

PARTNER CONTENT

A very big year for democracy



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All illustrations: Nzilani Simu

Democracy is having a moment

But it's not all going exactly to plan. Let's fix that – and recognise the people on the front lines of the fight for a brighter democratic future.

This year has been a big year for democracy – perhaps the biggest ever, with elections in 64 countries around the world. More than two billion people will have voted, representing a staggering 49% of the world's population. That's more ballot papers printed, checked, cast, and counted this year than ever before in history.

So, democracy is thriving, right?

It's complicated.

In October, general elections in two southern African nations showed both the promise and the perils that come with exercising one's democratic rights.

For nearly six decades, ever since it became independent, Botswana has been ruled by a single party, which won every general election in the country's post-independence history. Until now. In a result that shocked pollsters and political analysts – and even some voters, who now realise the scale of their power – a newly-formed opposition group won a resounding victory at the polls. The people had spoken, and the incumbent president conceded within hours.

In Mozambique, meanwhile, deadly protests are still raging after the announcement of the results of the presidential election in early October. The official tally gave the ruling party – which has governed the country, uninterrupted,

since independence in 1975 – more than 70% of the vote. Both opposition parties and civil society groups have cried foul, alleging widespread vote rigging, but protests have been brutally suppressed. At least 24 civilians have been killed by security forces during the unrest. The result prompted a front cover in this very newspaper which proclaimed, "Nothing is harder than voting out the liberators."

Getting democracy right

Maria Ressa, the Filipino journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, says 2024 "is a tipping point year for democracy". She chairs the steering committee of the World Movement for Democracy, which this year hosts its biannual Global Assembly in Johannesburg. "We meet in South Africa in November to find hope and strength, learn from each other, and build the future we want," says Ressa.

South Africa is a fitting location: the country is celebrating 30 years of multiracial democracy, and had its own elections this year, resulting in a government of national unity.

More than 500 delegates from nearly 100 countries will gather at the assembly to examine how democracy is evolving to meet the challenges, and the opportunities, of the 21st century. It is one of the largest-ever gatherings of pro-

democracy movements from around the world.

Over three days, diverse leaders from civil society, politics, labour, business, media, and academia will try to understand what went right in Botswana, and what went wrong in Mozambique. They will do so in the aftermath of a hard-fought election in one of the world's largest and oldest democracies, the United States. They will grapple with the rise of authoritarian governments, the disorienting influence of dramatic technology-driven change in societies, and the impact of the manipulation of information on electoral processes. They will celebrate each other's successes, commiserate over setbacks, and learn from each other, even as they share war stories – quite literally, in the cases of some of the honourees of this year's Democracy Courage Tributes.

Studies in courage

The Global Assembly will hand out four of these prestigious awards this year. The Democracy Courage Tributes recognise movements that have dedicated themselves to keeping the democratic flame burning – often at great personal risk.

Ukrainian civil society is honoured for its “extraordinary ability to organise and mobilise support from partners at home and abroad” amid Russia's full-scale invasion of the country, which is now in its third year. “We have lost colleagues in this war, some on the front line, others while doing their job duties. The thought of them is what keeps us going,” said

Anastasia Rudenko, the editor-in-chief of *Rubryka*, a Ukrainian news outlet dedicated to solutions journalism.

The work of Rudenko, along with PEN Ukraine's Tetyana Teren and Olga Myrovych from the Lviv Media Forum, has played a vital role in strengthening the democratic institutions that Ukraine has been building since independence in 1991 – and safeguarding those same institutions from any potential backsliding during Russia's brutal aggression, which the country and its civil society continue to resist.

Similarly, in Palestine, there are independent Palestinian civil society movements who are laying the foundations today for a democratic, prosperous future. One of them is led by Omar Shaban, the founder of PalThink for Strategic Studies, an independent non-profit think tank. Even as the war intensified – and family members, colleagues, and students were killed around them – PalThink has remained on the ground in Gaza. Shaban is determined to provide the next generation of leaders with the democratic tools they will need to begin the long and difficult process of reconstructing their country and building democratic institutions.

Despite the devastation that he has lived through, Shaban has not lost hope. “Nothing compares to Gaza. I am Palestinian. It is a beautiful country. We may not have gas or oil, but we have our people. They are intelligent and talented, we have everything to build our country. We just need the opportunity.”

Holding onto hope, in the face of enormous adversity, defines the work of the LGBTQIA+ rights movement in Uganda. Last year, the Ugandan government introduced one of the world's harshest laws against the LGBTQIA+ community, including the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality". Even advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights was criminalised.

This did not stop Clare Byarugaba, Richard Lusimbo, and Pepe Onziema from mobilising in support of the community, under the banner of Convening for Equality, a civil society coalition. Together, they are contesting the false narrative that homosexuality is a "colonial import", and document human rights abuses and support the health and financial needs of their communities.

"The reason I stay is because those leading the fight against us want us to leave. They want to make our lives so unbearable that we leave," said Byarugaba. "If being unapologetic and visible makes even one person feel okay, then for me that is a win."

This year's final Democracy Courage

Tribute goes to the pro-democracy movement in Venezuela. As a culmination of its long-standing and courageous commitment to democracy, in July 2024, this movement secured a critical victory for democracy in the Venezuelan general election, according to all independent observers. Impressively, democratic forces were able to demonstrate their win by documenting the results. Yet, despite the significant voter participation and the well-documented results obtained by the efforts of organised civil society, the regime-controlled electoral commission declared incumbent Nicolás Maduro as the winner. This might very well be the best-documented electoral fraud case ever.

Since the election, more than 2,000 activists have been arrested. Nonetheless, pro-democracy campaigners – who have already been fighting this fight for two decades – continue to do the difficult, dangerous work of exposing the Maduro regime's authoritarian nature, and documenting human rights abuses and corruption. ■

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THE BIG PICTURE

Hotbed of democracy: When the world thinks about the Sahel, it tends to focus on its unrest and upheaval. But this year, Mauritania calmly re-elected its president in elections widely considered free and fair.

Photo: John Wessels/AFP



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