



SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY 2023

Vision & Policy Recommendations

The strength of people is what makes a democracy thrive. The building blocks of a robust democracy are the people who work, every day, to bolster and improve it.

We live in a world in which authoritarianism is on the rise and democracies are backsliding. For many partners of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), their lived experiences are all too often pushed to the margins of society. They include genocide survivors, human rights defenders, stateless people, the LGBTQI+ community, Indigenous people, the small farmer or landless worker, the ethnic or religious minority member, the democracy activist and journalist. Their experiences, lessons and input offer the best litmus test to determine whether democracy is thriving. And it is their leadership and example that can offer the path forward to a more rights-based democratic future.

The second Summit for Democracy in March 2023 offers a unique opportunity for states and civil society to convene to re-envision democracy in a way that truly works for everyone. We also believe it must offer a platform — the first of many more — for marginalized voices to be at the forefront of efforts to design a better, inclusive, responsive and just form of democratic governance that can be sustained long into the future.

This policy paper seeks to describe:

- (1) the ways in which marginalized communities, activists and journalists are being disproportionately harmed by the surge in democratic backsliding and authoritarianism, and;
- (2) how, in many of these countries, these groups are often among the few voices actively seeking to keep democracy alive.

This paper offers four specific recommendations for the United States government as the original host of the Summit for Democracy, and an additional five recommendations for pledges by all of the Summit's participants, including the United States. **At its core, AJWS seeks to secure a more prominent role for the voices of marginalized communities, pro-democracy activists and journalists.**

AJWS's Vision for Democracy

The history of democracy has never been one of full inclusion: Groups including women; ethnic, racial, religious, sexual and gender minorities; and economically disadvantaged communities have all too often experienced discrimination and exclusion from participation, voting and other democratic rights. Through a history of hard-fought activism, the circle to whom democratic rights fully applied was expanded both in the U.S. and around the globe. Still, democratic rights are not able to be fully enjoyed by everyone. Often marginalized communities are scapegoated, discriminated against or attacked by political figures, not only in the leadup to elections, but also in the daily democratic practice—and this scapegoating regularly paves the way for further backsliding and dismantling of democratic norms and structures, which affect the entire society. Structural issues, such as growing economic inequality, along with the plague of corruption which diminishes state coffers, further exacerbate the challenges for marginalized people to meaningfully participate in or benefit from democracy. Now, in the current context where democracy is declining globally, the circle of those that are included in democracy and able to fully exercise democratic rights is shrinking again, including through the curtailing of voting rights and state-sanctioned attacks that cause people to flee their homelands.

AJWS's vision of democracy seeks to remedy this legacy of exclusion by ensuring that all people—especially the most marginalized, their allies and other defenders of democracy who are also often persecuted—experience the rights, protections and benefits of democratic inclusion and participation, and secure meaningful justice when those rights have been violated. At the core of this vision of democracy is the need to (re)construct strong state institutions that are transparent, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all people. Coordinated efforts to reduce economic inequality, including through inclusive development approaches, must be a priority.

We understand “marginalized communities” to mean those communities who are systematically excluded, face daily discrimination and/or experience disproportionate barriers to receiving services, enjoying rights and/or accessing positions of power. Marginalized communities are often on the front lines of the climate crisis, disproportionately affected by its impacts and subsequent humanitarian crisis. All too often, governments use these humanitarian crises to further crack down on the rights of these communities. Additionally, we recognize that those who seek to champion the rights of marginalized communities, and those who defend democratic rights, are also regularly attacked. These groups include journalists and pro-democracy and other rights-based activists, many of whom also come from marginalized communities themselves. In our view, it is only through the full participation and inclusion of all these groups that a society can become entirely whole and healthy. And it is only through incorporating, listening and fully welcoming the parts of a polity that have been excluded, rejected or repressed that a society can hope to operate at its full capacity — and hence be able to transform itself in a powerful and truly democratic way that is just, fair and equal.

Impact of Democratic Backsliding and Rising Authoritarianism on the Most Marginalized

AJWS works in 17 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. For more than three decades, we have repeatedly seen how marginalized communities — especially those standing up to defend their democratic rights — have often been the first ones to suffer from democratic backsliding or outright lapses into authoritarianism. Their experiences also regularly warn of greater democratic decline or mass abuse in the future. Common examples of democratic exclusion, abuse and backlash against marginalized communities often take the form of scapegoating and discrimination; land and resource grabbing; and violence, repression and expulsion.

Scapegoating and Discrimination Against Minorities and Other Marginalized Groups

Scapegoating and repression of already marginalized groups is not only a characteristic of backsliding democracies and authoritarian governments, but a central function of it. Politicians and other powerful people use often-public marginalization efforts to consolidate power,

create a false sense of unity in a majority population and, as a political tactic, to create an ostracized “other” to blame for society’s “problems,” often at little political cost and to presage further democratic backsliding.

In the Dominican Republic, for example, governments throughout recent history have scapegoated Haitian migrants for the country’s lack of social advancement, despite extraordinary economic growth. In 2021, the current government tightened immigration controls and limited access to public hospitals to undocumented people, often targeting pregnant Haitian women for deportation as they sought health care. They did so as part of a widely publicized campaign intended to blame these Haitian women for the failures of the chronically underfunded Dominican public health system. At the same time, the government abolished programs that created legal pathways for migration for Haitians, ending programs for university students and workers who had legally obtained documentation entitling them to study and work in the country. Following these extraordinary measures, the government began a public campaign of mass deportations of Haitian migrants, also detaining and deporting dark-skinned Dominicans and stateless Dominicans of Haitian descent entitled to special protections under Dominican law.

The Dominican government argues that irregular Haitian migration is a national security issue, as Haiti reels from a crisis in governance and gang violence. However, migration experts and human rights activists argue that the government’s measures do nothing to reduce irregular migration, since nearly all the people who are deported have lived and worked in the Dominican Republic for most of their lives. They see these public smear campaigns as a way of stirring up fear of a “Haitian invasion,” continuing a history of discrimination against Haitian migrants and their descendants as “the enemy next door.” These experts and activists also see these actions as an effort to consolidate political power for the current government in the leadup to the 2024 elections — and to distract the public from the failure of the current government to invest adequately in its own public health system.

Land and Resource Grabs, Especially from Indigenous or Ethnic Communities

Backsliding democracies and autocratic governments are often characterized by land and resource grabs, usually at the expense of Indigenous communities who have long stewarded the land, water and natural resources. Often, such governments have been captured by an economic

and/or corrupt elite who consistently disregard, if not attack outright, those who are multiply marginalized — usually along ethnic and economic lines. Such brazen resource grabs are enabled through systematic impunity and disregard for laws, policies and legal rulings, including in many countries that have codified the customary rights of Indigenous communities. These resource grabs then undermine the very hallmarks of a democracy: respect for indigenous and minority rights; laws that are designed to treat people equally, fairly and with recourse to justice; and a fair and just distribution of resources among the population that is respectful of traditional ownership.

In Kenya, for example, the Ogiek (an Indigenous people) have been historical inhabitants of the Mau Forest for millennia. Beginning in colonial times, the government has been appropriating their traditional territories for revenue (from timber), conservation or resettling other ethnic groups (most often from numerically larger populations) whose own lands have been grabbed for infrastructure or megaproject development. The displacement is magnified at politically sensitive junctures such as elections, when the political elite often grab more land to reward the majority ethnic groups that support them.

Violence, Repression and Expulsion

In countries that are sliding out of democracy or have already become authoritarian, the leadup to elections is a particularly dangerous time for marginalized communities and democracy activists. Pro-democracy actors often risk physical attack or mass violence and imprisonment and are sometimes forced to flee their own country.

For example, in Nicaragua, the mass protests in 2018 against President Daniel Ortega's increasingly authoritarian rule resulted in a widespread and systematic attack on protesters and civilians, amounting to crimes against humanity. This also led to the shutdown of media outlets, the harassment of journalists and the jailing and mistreatment of political prisoners — ranging from farmers, feminists and students to activists considered to be Ortega's political rivals. The elections Ortega later organized in 2021 were derided by the U.S. Secretary of State as a "sham," with nearly all members of the opposition locked up in jail. In February 2023, 222 political prisoners were freed and sent to the United States — only to have their nationality stripped by the Nicaraguan government. A good 10 percent of the nation's six million-person population have fled the country, a number which could keep rising as Ortega continues to consolidate power and crack down on the population. Facing a perilous and traumatic journey,

Nicaraguans fleeing both violence and economic collapse at home are increasingly rejected at international borders by the same governments (including the U.S.) that sanctioned the authoritarian rule of Ortega, despite evidence of the country's violent retreat from democracy.

Yet Marginalized Communities Offer the Keys to a More Democratic Future

Despite suffering disproportionately from democratic decline and authoritarianism, marginalized communities are often at the forefront of efforts to offer innovative solutions and alternative ways forward. For example:

Haiti is in a state of extreme democratic crisis and ongoing instability. An ineffective and illegitimate government is in power after former President Jovenel Moise was assassinated in July 2021. Constitutional terms of all elected officials have now expired with no realistic prospects for elections in sight. Gangs control large swaths of the country, spreading terror through random kidnappings for ransom, staging violent confrontations with police and blocking supplies of gas, food and water for Haitians across the country. Yet civil society — including youth groups, small farmers' movements, women's collectives and human rights defenders, among others — have come together in a remarkably democratic process to offer a roadmap for a democratic future. This roadmap, called the Montana Accord, represents the sentiments of most Haitians across the country and includes plans for transparency, accountability and security that create a path toward viable elections.

In the wake of Burma's military coup of February 2021, ethnic minorities who have long been marginalized have been central in the resistance and in efforts to establish a genuine and inclusive democracy. Ethnic minority groups around the country have been crucial in working as part of the country's resistance government as it develops a vision and policies for a more democratic, inclusive and federalist future after the military is no longer in power. Many groups, including the Rohingya people who have suffered from ongoing ethnic violence and genocide, struggle to have their voices included in this democratic struggle. Still, this period of civil war and democratic backsliding has also coincided with the most promising vision for a democratic future in Burma. These activists need the support of the international community to turn their vision into a reality.

The international community, however, has not always supported domestic efforts to restore or strengthen democracy that are inclusive of marginalized communities.

This includes even those nations that espouse democracy as a central tenet of their foreign policy, like the United States. In the case of both Burma and Nicaragua, the U.S. has been largely supportive of efforts by civil society that seek to include marginalized perspectives. But in the case of Haiti, the U.S. government's response has been tepid at best, instead continuing to throw its weight behind Haiti's current government even as it has consistently demonstrated itself unable to deal with the country's current challenges.

The international community — and especially the United States — has tended to draw a stark line between supporting democracy abroad and dealing with the impacts of democracy gone awry as those impacts spill across borders. Specifically, the U.S. and others in the international community have failed to create policies and practices that (1) explicitly support rights-based approaches to migrants at its borders fleeing chaos, violence and repression; and (2) address, through collaboration with governments and civil society across borders, one of the primary root causes of mass migration, specifically democratic decline and authoritarianism. It is precisely

this porous nature of democratic backsliding and authoritarianism that needs to be most urgently addressed through collective foreign policy efforts — and in ways that do not punish the victims of democracy gone awry. Collective solutions need to be developed by states and civil society working together, based on the insights of those most affected and marginalized.

Working Together Toward a Renewed Vision for Democracy

In 2021, Summit government participants committed to advancing democracy with specific pledges, ranging from legal reform to combatting corruption to securing accountability and justice. In 2023, as states account for what they have done toward fulfilling their commitments, they must look at what they can do individually at home, as well as collectively at the international level, to remake democracy into a better system for all, especially the most marginalized. Following are the types of commitments we seek from the U. S. government, in collaboration with other states, during the 2023 Summit.

Recommendations for the United States Government

1. Together with other participating states, institute a regular schedule of Summits for Democracy: The United States and all participating states should work to create a sustainable way to have regular democracy summits with shared, rotating leadership for planning and hosting these convenings. Civil society—with particular focus on marginalized groups—should have an equal seat at the table to plan and implement future summits, and to continually assess with states the commitments and progress made toward achieving a more democratic future for all. A formal mechanism should be developed and funded to track implementation of commitments into the future.

2. Set up a civil society advisory council for the Summit for Democracy through a public-private partnership: At the Summit for Democracy, the United States, alongside its co-hosts and other like-minded states, should create an advisory council of civil society pro-democracy activists — from democracies and authoritarian states alike. A special focus should be placed on including representatives from highly marginalized communities (particularly women and young people within Indigenous communities, stateless groups, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ people and those

living and advocating for rights at the intersections of these identities). The council could work together with the U.S. and other states to develop:

- A root cause analysis of democracy's current failings and solutions to address them;
- A vision for a revitalized form of democracy that views elections as one indicator — but not as a replacement — of a truly inclusive, responsive and effective democracy;
- Ideas for collective action emerging from the Summit;
- Advice on the long-term implementation of democratic strategies that will center the experiences and insights of marginalized communities; and
- Conceptualization and agenda-setting for future Summits for Democracy.

3. Set up a pooled fund to support the civil society advisory council's work: The United States and like-minded countries — along with public and private philanthropies — should set up a pooled fund to support the participation of marginalized communities and other pro-democracy activists, as well as the projects emerging from this collective work. Such a fund could support efforts of civil society to conduct outreach

and engagement with their own communities to raise awareness of the Summit's goals, progress and outcomes; underwrite monitoring of Summit commitments to ensure states uphold their promises; and most important, support efforts emerging from the Summit designed to help democracy work for everyone, especially the most marginalized. Such a fund could be structured along the lines of the Global Equality Fund, which advances the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons in more than 90 countries. One option could be to set up the fund as an element of the public-private partnership outlined above, with civil society retaining a core and ongoing advisory role on how these funds should be allocated to advance the Summit's goals and outcomes.

4. Issue a joint statement with a renewed commitment to democracy that works for the most marginalized:

The United States should lead the generation of a joint statement to be issued at the end of the Summit and signed by all Summit participants — governments and civil society alike — that commits to a revitalized approach to democratic revival that is values-based and centers human rights. The statement would contain a call for a root cause analysis of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and the ills from which all democracies currently suffer. It would recognize the necessity of ensuring those most harmed by authoritarianism, as well as democracy's flaws, are given an equal seat at any decision-making table to envision a form of democracy that works for them, and commitments to realize this vision in practice.

Recommendations to All Participating States at the Summit for Democracy to Create the Following Pledges

1. Shore up domestic democratic practice and institutions:

Individual states must commit to shoring up their own domestic institutions to ensure that democracy can be meaningful to everyone, especially the most marginalized.

2. Consult regularly with civil society to inform foreign policy on support for democracy:

All states should commit to meet and meaningfully engage with civil society, on an ongoing basis, to inform their country's foreign policy priorities and policies.

3. Commit funds to pro-democracy actors working in authoritarian states and ones where democracy is backsliding:

States at the Summit should commit funds to support the democratic forces — social movements,

civil society groups, free media — to do their work as well as provide diplomatic backing to assist them if they are attacked.

4. Provide at least temporary sanctuary, through protected status or other immigration protections, to those migrants escaping authoritarianism and democratic backsliding:

To ensure that all those fleeing violence, conflict or war receive protection and safety, all states should recommit to adhering to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The international community also should continue to work collaboratively to address the root causes of displacement in unstable, conflict-affected and authoritarian states. All countries, including the U.S., should support those who have fled authoritarian regimes with equitable integration opportunities, and not return people to a country where their rights or safety will be at risk.

5. Collective commitments to reimagine foreign policy tools to address democratic failures and backsliding:

Civil society, journalists and activists most harmed by authoritarianism and democratic backsliding are best placed to generate ideas of what would help get democracy back on track. States could also see this commitment to re-envisioning a foreign policy toolkit as a core function of the public-private partnership suggested above. Such a toolbox could include:

- A recommitment to investing diplomatic resources — including through financial support or withdrawal of funds — to place pressure on governments that are not living up to a vision of democracy that is rights-based and equitable;
- Strategic use of key roles in international financial institutions to incentivize inclusive democratic practices and systems and to disincentivize anti-democratic practice;
- Recommendations for how international institutions could reform their rules and structures to be more responsive to and inclusive of civil society and marginalized communities. International institutions should look closely at and reform where needed their membership requirements and recognition rights to ensure they are effectively working to prevent and fight against authoritarian abuses or regimes that have expelled democratic governments or opposition parties;
- Political and financial support for civil society and media — especially pro-democracy movements, and the inclusion of the most marginalized in those movements;

- More coordinated and focused use of sanctions on individuals as well as companies that abuse democratic principles and rights;
- Coordinated sanctions and other mechanisms designed to punish and deter corrupt practices, especially for the plundering of public funds that may be transferred or laundered internationally;
- Rethinking migration policies to account for the root cause of democratic backsliding and authoritarianism that send people fleeing in the first place and designing a series of “carrots and sticks” to encourage home governments to restore democracy. ■

For more information or to speak with a member of the team or partner of AJWS, please contact **Ryan Mace, Senior Policy Advisor for Civil and Political Rights**, at rmace@ajws.org.

ABOUT AJWS Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Working with American Jews and clergy in the United States, the Advocacy and Jewish Engagement Team mobilizes American Jewish leadership in solidarity with our grassroots partners across the Global South. In Washington, D.C., we elevate the voices of our partners by advocating for policies that strengthen their efforts as they fight for human rights and combat injustice in their communities.