

Democracy Under Threat: Imperfect, Yet Irreplaceable

By Mobeen Ajaib

Around the world, democracy is under siege. From the deserts of the Sahel to the streets of Washington, from New Delhi's corridors to Europe's parliaments, humanity's boldest promise faces its greatest test in generations.

According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024*, the global average score fell to **5.17**, marking the lowest point since the index began in 2006. The decline was widespread—**130 out of 167 countries** registered either deterioration or no improvement in their democratic performance. The report shows that **45% of the world's population** now lives under some form of democracy (full or flawed), while **39.2%** live under authoritarian rule. Within these categories, only **6.6%** of the global population enjoys life in a full democracy, whereas **38.4%** live in flawed democracies and **15.7%** in hybrid regimes. This historic low underscores how polarization, conflict, and disinformation are steadily eroding the foundations of freedom and accountability worldwide.

Yet here lies the paradox: democracy may be slow, messy, and imperfect, but it remains the only system that can **correct itself, redistribute power peacefully, and give citizens a voice**. Every alternative — whether military rule, populist authoritarianism, or technocratic control — collapses under its own weight. Democracies, despite their flaws, foster innovation, accountability, and inclusive growth; they lead in long-term economic performance, human development, and equality.

In the past five years, coups and populism have rolled back decades of democratic progress. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Gabon have all fallen to juntas since 2020, citing corruption and insecurity — yet delivering deeper instability and isolation. In Asia, Myanmar's 2021 coup crushed a decade of reform, while Afghanistan's democratic experiment ended with the Taliban's return.

Even mature democracies are wobbling. In the United States, the 2021 Capitol attack and ongoing polarization under the 2025 Trump administration continue to test institutional resilience. Across Europe, far-right populism is resurgent — from Hungary and Poland to France and Germany — and the 2024 EU elections saw nationalist parties gain ground. Latin America mirrors this unease: Venezuela's 2024 disputed elections and El Salvador's slide into authoritarianism reveal how the promise of “order” can hollow out liberty.

The *Global State of Democracy 2025* report warns of a world drifting toward repression — but the story isn't only decline.

Even amid turbulence, democracy's resilience endures:

- **Ghana** continues to hold free, peaceful elections — most recently in 2024 — proving that African democracies can thrive when citizens guard their institutions.
- **South Korea**, once under military rule, now stands among the world's most transparent and innovative societies, sustained by civic activism and a free press.
- **Chile's** citizen-led constitutional reform and peaceful protests show that democracy can heal and reinvent itself.
- **Poland's** 2023 election ousted an illiberal government and restored judicial independence — a powerful reminder that voters can reverse backsliding.

- **Brazil's** 2022–23 transition survived unrest and disinformation, affirming judicial strength and the sanctity of the vote.
- **Senegal's** 2024 youth-led mobilization forced a fair election and peaceful transition, keeping Africa's democratic pulse alive.

These examples show that democracy's strength lies not in perfection but **persistence** — its capacity to adapt, self-correct, and empower citizens to reclaim the narrative.

Why, then, do people lose faith? Because democracy demands patience. Citizens facing economic hardship and insecurity crave quick fixes, which authoritarian leaders eagerly promise. But history is clear: **strength without justice is oppression**, and **order without accountability is decay**.

Autocracies appear efficient — until they implode. The Soviet Union's collapse, China's mounting censorship and economic slowdown, and Africa's faltering juntas all prove that control cannot replace consent.

Democracy's genius lies in its humility. It allows dissent, embraces imperfection, and evolves through participation. Empirical evidence shows democracies are less likely to wage war, more transparent in crises, and better equipped to tackle climate change and pandemics.

But belief alone is not enough — defense is required. New threats like AI-driven disinformation, cyber manipulation, and hybrid warfare target trust itself. Protecting democracy means strengthening civic education, supporting free media, and defending truth in an age of digital deceit.

The survival of democracy depends on active citizens: **every vote cast, every protest voiced, every truth spoken**. Journalists, teachers, judges, and civil society leaders must form democracy's living defense line. And democratic nations must back movements — not merely governments — that keep freedom alive.

Democracy is fragile, noisy, and slow — but it is the only system built to serve, not subdue. Its adaptability makes it humanity's best hope in an age of uncertainty. As the world toys with the illusion of “strongmen,” we must remember: dictatorship may deliver order, but democracy delivers **dignity**.

In Churchill's timeless words, “*Democracy is the worst form of government — except for all the others that have been tried.*” And in this turbulent century, that truth has never been more urgent.

About the Author

Mobeen Ajaib is a humanitarian and development leader with over 18 years of experience across Africa and Asia. She champions governance reform, localization, and feminist leadership in the development and humanitarian sectors. Passionate about inclusion and social justice, she writes about democracy, gender equality, and the moral foundations of global leadership.