumstances, unimaginable adversity, and other harsh realities of authoritarianism. A stark reminder of the common brutal strategies of dictators; the global battle between liberty and repression and a mix of tears, joys, and blood in the tortuous journey toward anticipated freedom.

Another point of convergence is the reality that freedom and human rights are vital for the progress of any society or country. Citizens are unable to reach their full potential in an environment devoid of these democratic values. Additionally, without freedom and human rights, individuals cannot develop and practice their beliefs, cultures, and other values. Of importance, however, is the willingness of activists to forge ahead in the face of serious abuses, including mass arrests and protracted incarceration, beatings, torture, and other forms of threat to life, in many countries. This lingering struggle has received substantial scholarly attention in recent years. The solidarity of international rights organisations such as the Human Rights Foundation (HRF) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) to expose and document these atrocities is equally public knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial to encourage and assist individuals, organizations, and countries as they strive to promote freedom



and human rights. The significance of educating and empowering the people of these countries to better understand their role in creating a more free and equitable society must be emphasized at every stage of the struggle.

5.0 Conclusion

It goes without saying that the liberal order that emerged after World War II is in danger. If decisive and united action is not taken, the world's democracies may very well face an existential threat in the years to come. The African Media Association considers the 15th Oslo Freedom Forum significant at this moment when we plan to empirically examine the normative framework that might ensure the political inclusion of migrants in Malta's decision-making processes. Like many European countries, Malta's laws and regulations do not favour migrant political engagement, particularly when it comes to voting and running for office. For instance, third-country nationals who are long-term residents in Malta have never been allowed to participate in elections.

We strongly believe that democracy thrives through the diversity and active engagement of all citizens, and to function properly and engender social inclusion, it must engage all members of the political community through deliberate political action. Our participation at the Oslo Freedom Forum has further equipped us with the contemporary advocacy strategies to investigate the ways in which the voices of migrants (constituting 22 percent of the population in Malta, for instance) can be amplified, and how to meaningfully engage the government with a view to fostering a vibrant and inclusive democracy. In other climes (emerging democracies) such engagements can, in the long run, enhance conditions conducive to democratic consolidation if political actors imbibe the responsibility to implement policies that protect democratic practices. It suffices that even in the face of adversity, democracy is still an attainable goal and that freedom fighters, with a commitment to shared values and international solidarity by democratic societies, must remain determined to achieve it.

No doubt, meeting with people who work on human rights and democracy issues across the globe has a unique way of stimulating logical inquiry, activating multiple advocacy strategies, and effective mitigating mechanisms, and providing practical solutions to nutty ideas around the subject matter. This is what the 2023 Oslo Freedom Forum has offered. Based on comparative analysis, the conference's panel discussions and other interactive sessions readily provide an intellectual hub to



learn about the values that can be entrenched to foster democratic ownership, expose threats to liberal democracy and promote the rule of law. For AMAM, this forum provides innovative ideas on how to create and disseminate knowledge around the subject in the course of our advocacy and research endeavours as it will enhance our capacity to address the gap between policies and practices in the context of democracy and human rights in Malta, particularly as they affect African migrants.



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