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# Youth to the Rescue:

What Kind of Democracy Do  
Young People in Africa, Asia  
and Europe Want?





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# Foreword from the Council of Europe

Democratic systems are facing challenges all over the world and it's never been more urgent to form a coordinated response, taking into account what citizens, and young people in particular, feel a proper 21st century democracy should look like.

As an organisation dedicated to upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law, we partnered with Debating Africa and Debating Europe to canvass the opinions of 150 young people from Africa, Asia and Europe via a series of focus groups, about the kind of democracy they want. The following report paints a picture of a youth fully aware of the challenges of its time. It illustrates that the strains on democracy are mutually felt, from the stagnation of living standards and the weakening of institutions to the corrosive effect of disinformation and the looming threat of polarisation and populism.

The focus groups unearthed varying, nuanced, region-specific perspectives underpinned by a common desire to live in peaceful and harmonious societies. Though participants were scathing in their criticisms of current systems, they saw a bright future for democracy if the necessary adaptations are made. For if democracy is the best path to the greatest good of all, we must be open to having our notions of what it means challenged. No demographic performs this function better than the youth, which is why strengthening mutual trust between young people and democratic institutions, notably through our Democracy here, Democracy now campaign, remains central to our work at the Council of Europe.

With the rise of the youth as a force for change, education and the ability to mobilise online will perhaps be their greatest weapon. They are ready with forward-thinking ideas and will need the support of policymakers, business leaders, communities, civil society and the international community at large. This forms part of our activities at the 10th World Forum for Democracy taking place in Strasbourg, France from 7-9 November 2022. As part of such event and our long-term work to contribute to healthier democracies, we will keep on exploring the contributing factors to democratic decline and charting the way forward in the interests of people across the world. Because what we continue to see through our work, and indeed in this report, is that the we can all be rescued only if we actively listen and work with youth.

# An Introduction to the Project



## **What kind of democracy do young people in Africa, Asia and Europe want?**

What are their concerns and hopes for the future of their societies, and how can theirs and other marginalised voices be heard?

Three decades ago, democracy seemed like the unassailable winner. The fall of the Berlin Wall had prompted the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of autocracy in many Eastern and Central European societies. The rise of India as a superpower, and growing economic freedoms in China, seemed to pave the way for a new era of global liberal democracy. Multiparty systems and movements to protect human rights were spreading in Africa.

But progress ground to a halt and a malaise set in. Now, democracy is in crisis. Some of Africa's fresh-faced democrats of the 1980s are still in power today. Contrary to liberal internationalist assumptions that a growing middle class would push for greater political freedoms, China's communist party has deepened its grip on every aspect of citizens' lives. India's ruling party has been described as an "electoral autocracy" by the Swedish-based V-Dem Institute. Populism has swept through Europe and several former communist states have slipped away from democracy. The world is suffering an epidemic of disinformation and people are increasingly dissatisfied with their elected representatives.

In the run-up to the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy (WFD) in November 2022, Debating Europe, together with its sister platform Debating Africa, asked 150 young people aged 18-35 from Africa, Asia, and Europe to reflect on these and other developments in the sessions.

African participants came from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Rwanda, Malawi, Ghana, and Cameroon; European participants came from Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the UK, the Netherlands, Czechia, and Ireland; Asian participants came from India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Through a series of questions, we uncovered their attitudes to democracy, ranging from how they feel about the current political situation in their country, to whether they trust politicians, what democracy should look like in the 21st century, and the practical action they envision to improve and strengthen it.



# About the Results in Brief

We asked participants questions designed to dig into their perception of democracy right now in their countries. Are democratic systems strong and healthy? Are politicians responding to the needs of the people? We then asked them to imagine better ways of fostering democracy. What reforms could protect their democracies? Might other forms of government work better?

African participants were, in general, pessimistic about the state of their democracies. They frequently stressed that democracy was part of a wider concept of wellbeing in society. It was fine while people were happy and prosperous, but if a democratic government consistently failed to fulfil the basic needs of its citizens, then the entire system would be in trouble. Some African participants openly wondered whether some societies would be better off without democracy at all.

Most Asian participants were broadly satisfied with their democracies – although several felt that their countries did not fit into accepted definitions of the word. Asian participants were the most strident in separating their institutions from their politicians. They were broadly positive about the institutions but extremely critical of those in power. They joined many of the African contributors in decrying widespread corruption among the political classes. There was a broad desire for politicians to listen to their voters and act in the interests of their countries rather than their bank balances.

In Europe, there was little optimism among participants that democracy would fare well in the next few years. Top of the European list of concerns were polarisation and populism. The participants felt social media was helping to drive a wedge between groups of people, and between citizens and politicians. European contributors often felt that education was the key – children should be taught civic education and ways to detect “fake news.” Voting and party systems could be tweaked to make them more responsive.

# Ten Key Ideas from Our 150 Participants

**1** **Involve young people in decision-making**  
Young people feel detached and excluded

**2** **Boost transparency to tackle corruption**  
Particularly among Asian and African participants, corruption is seen as ingrained

**3** **Politicians must compromise and cooperate**  
Polarisation is putting democracy in peril

**4** **Break out of political bubbles and echo chambers**  
Politicians need new ways to engage with their electorate

**5** **Civil rights and freedoms must be protected**  
Legal protections like free speech must be upheld more forcefully

**6** **Democratic institutions need political support**  
Attacks on the foundations of democracy must stop

**7** **Listen to voices on the margins**  
Marginalised groups should be better represented

**8** **Greater investment in civic education**  
Young people need to understand the power of the vote

**9** **Adopt new ways to participate**  
Democracies need to innovate to survive

**10** **Nobody is above the law**  
Leaders must abide by the law

# The Results in Depth

The focus group discussions were divided into two broad categories. For the first approach, participants were asked in a variety of ways to describe their systems as they are today. The second approach interrogated their hopes for the future and asked them what their ideal system would look like.

## What is the Current State of Democracy?

Participants were asked to assess and reflect on the state of democracy in their countries. The resulting discussions teased out nuanced views on the cultural underpinnings of democracy, the institutions that guarantee the system functions properly, and the personnel charged with representing the citizens. Many of the contributions were pessimistic, particularly about the performance of politicians and the diminishing authority of institutions. But there were shafts of light in the gloom. Where politicians were responsive and societies cohesive, participants saw a bright future for democracy.

### **POLARISATION HITS HARD, EVERYWHERE**

One phrase recurred frequently in the focus groups: echo chamber. Modern societies have become atomised, and people speak only to those who share their opinion, according to many of our participants. While social media was often blamed for exacerbating these divides, participants from some Africa countries also pointed to longstanding tribal and regional loyalties. In Asia, too, there were more profound and longer lasting groupings – around religion in India and Malaysia, for example.

“Kenyan politics is driven by tribalism,” said Ivan. Eliud, also from Kenya, agreed, saying “if you come from a particular region of the country, you’re almost 90 percent likely to vote for a certain party or a certain individual.” He said this came from both regional and tribal loyalties, and suggested it limited what could be expected of leaders who were elected in that way. Eliud questioned whether such ingrained voting patterns were corroding democracy in his country.

Tribalism was also hugely important in South African society, said Kile. “There seems to be a deep growing mistrust amongst races,” she said. This was bleeding into the political system with a rising number of smaller parties appealing to ethnic groups, a development she said

was “kind of scary.” “It’s getting towards the point that there is more hate speech coming in and there’s less room for a nuanced approach to politics. It’s either you are for, or against.”

However, Kile was confident that tribal divides would not predominate. “Tribalism has been used to shield political misdeeds,” she said, “it’s not something that governs our politics.” She said former president Jacob Zuma had tried to play up tribalism by accusing his enemies of wanting to get rid of him because he was Zulu. She pointed to massive corruption as the real reason for opposition to Zuma. In general, she said, many of the greater debates in South Africa still revolved around policy issues such as immigration – albeit within a less nuanced and more polarised space.

Nadine from Germany worried that populists on the right and the left were removing the space for productive debate in her country. “It’s getting very emotional and disrespectful,” she said. “Many discussions are on the internet. It’s easier to be rude on social media than when you talk to someone face to face.”



## **It’s easier to be rude on social media than when you talk to someone face to face**

- Nadine, Germany

Juan from Spain put the blame squarely on big tech companies. He said their algorithms channelled people towards content they were pre-determined to like, even if it was racist or homophobic material. “This is not helpful at all for democracy,” he said. “I think that also we need to demand a lot of responsibility from these companies because the impact that they’re having can be super bad.”

Many of the participants from Asian countries felt that their compatriots had lost the ability to separate personal and political issues. Banal debates, they said, could often escalate into rows and personal insults. “People get very personal and offended with arguments revolving around political issues,” said Hrithika from India. She said emotional reactions made it much harder to solve political differences. “Sometimes people might get offended or even might not speak to you if you have a strong opinion about their political preference,” she added.

Her compatriot Radit agreed. “Political views have become more a part of a person’s identity and if you have a differing opinion, it’s like a personal attack on them, everything is taken personally,” he said. Each side preferred to stay in their own bubble, he added.

“There are many echo chambers around and people say whatever they like even if it’s hurtful or disrespectful because it’s on social media,” said Jane from Singapore, touching on one of the central discussions of the focus groups – the role of social media. “People of different opinions now



have become more isolated from each other,” said Kiwi from Indonesia. “Social media definitely plays a role in making groups more sure of themselves and unwilling to listen to another possible point of view,” she added.

Youn from South Korea was the only participant to point to a generational divide. “Specifically in Korea, it’s not as easy to have respectful disagreements when the older generations who rule the country are detached from the workforce, which includes the younger generations,” he said. “Cultural norms such as respecting the elderly also hinder us from achieving such respect for each other.” He said people with views on both ends of the political spectrum were becoming more entrenched and less able to deviate from their fundamental beliefs.

However, Shifa from India, was one of the few to see a positive outcome. While conceding that it was “getting harder to have political disagreement” in her country she said it was “very well understood that differences in opinion play a very important part in the betterment of society.” She added: “Institutions are working together to reduce these differences.”

#### **YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO BE INVOLVED**

Polarisation helps to stifle political debate but there are plenty of groups who feel completely excluded from the political system. Participants from several countries in all three regions said young people were often the principal victims of exclusion. The phenomenon of young people choosing not to vote because they cannot see anyone representing their views has been widely reported across the world. Several of the focus group participants were clear that they felt completely detached from their democratic systems and powerless to change the status quo, though African participants were much more likely to say this than participants from Europe or Asia.

“I know this is a horrible thing to say, but I’m just going to go ahead and say it,” said Siby. “In Poland, it feels like at this point, all we can do is either wait for them [current political leaders, editor’s note] to retire or to die before we the younger generation can take part in the way that the country’s being run.”

Similarly disillusioned was Ijo in Indonesia. “I am not sure whether we are going in a better direction,” he said. “I do not know whether I can influence decision-making agendas via my representative. I feel detached and have no idea where to share my voice except direct social media channels like Twitter.”

These were also rare, deeply pessimistic opinions from Europe and Asia. In general, those two regions did not raise the subject as much as participants from Africa, who felt that it was a critical problem.

“We have a very good majority of young people,” said Kile from South Africa, but they were staying away from elections “across the board.” She said the ruling ANC had faced a big wake-up call in recent elections,

where declining turnouts have drastically reduced its majorities. It would have to make radical changes if it wanted to continue in power, she said. Kalisa in Rwanda highlighted a survey showing more than half of young Africans wanted to leave the continent. For him, this was a symbol of democracy's failure.

Anuwality from Malawi was deeply disillusioned with the system in her country. "We elect our leaders, we give them power, but then when people come to power, they don't fulfil their promises. When we try to vote them out, we are arrested or silenced. The youth are not empowered."



**We elect our leaders, we give them power, but then when people come to power, they don't fulfil their promises. When we try to vote them out, we are arrested or silenced. The youth are not empowered**

- Anuwality, Malawi

However, Chibunna from Nigeria saw some early signs of a democratic bounce-back in his country. He said people had been feeling increasingly excluded from the system and feeling like their votes did not count. "So that awareness needs to be created to show people that our votes actually count, and they should get involved in the political system," he said. "Nigeria is about to go into elections by next year and the youth population are very, very active, this time around, to actually participate." He said it was a crucial moment for the nation and a decline in development could be "very catastrophic" if the right leadership was not chosen. "I think that's the good spirit of democracy, rising again."

#### **CHOICE IS VITAL FOR SUCCESSFUL SYSTEMS**

While many participants felt a strong opposition and a genuine choice at the ballot box were laudable aims of a democratic society, some felt that their countries were failing to deliver this basic requirement.

Hilary from Cameroon said democracy in Cameroon was still more of a theory than a fact. "We have one of the longest ruling presidents in Africa," he said. "The president has been in power for 40 years. And that is clear evidence to show the lack of competitiveness of elections in Cameroon."



"We believe it's rigged," said Jeremiah of the system in Uganda, where the president has been in power for 36 years. However, he said there were signs in the last election that the long-time leader was vulnerable. "So, I believe that it's getting better, people now believe that they can at least make an impact."

Among the Asian participants, there were lively discussions about the lack of choice in elections particularly in India and Singapore. "While

Singapore elections are excellent in terms of procedure – if you fit the requirements, really anybody can go and run – the fact of the matter is that the ruling party has learned how to co-opt individuals into the system,” said Sean from the island nation. He said they had been so successful that it was “just inconceivable” that anyone would want to run against the ruling party. He called it a “pretence of democracy.”

While Sean was critical of this process and wanted to see a flourishing pluralistic democracy, others from the city-state suggested that if the citizens were happy, the lack of opposition was not a big problem. This was contrasted with several Indian participants, who lamented what they saw as a decline into a one-party state.

Many Asian, African, and East European democracies are young, having been created only a few decades ago. But the cradle of democracy in Southern Europe faces similar problems. “A lot of the time, the people in power tend to be from the same families,” said Myrto from Greece. “You have this generation of powerful politicians who grew up in the system and have absolutely no perception of what the average citizen has to deal with.” She made similar points as participants from Cameroon and Singapore, that on paper the system was fine, but in practice it is dysfunctional. “It’s almost like we don’t have enough representation and enough options,” she said. “Enough options in terms of people in power who can actually represent us and who know what we are dealing with.”



**You have this generation of powerful politicians who grew up in the system and have absolutely no perception of what the average citizen has to deal with**

- Myrto, Greece

#### **CORRUPTION IS PERCEIVED TO BE A SYSTEMIC RISK IN ASIA AND AFRICA**

One of the biggest divides between European participants and the others emerged on the issue of corruption. While participants from several African and Asian countries spoke about the everyday corruption of their political classes, this problem was not regarded as important for most of Europe.



Several participants from Kenya flagged corruption as being the biggest problem for the country. Lydia was among them: “What worries me is mostly corruption and lack of accountability by our leaders,” she said, adding that it had a corrosive effect on the country’s democracy. Across Asian countries, participants felt that corruption was ingrained. Several Indian participants said vote-buying was rife. “We are the world’s largest democracy,” said Asur. “However, most of the people are poor and the corrupt politicians being aware of that try to exploit it. Most of the elections are a sham where politicians pay money to buy votes. I don’t think that these are the traits of a strong democracy.”

Aman agreed and went further, saying politicians used their positions just to enrich themselves. “The elected people only fill their own pockets and make decisions that favour them,” she said. “Only a few work for the people, the rest of them are just businessmen running their businesses in government offices.”

Comparable stories emerged from Indonesia, South-East Asia’s biggest country. “Even though it’s a democratic country, sometimes you can buy bunch of people to support your cause,” said Diah. “Our corruption rate is very high,” she added. Rana, also from Indonesia, summarised the situation: “Rampant corruption is ingrained within every position in government,” she said. But she added: “I’m sure a couple of politicians still try to do their best.”



## **Rampant corruption is ingrained within every position in government**

- Rana, Indonesia

Malaysia has been in the grip of a global corruption scandal for several years, after the former prime minister was put on trial for embezzling vast sums from a public investment vehicle. “Democracy has always been a hit or miss,” said Zara. “We are still a nation that prioritises the monarchy over the prime minister.” But she said the corruption scandal had rocked the country’s faith in the system. “Politicians in the country are power hungry, they care only about what’s best for them, not the hardworking citizens that make up the nation.”

Broadly, Europeans felt that their elections were free from corruption. “In Spain, elections-wise and voting-wise, I think we’re doing well at all levels,” said Juan. “Also, I think that the current government is being very inclusive. So, I think that democracy is making sure that everyone’s voices are heard.”



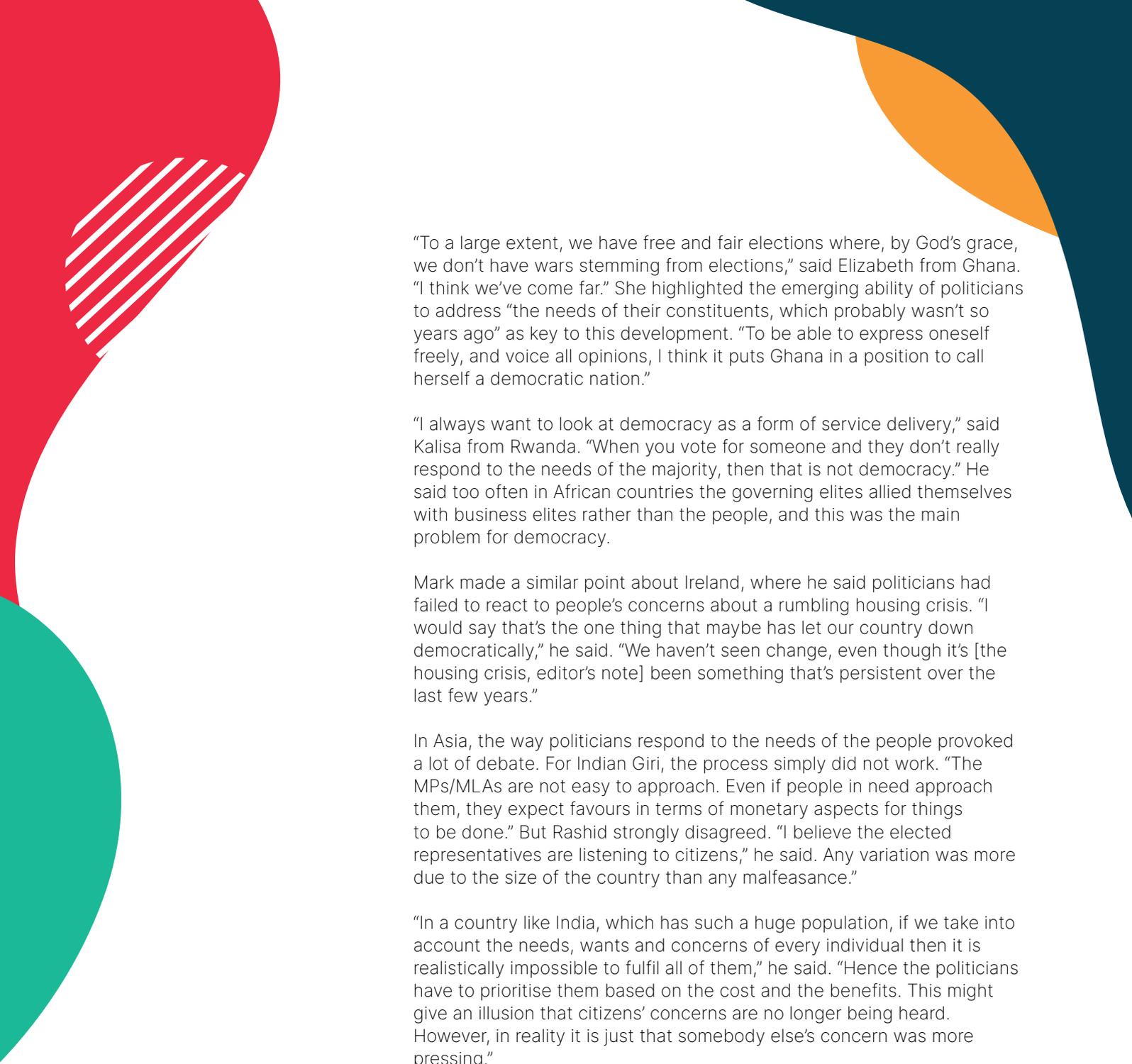
## **I think that democracy is making sure that everyone’s voices are heard**

- Juan, Spain

Nadine from Germany felt similar about her country. “I’m quite convinced that there is no corruption in elections,” she said. “For sure there might be some corruption in politics, but not in the election itself, and I think that’s the main point for democracy.”

### **RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE POLITICS IS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL**

What makes a successful democracy? One of the crucial aspects emerging from the focus groups is the responsiveness of politicians, their ability to listen and adapt. There were examples of successes and failures from each of the three regions.



“To a large extent, we have free and fair elections where, by God’s grace, we don’t have wars stemming from elections,” said Elizabeth from Ghana. “I think we’ve come far.” She highlighted the emerging ability of politicians to address “the needs of their constituents, which probably wasn’t so years ago” as key to this development. “To be able to express oneself freely, and voice all opinions, I think it puts Ghana in a position to call herself a democratic nation.”

“I always want to look at democracy as a form of service delivery,” said Kalisa from Rwanda. “When you vote for someone and they don’t really respond to the needs of the majority, then that is not democracy.” He said too often in African countries the governing elites allied themselves with business elites rather than the people, and this was the main problem for democracy.

Mark made a similar point about Ireland, where he said politicians had failed to react to people’s concerns about a rumbling housing crisis. “I would say that’s the one thing that maybe has let our country down democratically,” he said. “We haven’t seen change, even though it’s [the housing crisis, editor’s note] been something that’s persistent over the last few years.”

In Asia, the way politicians respond to the needs of the people provoked a lot of debate. For Indian Giri, the process simply did not work. “The MPs/MLAs are not easy to approach. Even if people in need approach them, they expect favours in terms of monetary aspects for things to be done.” But Rashid strongly disagreed. “I believe the elected representatives are listening to citizens,” he said. Any variation was more due to the size of the country than any malfeasance.”

“In a country like India, which has such a huge population, if we take into account the needs, wants and concerns of every individual then it is realistically impossible to fulfil all of them,” he said. “Hence the politicians have to prioritise them based on the cost and the benefits. This might give an illusion that citizens’ concerns are no longer being heard. However, in reality it is just that somebody else’s concern was more pressing.”

Arthur from Indonesia felt that participation in decision-making was one of the strongest aspects of democracy in his country. “For example, the country has a people’s representative council, which has similar power to the president in terms of legislation,” he said, adding that the country’s elections were widely regarded as honest and transparent.

#### **MIXED PICTURE ON FREE EXPRESSION**

The big divides over freedom of speech came internally in the main regions. In Western Europe, participants generally felt like they could broach most topics without fear of reprisals, but this was not always the case elsewhere on the continent. In Asia, the issue was extremely important to Indian and Malaysian participants but much less so to those further east in Japan and South Korea. Few African participants raised the issue at all.



Tanushri was incandescent over India's recent record on free expression. She said it was constitutionally protected "but right now, there are stories of school students being arrested because they made a caricature of a political leader," she said. "There are crackdowns on journalists and academics, and even students who write something against the government." She said harassment was everywhere and it had a "chilling effect" on free speech.



"That's why I think one of the reasons why we are slowly moving from a multiparty, pluralistic sort of political system to a monopoly of sorts, which is very dangerous," she said.

## **There are crackdowns on journalists and academics, and even students who write something against the government**

- Tanushri, India

James in Malaysia said there were laws in his country that actively limited freedom of speech. "For example, criticising government officials will lead to arrests, fines or official action taken against you," he said. There were laws against misinformation, too, that he said only helped to shield certain groups from criticism. "People are still afraid of criticising certain groups of people, and there hasn't been much change of this over the past few years," he said.

By contrast, participants in East Asia were broadly positive about free expression. "Our country has a strong demonstration culture which allows us to voice our opinions," said Ha-yoon from South Korea. But she added: "Whether they are heard and addressed is a different issue."

But in some eastern countries, participants spoke of a culture that had clamped down on unpopular opinions. "Sometimes I'm even scared to talk about politics," said Bianca from Slovakia. "If you have a more pro-European Union opinion, people are starting to attack you." She said it was depressing and people like her were beginning to lose hope that Slovakia would ever change.

### **THE ALARMING COLLAPSE OF INSTITUTIONS**

Participants across the regions frequently – though not universally – praised the institutions and the foundations of their democracies. Constitutions, parliaments, judiciaries were all singled out for positive comment. However, politicians were not so lucky. Often portrayed as amoral and corrupt, selfish, and arrogant, the people in charge also faced the most damning accusation of seeking to undermine the hallowed institutions they were supposed to serve.

"In my childhood everybody was talking about the EU and our bright future and there was always this example that just in a couple of years, Hungary will be a better place than Austria," said Erik. "The economic boom will be much bigger; the democracy will be stronger." The

institutions were put in place, he said, but the mentality of the people – who had spent decades under communism – never changed. “We didn’t invest enough in the citizens, the democratic culture.” He said this has allowed the government of Viktor Orban to “destroy this democratic landscape.”

Philippine was equally as pessimistic about France, listing many problems: “Police brutality, strikes, an increasing oligopoly of ownership in the media, rising inequality among the citizens, the rise of far-right movements taking more and more space even within our National Assembly, the lack of participation, or at least the diminishing participation of citizens in elections.”



## **We didn’t invest enough in the citizens, the democratic culture**

- Erik, Hungary

She said these factors indicated a weakening of democratic institutions in France. “Almost all public services except for the police are being underfunded at the moment, so I think it says a lot about the state of democracy in France.”

Samyukta from India said her country’s institutions were simply not strong enough to stand up to the ruling BJP party. “It’s too young. It’s too poor. It’s too underdeveloped to have strong enough institutions to weather storms like the BJP,” she said. While the United States has had more than two centuries to consolidate its democracy, she said, India has had just a few decades. “India is much younger, and I don’t think the institutions are able to weather the storm of a party that is less than democratic, less than secular.”

Her compatriot Asur broadly agreed and pointed to the corrosive effect of political parties buying into the media landscape. “Now political parties own major chunks of news channels and other forms of media, which makes it easy for them to manipulate the people,” he said. This was a particular problem with religion, the major issue of the day. “Political parties owning and controlling the media puts this religious bias in the minds of common people and strengthens religious hatred.”

Malaysia, too, has its problems, with participants expressing fears that the electoral system was not strong enough to rein in politicians. “People no longer trust the voting system,” said Chris. “Anything can happen afterwards as the politicians can negotiate between themselves for their personal interest to be in power and not the people’s interest.” Zara made a similar point. “Democracy is flawed in Malaysia,” she said. “Transition of power from one leader to the next has never been smooth or peaceful.”



In several African countries, participants expressed disillusionment with the way politicians had hollowed out institutions. However, this was often so ingrained, particularly in societies with a history of authoritarianism, that it was barely seen as an issue.



In Kenya, where several participants spoke highly of their constitution, there were some specific concerns about the authorities in charge of elections. Eliud said the electoral commission was “supposed to be a very independent institution” mandated to ensure integrity and credibility. “However, this is not the case,” he said, because government figures and other prominent people influenced its decisions. “Definitely that affects the will of the people, because the people vote but we don’t believe our vote actually counts,” he said.

## How Could Democracy be Improved?

There were plenty of ideas of how to make democracy better, but no real consensus on the best way forward, either across regions or within them. Contributors proposed a rich array of reforms, from tweaks to voting systems and improvements in civic education, to overhauling constitutional orders and even scrapping democracy itself. In parts of Asia and Africa, several participants felt that preserving democracy was far less important than providing for the basic needs of the people.

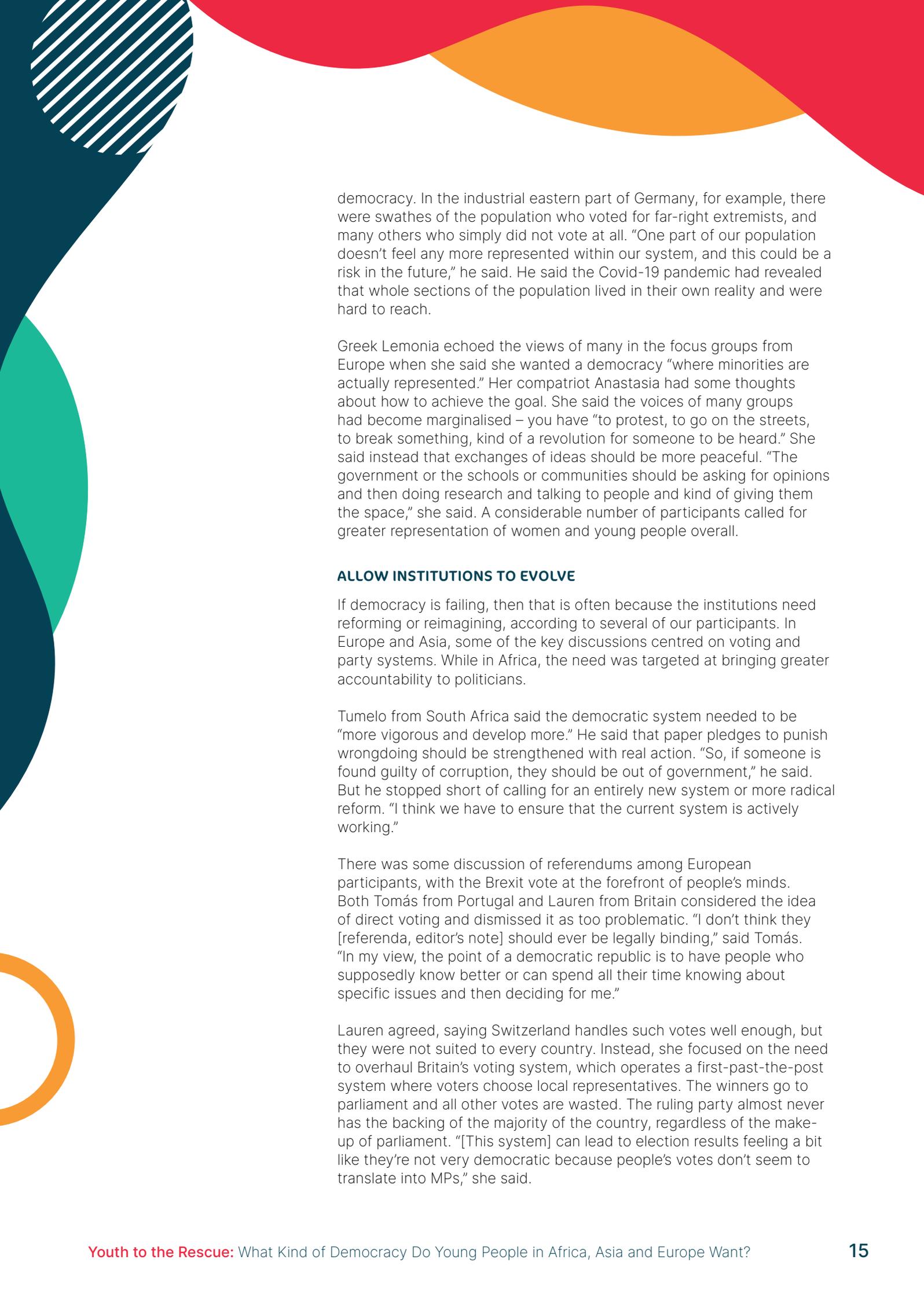
### TALK TO PEOPLE ON THE MARGINS

One of the major problems with democracy identified by participants from all three regions was the emergence of entire sections of society who felt excluded from mainstream politics. In African countries, young people were often the focus of concern as elections consistently show younger voters are simply not registering. In Europe and Asia, participants pointed to the rise of populism and authoritarianism as evidence of a growing sense of exclusion. A broad consensus emerged that democracy could be improved if the authorities made serious efforts to engage with marginalised groups.

Ivan reckoned his country, Rwanda, was already well on the way to finding a solution. “There is a very hard campaign that encourages everyone to participate,” he said. “Rwanda puts the youth at the forefront of every project. Before elections, they hold campaigns and gatherings that make sure the youth understand the electoral process.” He said this civic education was vital for democracy in his country.

Malti from India said simply that she wanted “a true participatory democracy without any marginalisation of any citizen.” Shreya dug deeper into India’s problems, hailing the constitution as something to be proud of, but slamming the politicians who seem to flout the laws. “In the coming years, I would hope whoever the government is, they are more inclusive,” she said, urging them to “go to the grassroots and actually see the problem and try to find a solution for that rather than only seeing the upper middle class.” She added that the current government also needed to open itself up to criticism rather than shut down opposition.

Likewise, Niels in Germany praised the stability of the parliamentary system but highlighted several processes that he felt were undermining



democracy. In the industrial eastern part of Germany, for example, there were swathes of the population who voted for far-right extremists, and many others who simply did not vote at all. “One part of our population doesn’t feel any more represented within our system, and this could be a risk in the future,” he said. He said the Covid-19 pandemic had revealed that whole sections of the population lived in their own reality and were hard to reach.

Greek Lemonia echoed the views of many in the focus groups from Europe when she said she wanted a democracy “where minorities are actually represented.” Her compatriot Anastasia had some thoughts about how to achieve the goal. She said the voices of many groups had become marginalised – you have “to protest, to go on the streets, to break something, kind of a revolution for someone to be heard.” She said instead that exchanges of ideas should be more peaceful. “The government or the schools or communities should be asking for opinions and then doing research and talking to people and kind of giving them the space,” she said. A considerable number of participants called for greater representation of women and young people overall.

#### **ALLOW INSTITUTIONS TO EVOLVE**

If democracy is failing, then that is often because the institutions need reforming or reimagining, according to several of our participants. In Europe and Asia, some of the key discussions centred on voting and party systems. While in Africa, the need was targeted at bringing greater accountability to politicians.

Tumelo from South Africa said the democratic system needed to be “more vigorous and develop more.” He said that paper pledges to punish wrongdoing should be strengthened with real action. “So, if someone is found guilty of corruption, they should be out of government,” he said. But he stopped short of calling for an entirely new system or more radical reform. “I think we have to ensure that the current system is actively working.”

There was some discussion of referendums among European participants, with the Brexit vote at the forefront of people’s minds. Both Tomás from Portugal and Lauren from Britain considered the idea of direct voting and dismissed it as too problematic. “I don’t think they [referenda, editor’s note] should ever be legally binding,” said Tomás. “In my view, the point of a democratic republic is to have people who supposedly know better or can spend all their time knowing about specific issues and then deciding for me.”

Lauren agreed, saying Switzerland handles such votes well enough, but they were not suited to every country. Instead, she focused on the need to overhaul Britain’s voting system, which operates a first-past-the-post system where voters choose local representatives. The winners go to parliament and all other votes are wasted. The ruling party almost never has the backing of the majority of the country, regardless of the make-up of parliament. “[This system] can lead to election results feeling a bit like they’re not very democratic because people’s votes don’t seem to translate into MPs,” she said.



Rashid focused on India's party system. "We have too many political parties in the country," he said. "While two-party democracy might be unrealistic for a country like India, something like a five-party or 10-party democracy should work well." On the other hand, Youn from South Korea reckoned his country needed more parties. "It would be better if we had more than two major parties to choose from in every election," he said. Julie agreed that Taiwan failed to nourish a multiparty system. "I like the system right now," she said. "I just hope that the small parties can get a little bit of protection to help them grow a little bit."

## **It would be better if we had more than two major parties to choose from in every election**

- Youn, South Korea



Among the most striking takes on political parties came from Chris in Malaysia, who simply wanted them scrapped altogether. "I want a system where there are no more political parties," he said. "People should vote for the person in charge rather than the party he is campaigning for. This would prevent party bias and reduce the number of incompetent politicians from having the power to influence important national decisions."

## **I want a system where there are no more political parties**

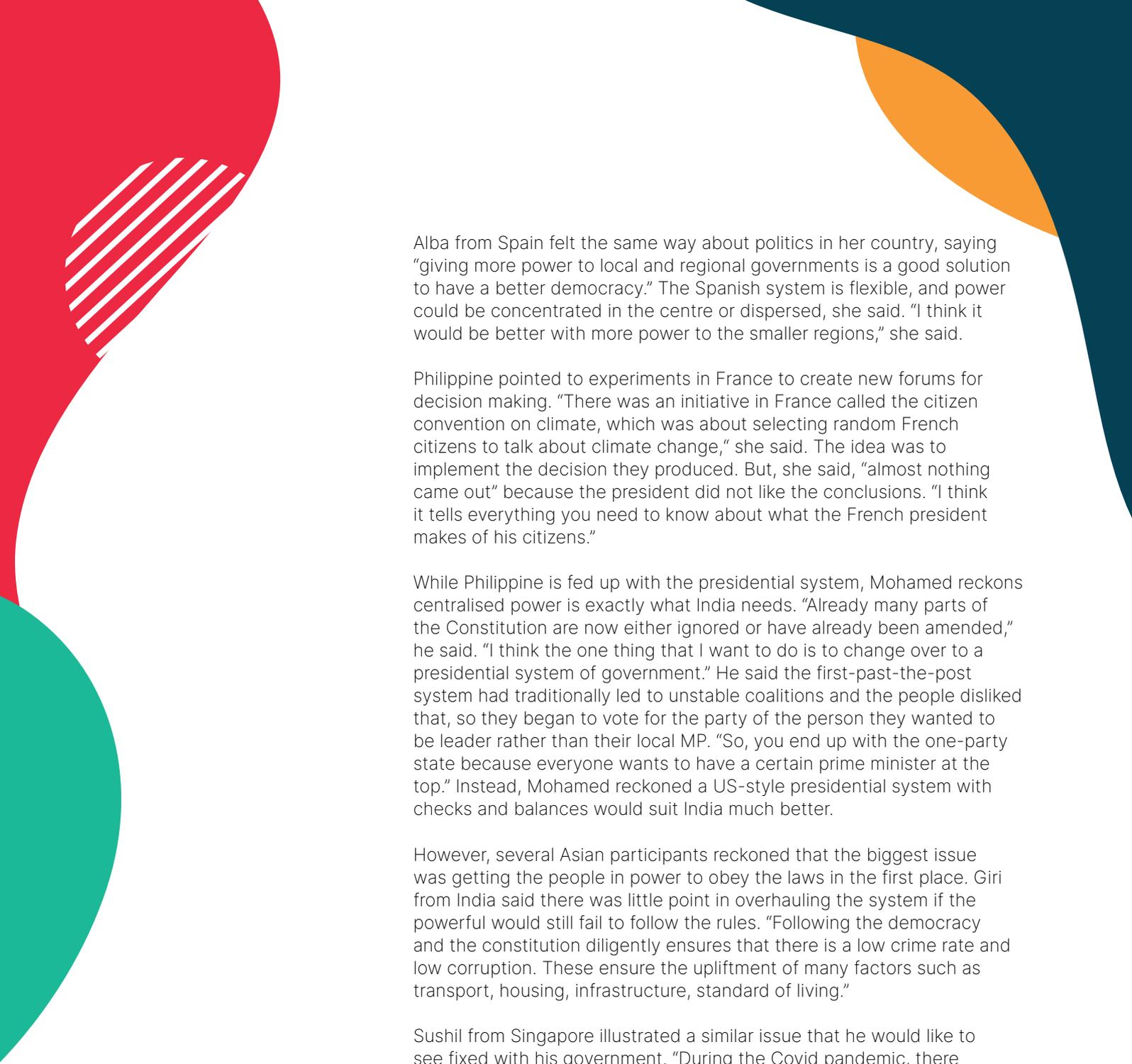
- Chris, Malaysia

### **FIND A BETTER BALANCE OF POWER**

Where the power lies in a democracy has long been the subject of heated debate. Ultimately, the people are supposed to be in charge, but in a representative democracy the reins of power are handed to delegates. With that dilution comes a whole host of issues, many of which were teased out in our focus groups. There was a groundswell of support for boosting local democracy, particularly in Africa and Europe. Several Indian and African participants resorted to paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, calling for government by the people, for the people, in an apparent rebuke to today's political classes who allow for neither.



Lydia and Pauline, both from Kenya, felt that their country needed to bolster local forums. "I think the government should strengthen local governance like the county governments," said Lydia. "Improving county by county will lead to a stronger and an equal government, strengthening the democracy." Pauline agreed, calling for further decentralization. "I feel like the country itself has made a milestone in trying to achieve democracy but it's not at the point that will say we are democratic yet."



Alba from Spain felt the same way about politics in her country, saying “giving more power to local and regional governments is a good solution to have a better democracy.” The Spanish system is flexible, and power could be concentrated in the centre or dispersed, she said. “I think it would be better with more power to the smaller regions,” she said.

Philippine pointed to experiments in France to create new forums for decision making. “There was an initiative in France called the citizen convention on climate, which was about selecting random French citizens to talk about climate change,” she said. The idea was to implement the decision they produced. But, she said, “almost nothing came out” because the president did not like the conclusions. “I think it tells everything you need to know about what the French president makes of his citizens.”

While Philippine is fed up with the presidential system, Mohamed reckons centralised power is exactly what India needs. “Already many parts of the Constitution are now either ignored or have already been amended,” he said. “I think the one thing that I want to do is to change over to a presidential system of government.” He said the first-past-the-post system had traditionally led to unstable coalitions and the people disliked that, so they began to vote for the party of the person they wanted to be leader rather than their local MP. “So, you end up with the one-party state because everyone wants to have a certain prime minister at the top.” Instead, Mohamed reckoned a US-style presidential system with checks and balances would suit India much better.

However, several Asian participants reckoned that the biggest issue was getting the people in power to obey the laws in the first place. Giri from India said there was little point in overhauling the system if the powerful would still fail to follow the rules. “Following the democracy and the constitution diligently ensures that there is a low crime rate and low corruption. These ensure the upliftment of many factors such as transport, housing, infrastructure, standard of living.”

Sushil from Singapore illustrated a similar issue that he would like to see fixed with his government. “During the Covid pandemic, there were vaccine passports in Singapore,” he said. “You had to check in everywhere you went on your phone. You were constantly being tracked.” He said the government told the citizens their data would only be used for Covid, but then they started using it to track crime. “So, they broke their word. Are they still doing that now? We don’t really know.” He said more accountability and transparency would help restore the balance between citizens and their government.



### **USE EDUCATION TO BOLSTER DEMOCRATIC NORMS**

With the rise of disinformation in mind, many of the focus group participants from across all regions landed on education as a crucial aspect to help democracy flourish. This was expressed in personal terms by some young people who admit that they can feel bewildered at the options they face. It was also expressed as a theoretical goal, that citizens should be given a civic education to understand the

importance of their participation. Several Indian participants pointed to a lack of education among politicians and the electorate as a problem for the functioning of democracy. And for some African participants, the meaning of education took on a wider significance.

For Margaret from Kenya, the need for better education is not just about teaching people about the voting or party systems, it is more fundamental than that. "If we are able to be independent, in terms of our curriculum and not borrowing from the Western curriculum then we'll go far because in Africa, we have a lot of potential," she said. The point about African democracy not having Western approaches imposed upon it was taken up by Kalisa from Rwanda. "I agree with Margaret; we really need reforms in education so that we can decolonise our minds," he said. Both gave several examples from their own education of being told how white Europeans were "discovering" parts of Africa. "We need to be like Africans, but we can't be if people are speaking on our behalf amplifying voices who most of the time are misinformed or biased," said Kalisa.



**We need to be like Africans, but we can't be if people are speaking on our behalf amplifying voices who most of the time are misinformed or biased**

- Kalisa, Rwanda

For others in Africa and beyond, improvements in education were needed just to improve the outcomes of democracy. Hilary from Cameroon, like many others, criticised the self-interest of many of his country's leaders. "I may say that bad leaders are also elected by people," he said. "I therefore think the first step is educating the voters on the relevance of their vote and equally on the amount of damage and good their vote can cause on the welfare of the state."



**I may say that bad leaders are also elected by people**

- Hilary, Cameroon

The idea found support from several participants in Europe. Niels from Germany said school pupils should be taught about the culture of democracy and how to spot "fake news". Gianluca from Italy agreed, flagging the detachment many people felt as a big problem for democracy. "I think overall it's not very good if we don't work on educating young people to understand why it is important to participate," he said.

Several contributors from Southern Europe shared more personal perspectives on their own struggles to comprehend their systems. Mariavittoria and Michele, both from Italy, highlighted a referendum held this year on the judicial system. They both felt the options on the ballot were baffling. "You need a master's degree to understand what



is on the ballot sometimes in Italy,” said Mariavittoria. Michele said the referendum was so incredibly confusing that it led to him wanting to scrap democracy entirely.

## I would like someone trustworthy to explain simple concepts

- Anastasia, Greece

Anastasia from Greece said she sometimes did not vote “because I consider myself a little bit ignorant”. She said even if you read the news, there are always hidden messages and agendas that she does not have the time to understand. “I would like someone trustworthy to explain simple concepts,” she said. “I don’t want to give away my responsibility, but I need someone to kind of guide me a little bit through this chaos.”

Sean from Singapore suggested this should, at least in part, be the government’s job. He said his government tended to be good at communicating bread-and-butter issues like housing and cost of living, but not on the bigger issues: “At the outbreak of the Ukraine war Singapore was one of the first nations to impose sanctions on Russia,” he said. “And then there were a few people commenting that Singapore is a small state, we shouldn’t be doing things like that. I think that in these kinds of larger defence and foreign relations subjects the government tends not at all to communicate to the public the rationale.”



## The younger generation needs to change their apathetic attitude and understand the importance of politics

- Angel, Taiwan

Angel in Taiwan reckoned education could be used to reinvigorate democracy. “If anything should be reformed, it should be Taiwan’s educational system,” she said. “The values and norms we share should inspire us to build a better society and government, it should be more than just money and jobs. The younger generation needs to change their apathetic attitude and understand the importance of politics, the changes it can bring and how it can bring people together. They need to learn to follow global news and recognise fake news.”

### DEAL WITH OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE

A country’s relationship with the outside world was seen as vital to the success or failure of democratic systems. Several African participants felt democracy was a Western idea that had been imposed on them and continued to be imposed through quid-pro-quo deals involving development aid. In Asia and Europe, outside pressure was less a matter of imposing rules and systems and more a matter of delicate interplay.



“Democracy isn’t perfect, as the Capitol riots showed,” said Chibunna from Nigeria. “However, Western culture has sold it in such a way that it’s the only system of government.” He said African nations were forced to make democratic reforms in return for aid and other funding. “We need to build an Africa that is not dependent on aid. That way, we can make our own decisions,” he said. “As long as we keep getting grants and aid from these countries, they will keep imposing their culture, they will keep imposing their principles.”

**We need to build an Africa that is not dependent on aid. That way, we can make our own decisions**

- Chibunna, Nigeria



Attitudes towards outside actors were often quite different among European participants. In Hungary, for example, one of the factors that allowed democratic institutions to be overridden, said Erik, was a misjudgement by other European nations. “There was a common mistake amongst EU leaders, a kind of gentlemen’s agreement, that once you are in the club you will respect the rules,” he said. This assumption allowed democracy to be squashed without much oversight from outside.

**There was a common mistake amongst EU leaders, a kind of gentlemen’s agreement, that once you are in the club you will respect the rules**

- Erik, Hungary

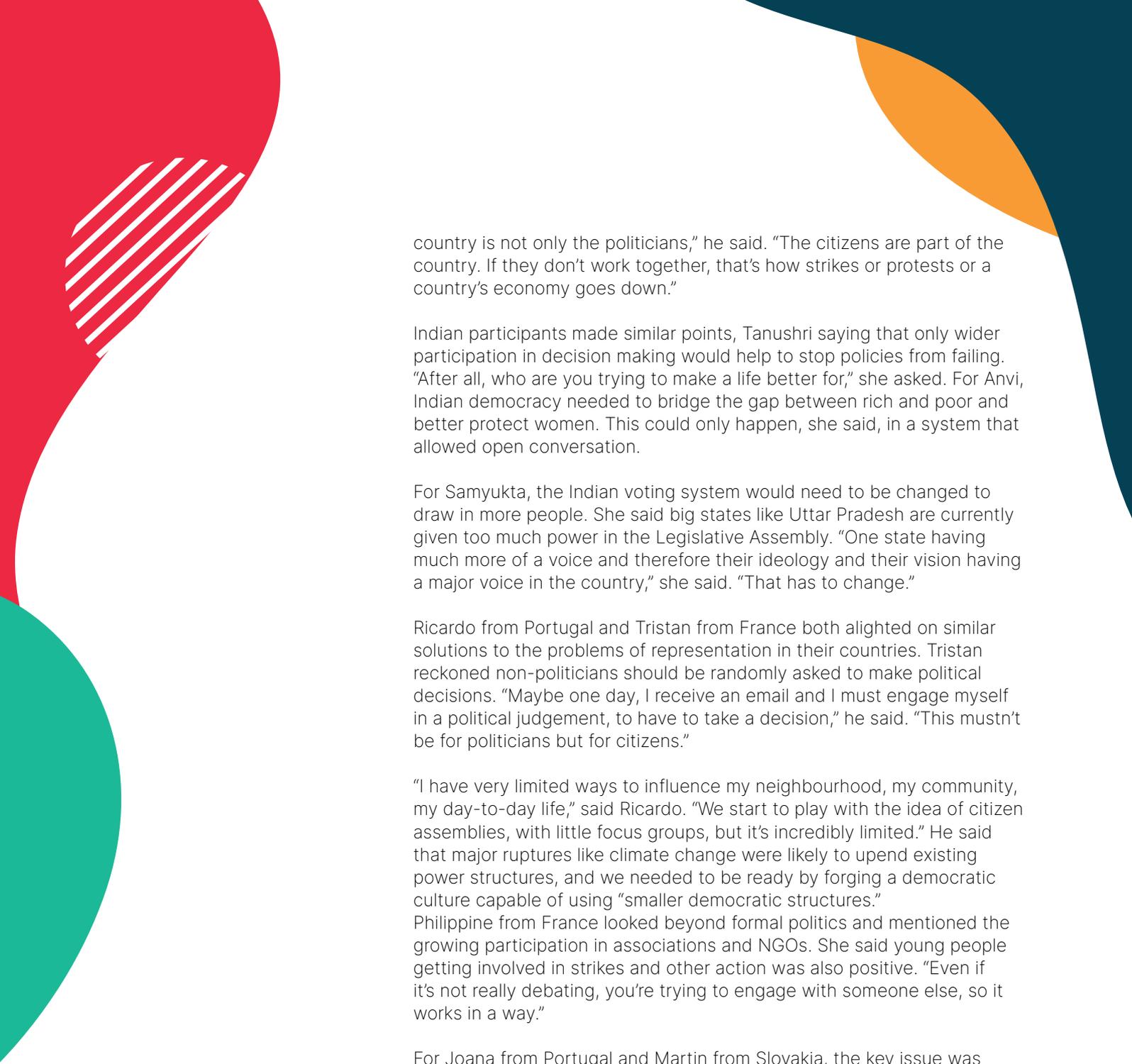
In Taiwan, there is always a lingering feeling that, no matter how much progress is made with internal democracy, it could all be undone in a flash if China decided to invade. “Our problem kind of lays beyond our border,” said Julie. She said internally Taiwanese people were getting used to democracy, just a few decades after the end of autocracy. There were forums for people to express differing opinions, and people felt empowered that they could change things. And she said the Covid pandemic had brought signs of hope from the outside world too. “A lot more democratic countries are now brave enough to actually voice their support to Taiwan,” she said.



#### **BOOSTING PARTICIPATION IMPROVES SOCIETIES**

There was universal agreement that more participation was a good thing for democracy. While African and Asian participants suggested small tweaks to the current system, Europeans put forward some radical plans to boost the involvement of people in decision-making.

Norman from Rwanda pointed out it was a basic principle that politicians had to get the views of the citizens before they imposed new laws. “A



country is not only the politicians,” he said. “The citizens are part of the country. If they don’t work together, that’s how strikes or protests or a country’s economy goes down.”

Indian participants made similar points, Tanushri saying that only wider participation in decision making would help to stop policies from failing. “After all, who are you trying to make a life better for,” she asked. For Anvi, Indian democracy needed to bridge the gap between rich and poor and better protect women. This could only happen, she said, in a system that allowed open conversation.

For Samyukta, the Indian voting system would need to be changed to draw in more people. She said big states like Uttar Pradesh are currently given too much power in the Legislative Assembly. “One state having much more of a voice and therefore their ideology and their vision having a major voice in the country,” she said. “That has to change.”

Ricardo from Portugal and Tristan from France both alighted on similar solutions to the problems of representation in their countries. Tristan reckoned non-politicians should be randomly asked to make political decisions. “Maybe one day, I receive an email and I must engage myself in a political judgement, to have to take a decision,” he said. “This mustn’t be for politicians but for citizens.”

“I have very limited ways to influence my neighbourhood, my community, my day-to-day life,” said Ricardo. “We start to play with the idea of citizen assemblies, with little focus groups, but it’s incredibly limited.” He said that major ruptures like climate change were likely to upend existing power structures, and we needed to be ready by forging a democratic culture capable of using “smaller democratic structures.”

Philippine from France looked beyond formal politics and mentioned the growing participation in associations and NGOs. She said young people getting involved in strikes and other action was also positive. “Even if it’s not really debating, you’re trying to engage with someone else, so it works in a way.”

For Joana from Portugal and Martin from Slovakia, the key issue was to combat the rise of political structures that revolved around a single person. “If there’s one person who’s organising society,” said Joana, “it will always only reflect that person’s reality. So, maybe they’re a white middle class male... they’ll never understand the needs of women who have children, or those who live in poverty, or those who are disabled.” She said a good democracy was one “where everyone has their views equally heard,” and it would naturally solve many of the social and economic problems of autocracy.



“What I would like to see changed in our democracy is to have more established political parties with actual original structures and complex policymaking,” said Martin. “Because we have a lot of parties that are just about one person and that’s not healthy.” He said the one-person parties did not last long and failed to focus on long term goals.



Chloe from Finland was keenly aware of democracy's legitimacy problem: what happens when the proportion of people who vote in an election falls below 50 percent? The knowledge that any winner will have garnered only a small fraction of the possible vote has caused headaches for political philosophers for hundreds of years. "I'm actually happy with the system in Finland, because I think proportional representation is a good system," she said. "The only thing is that I might contemplate the idea of forced voting." She conceded that it sounded bad, but said it worked in Australia and there needed to be some way to compel more people to vote.

## **I feel like democracy is failing us, or we are failing democracy**

- Chifuno, Malawi

### **MAKE SURE THE BASICS ARE PROVIDED**



Many participants expressed frustration with the narrow view of democracy as merely elections and institutions. The desire to broaden the concept of democracy or situate the system in a wider context brought radically different ideas from the three regions. European participants were more likely to consider ways to improve democracy.

## **I don't feel like democracy is the best way in a society that is super complicated already**

- Michele, Italy

Several participants from Asia and Africa, though, were comfortable with the idea of scrapping democracy entirely. It was far more important, they said, to create peaceful and harmonious societies than protect failing democratic structures.

"As Africans, we don't care," said Kalisa from Rwanda. "As long as they see their standards of living improving, that is the biggest thing." Chifuno from Malawi said democracy could work but only if the government and the people wanted it to work. "If that's the condition it's highly unlikely that it would happen anytime soon," she said. "I feel like in our country things were working out when we had a single party rule." She said life was more complex now, as the war in Ukraine, the pandemic and globalisation showed. "So, I don't know if it can still work in the modern day. But I feel like democracy is failing us, or we are failing democracy."

Michele from Italy took the same insight on the complexity of modern life and came to the opposite conclusion. "I don't feel like democracy is the best way in a society that is super complicated already," he said. "We don't have the knowledge for each person to choose what is best for everyone, so in my opinion democracy is not the best way to organise a nation." He suggested a system that included elements of democracy along with a "modern scientific approach to searching for what is the best for everyone."

In Asia, many of the participants were familiar with such hybrid systems. Greta from Indonesia, for example, said a well-ordered society such as Singapore's was more desirable than holding on to democracy. "Singaporeans appreciate the prosperity of their country despite being restricted in certain areas."

Bearing out Greta's view of Singapore, Jane from the island nation said she was thankful that she felt completely safe walking in the street at night. "I don't really care about freedom of speech, to me that's overrated," she said. "I think the government is trying its best to balance the needs of all the different communities at this point, so it's less about democracy but more about acceptance, compromise or tolerance."



**I don't really care about freedom of speech,  
to me that's overrated**

- Jane, Singapore

Greta's opinion was strongly supported by several other Indonesian participants. "I used to think that I want democracy, but democracy relies heavily on the notion that everyone thinks of the group and not just for individual's needs," said Kiwi. John said he would be fine with any system that created a happy society. And Ijo said the important thing was for basic living needs to be fulfilled. "Democracy with chaos is not the best option for me," he said. "It only benefits the one who has power."

Samyukta from India also looked to Singapore as a way of illustrating the best-case scenario for a system just short of democracy. "Not to say that Singapore is authoritarian, but it is a one-party government, a very benevolent government that runs everything," she said, contrasting this with India, where until recently democracy was flourishing. "I would choose democracy all day every day, because where there's a fear of being able to open your mouth is not a place you want to be," she said. "For countries like India, for countries that are big, and need to accommodate all kinds of voices, as difficult as democracy is, as inefficient as it is, I can't think of a better system."



# Conclusion

The focus groups illustrated the global nature of the crisis in democracy. From populism in Europe to autocracies in Asia and entrenched one-man rule in Africa, democratic systems are facing challenges throughout the world. In a time of increased instability, where living standards in many societies are stagnating or even falling and citizens are once again facing the prospect of shortages of vital resources, many people are reassessing their views on democracy.

Plenty of the problems resonated in all three regions covered by the focus groups. Disinformation and the rise of social media were identified many times as major sources of corrosion in democratic values. If the people do not know what is true, how can they make informed decisions on any political topic? Corruption was seen as a systemic risk in societies in Asia and Africa. And institutions were seen as getting weaker across the board.

Finding solutions was less straightforward. While many participants criticised their political classes, opinion was divided over whether getting rid of the current crop of political leaders would cure democracy's ills. Many participants felt that a more fundamental overhaul of institutions was needed. Those who still believed in democratic ideals pushed imaginative solutions - from creating compulsory voting systems and citizens' assemblies, to instilling democratic culture and values in children at an early age.

Geographical location played a huge part in the views of participants, with wide variation even within regions. For example, while participants from Northern Europe and Germany were likely to trust their politicians and institutions, those in the south and east were of a quite different mind. In Asia, people from Japan and South Korea were more likely to be satisfied and confident with their democracy than elsewhere in the continent. And Kenyan and Ghanaian participants were far happier with democracy than, say, those from Rwanda, many of whom felt democracy was far less important than stability.

Context is king, and many participants were able to look at their own history, or the example of a near neighbour, to support their points. In South-East and South Asia, for example, Singapore was often the reference point: a curtailed democracy where people were regarded as happy. Understandably, this sparked much reflection on the true value of democracy. If Singaporeans can be happy in this context, why can't we? As many of the participants pointed out, though, Singapore is tiny and wealthy – a world away from India or Indonesia.



African participants more frequently reflected on their own country's travails and were more pessimistic about the prospects for democracy. Kenya and – to a lesser extent – Ghana stood out as examples of happy, prosperous democracies. Participants from other nations felt the weight of a recent history of colonialism and authoritarianism. In countries like Cameroon and Uganda, where the same ruler has been in charge for decades, democracy remains an unrealised fantasy. In South Africa, a deep malaise with corruption and distrust of politicians clouded any hope for democracy's future.

In much of Europe, many countries have enjoyed decades – if not centuries – of democratic government. Participants from those countries rarely looked for inspiration in history or in neighbouring countries. Deeper questioning of the foundations of democracy was more likely to come from participants in Eastern Europe. After years of backsliding in Hungary and Poland, participants from those countries questioned whether they would ever again enjoy full democracy.

Overall, though, a solid strand of thinking from many of the participants regardless of their region was that democracy can flourish only when it is nourished with the right culture. Very broadly, European participants were likely to put their faith in innovations in voting systems, modes of representation or education. Many Asian participants most of all wanted politicians to obey the rules they were sworn to uphold. For several African participants, understanding the roots and context of democracy often led to the conclusion that it was simply not suited to their continent.





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