Democracy and Resilience

Conceptual Approaches and Considerations

Background Paper

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This Background Paper explores the conceptual approaches that facilitate understanding of the linkages between democracy and resilience. These approaches helped inform the resilience-related analysis in *The Global State of Democracy 2017: Exploring Democracy's Resilience* (International IDEA 2017), which examines the conditions under which democracy has proved to be resiliet in the light of 21st-century governance challenges and related concerns about the health and vitality of democracy. Specifically, this paper complements Chapter 2, 'Democracy's resilience in a changing world' (Sisk 2017).

Contemporary democracies, newer and established alike, face challenges and complex policy problems that, if not addressed, can lead to crises that threaten the survival, quality or performance of democracy. Democracy can prove to be resilient by adaptation, flexibility or innovation. The inverse relationship is also important.

Under some circumstances, democracy can contribute to national and community resilience: countries with democratic institutions and practices are better able to cope with challenges and crises. Democratic institutions can be designed for resilience, but there are no simple solutions and designs must be adapted to local realities. With context-appropriate design, it may be possible to craft institutions that are more resilient when they are tested by political, economic or social strains and pressures.

The Global State of Democracy aims to provide policymakers with an evidence-based analysis of the global state of democracy, supported by the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indices, in order to inform policy interventions and identify problem-solving approaches to trends affecting the quality of democracy around the world. The first edition, published in 2017, explores the conditions under which democracy can be resilient and how to strengthen its capacity as a system to overcome challenges and threats.

The full report can be accessed online: <http://www.idea.int/gsod>.

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1. Introduction

Is democracy resilient in the 21st century? The challenges to democracy from within have raised concerns about the ability of democracy to thrive and survive in the current climate. Such challenges include the abuse of executive power, corruption and state capture by political elites, and the broader challenges of governance from beyond borders, such as socially polarizing debates around migration. In addition, there is evidence of public disillusionment with democracy and declining trust in democratic institutions. On the other hand, there is a concomitant growth in citizens' movements demanding new platforms, and new methods of practicing and experiencing democracy. This also raises concern about traditional approaches to participation. For example, younger generations who have grown up in East Asian democracies show strong support for democracy in opinion surveys (Dalton and Shin 2014; Pew Research Center 2015). The challenges and crises that threaten democracy in both transitioning and established democracies—and the opportunities for further expansion—make the resilience concept applicable across the board for understanding the trajectory and trends of democracy in the 21st century.

International IDEA sees democracy as a set of processes that give meaning to the principles of popular control and political equality. The seven mediating values that give effect to democracy are participation, authorization, representation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and solidarity. International IDEA's State of Democracy Assessment Framework describes the four pillars of the democratic institutions required to realize these mediating values as (a) citizenship, law and rights; (b) representative and accountable government; (c) civil society and popular participation; and (d) democracy beyond the state. Achieving the principles of popular control, political equality and participation must be preceded by conditions that protect basic human security, the rule of law and respect for basic human rights such as the freedoms of expression and assembly (Beetham et al. 2008). Democracy is a set of processes that together constitute a 'system' of governance with related 'sub-systems' such as electoral systems and political parties. The resilience concept more broadly is important for informing the assessment of democracy globally.

Especially in the wake of the outcomes of the Arab Uprisings, there is an overarching concern that the growth and spread of democracy that began in the 1960s and 1970s, and culminated after the Cold War, is now at an end. Questions have been asked about how resilient democracy is in the 21st century. This Background Paper discusses International IDEA's definition and conceptualization of resilience. It explores the relationship between resilience and democracy, and how democracy can help to bring about resilient countries and communities. In addition, it asks what it means to be a 'resilient democracy'—how democracy as a governance system, and the democratic practices of policy formulation, monitoring and implementation, can contribute to the overall resilience of societies and communities at the national and local levels. The question of how to design more resilient democracies is discussed in the Conclusion.

2. Contemporary challenges and the crises facing democracy

This section provides an overview of the types of challenges identified in historical and philosophical analyses of contemporary democracies as affecting the ability of such democracies to address policy problems or to be resilient in the face of crises and change (Dahl 1989). Political, economic, social and transnational forces can affect the health of democracy and if they go unaddressed, lead to crises that threaten its survival.

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Political challenges arise from 'anti-democratic' tendencies and forces in society, most notably where democracy threatens the vital interests and enterprises of individuals, such as incumbents; actors, such as the military; or institutions, such as electoral management bodies (Bermeo 2016). The scholarly literature suggests that internal political challenges often arise as a result of deliberate acts. For example, democratic freedoms and practices can be restricted, by power-hungry leaders who fear opposition or loss of power; by divided leaders in the absence of a political settlement over the basic rules of the political game; or by patterns of leadership behaviour that engender corruption and rent-seeking. These factors, often combined with 'hijacked' institutions, are among the leading explanations for challenges to democratic backsliding from within (Lust and Waldner 2015). A common pattern in political challenges is for democracy to be used by self-serving elites for their own personal enrichment and to enable them to wield power through powerful patronage networks that rely on rent-seeking and corruption (Greene 2010). In such circumstances, political challenges to democracy typically manifest in electoral fraud and threats to electoral integrity, the use of targeted political violence against the opposition, the unchecked influence of money in politics, exacerbated social inequalities, especially when patronage occurs along identity lines, and poor levels of or underperforming service delivery.

Economic challenges can cut both ways, both for and against democracy. Inequality and hard economic times can lead to demands for enhanced democracy and what have been labelled 'pocketbook protests' (Brancati 2014), which in turn can provide the impetus for greater participation by, and inclusion of, the marginalized in governance structures. This was the case, for instance, during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. However, when combined with the political challenges outlined above, economic challenges such as inequality, social exclusion and extreme poverty undermine citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of the state, and the ability of democracy to address basic service delivery and livelihood needs. Extreme inequality and the persistence of destitution and poverty in the Americas have had a direct effect on undermining democracy there. Such conditions undermine the social cohesion needed for democracy to prevail and endure (Cuellar 2009). In addition, when inequality overlaps with ethnic, racial, religious or other inequalities—so-called horizontal inequality with vertical inequality—the risk of violence sharply increases (Stewart 2010).

Social and demographic factors can also place strain on democratic systems. Widespread disparities along gender lines, such as social norms that favour male children, and overall discrimination against and disadvantage of women and girls, are seen by many not just as an ethical challenge for gender equality, but a factor in the vulnerability of a country to internal conflict or even international conflict (Hudson 2008/9). While ethnic or religious diversity in society is not directly associated with democratic instability, under various conditions identity-based mobilization can threaten the quality of democracy and its performance (see Harris and Reilly 1998; Large and Sisk 2006). For example, recent work in the Middle East and North Africa describes the scourge of sectarian strife as an inhibitor of democracy in the region (Hashemi and Postel 2017).

Extreme social polarization threatens the requirement for centrist orientations, compromise and 'governing from the centre' which democratic systems generally engender. Such polarization increases the risk of conflict and makes the processes inherent to democracy more difficult, such as coalition formation and interest aggregation. Across the globe, social polarization has significantly affected the ability of democracy to manage conflict and contribute to the realization of pragmatic approaches to vexatious policy issues. Consensus and compromise have become impossible to achieve. Some institutional

Political challenges arise from 'anti-democratic' tendencies and forces in society

choices, such as some forms of list-proportional representation, have been promoted to encourage a fragmentation of the party system, or 'polarized pluralism', especially in hard economic times (Pelizzo and Babones 2007). For extensive analysis of the effects of social polarization on politics, democracy and conflict, see the March 2008 special issue of the *Journal of Peace Research*, and in particular the leading article by Esteban and Schneider (2008) on the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding understanding and measuring social polarization.

Finally, many of the challenges that affect democracy are linked to conditions or pressures that emanate from beyond country borders. Many countries have seen migration pressures have a strong either direct or indirect effect on democracy, in part because of the effects of migration on social polarization. While migration is generally shown to have a net positive effect on societies, in terms of development and perhaps an enriched, multicultural life experience, unregulated migration flows, debates over immigration policy and the responses have created new strains for many democracies worldwide. To name a few, Australia, Germany, Greece, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa and the United States have all had debates over migration pressures in recent years, and in some instances there has been violence against immigrants. Indeed, migration may bring out the putative 'dark side' of democracy' (Crush 2012). Other possible transnational spillovers are the spread of global epidemics, the effects of climate change and the effects on the terms of a country's global trade (e.g. primary commodity exporting economies may allow greater rent-seeking by elites). More ominously, recent allegations of direct interference in electoral processes by outside powers, for example through breaches in computer security, have shaken trust in democracy.

When political, economic, social or transnational challenges such as those outlined above go unaddressed, or are inadequately addressed, they can lead to or precipitate crises that can have local and sometimes global implications. Crises are urgent: they generate immediate problems and require rapid responses. Among the recent crises in democracies there have been succession struggles, state failure or lapses in government authority, election-related or other political violence or threats of violence, terrorism aimed at disrupting social cohesion, and direct violence between the state/police and the opposition. Succession and constitutional crises are inherently prone to violence and, under the most extreme conditions, civil wars and potential gross violations of human rights—as the 2016–17 crisis in Burundi has shown (International Crisis Group 2016).

Scholars and practitioners highlight a set of paradoxes and dilemmas relating to democracy in conflict-affected countries that speak to the special and multifaceted challenges during transitions from war to democracy. Other forms of legitimacy have been described by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as 'historical', 'output' and 'external-international' or outside recognition (OECD Development Assistance Committee 2010). Leaders in such countries often choose electoral processes in recognition of the fact that ultimately, the legitimacy of a regime rests globally and nationally on the ballot box as a form of 'process-legitimation' (Jarstad and Sisk 2008).

Common issues in such war-to-democracy transitions—perhaps demonstrated today in Colombia following the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement—include the transformation of rebel forces into mainstream political actors, the often deeply divided nature of civil society, managing electoral processes, constitution making, transforming security institutions and transitional justice, building state capacity to deliver services, and addressing the psychological and social wounds of war. Countries emerging from conflict therefore face

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special challenges and are especially prone to crises that threaten the re-emergence of widespread political violence and, potentially, armed conflict. Such challenges and crises beg questions about democracy's resilience, or its ability to cope with challenges and mitigate crises.

3. Resilience: definition and characteristics

What does resilience mean when applied to democracy? Above all, resilience refers to properties of a political system to cope, survive and recover from complex challenges and crises that represent stresses or pressures that can lead to a systemic failure. Chief among the properties of resilient social systems are:

1. *Flexibility*: the ability to absorb stress or pressure;
2. *Recovery*: the ability to overcome challenges or crises;
3. *Adaptation*: the ability to change in response to a stress to the system; and
4. *Innovation*: the ability to change in a way that more efficiently or effectively addresses the challenge or crisis.

Resilience has become a popular concept in relation to modern global issues such as climate change and associated natural disasters, and the term has been readily adopted by leading international organizations. While this could suggest 'groupthink', those in the humanitarian assistance community have concluded that despite its status as a 'buzzword', its popularity is justified. Although its original application was to ecological systems, the concept is directly relevant to social systems (Levine et al. 2012). Climate change and natural disasters also have many organizations evaluating how communities can be resilient in the face of fundamental challenges to the environment and to human settlements. On the resilience concept as it relates to climate change and natural disasters, and for an articulation of 10 characteristics of resilient social systems, see Bahadur (2010).

The resilience concept has recently been identified by international and non-governmental organizations working in the development and humanitarian fields as having particularly important applications to human or social systems. The concept of resilience is particularly insightful for articulating the interrelated peace and development goals of multifaceted transitions from war to peace and stable governance in conflict-affected countries. For example, the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report* devotes a chapter to pathways from 'violence and fragility' to resilience, which it argues occur through institutional transformation and the provision by the state of jobs, security and justice (World Bank 2011). Similarly, in a publication on post-war governance the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) argues that development assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states must build systemic resilience against underlying, deep-rooted causes or drivers of violence that cannot easily be addressed by peace agreements (UNDP 2012). In both these conceptualizations, resilience emerges as the outcome of inclusive, accountable governance institutions and processes that can effectively manage deep-rooted conflict at the national and local levels.

4. Democracy and resilience: two fundamental propositions

To analyse the complicated relationship between democracy and resilience, this paper presents two fundamental propositions that encapsulate the recent literature and policy-related discussions. This helps to define what qualifies as a 'resilient democracy': one that through its attributes of flexibility, recovery, adaptation and innovation is capable of

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addressing complex challenges, and weathering and responding to the crises that affect its survival or durability, and its overall quality and performance.

Proposition 1: 'value resilience'

Democracy as a governance system based on fundamental values has built-in properties that enable countries to successfully cope with crises, challenges or deep-seated social change. Empirically, democratic systems persist and have shown themselves to be adaptable, flexible and innovative. In terms of *flexibility*, a resilient democracy is one that is sufficiently flexible to absorb and respond to new social demands, actors or movements, for example through an electoral or party system that allows new parties or voices to emerge and be heard.

Democracies can *recover* from a particularly costly, contentious or violent electoral process through post-election political settlements. This was the case following Kenya's 2007–08 crisis and election-related violence. Democracies can also *adapt* to be more resilient. This is illustrated by the 2015 Italian reform of the rules of the electoral system, to address the persistent problem of 'polarized pluralism' that had hampered governance for decades. Finally, democracies can be *innovative*, which reinforces their overall resilience. For example, in South Africa's 1994 Constitution, Chapter 9 created independent institutions on language rights, human rights, preventing corruption, gender equality, elections and communications/broadcasting. These are examples of innovations in democracy that can enhance its overall resilience by addressing sensitive social issues or providing additional checks, balances, transparency or autonomy in policymaking. In the South African Constitution's Chapter 9 institutions were designed to address issues that could be addressed well in traditional legislative, executive, or judicial institutions, and overall they have been quite positively evaluated (Bilchitz et al. 2016: 11).

Evidence of resilient democracy can be drawn from quantitative research and from both comparative and single-case-study research on resilient democracies. Systemic resilience emanates from institutions that can interact to achieve balance and ensure survival. If one institution or coalition fails, is corrupt or misbehaves, others can act to achieve a balance in power. Institutions therefore interact to address internal weaknesses or vulnerabilities, which leads overall to the survival of democracy (Ganghof 2012).

Proposition 2: 'demand resilience'

Democracy is resilient because of the continuing 'demand' for democracy. This argument is based on long-standing ideas in the literature on what drives democracy: theories on the deep underlying causal factors that lead to citizen demand for democracy. This literature explores from a position of hindsight, the broad economic and social processes that historically drove the demand for democracy: principally, increased income equality through the 'class struggle' and the advent of a middle class (Geddes 2009).

Beyond the persistence of democratic 'demands' from a modernization perspective, democracy's resilience may also have been driven by citizens' attitudes to political rights and civil liberties, drawn by learning from other contexts or from the diffusion of international norms. On the ways in which states such as Russia and China seek to insulate themselves from 'democracy-related norm diffusion' see Koesel and Bunce (2013). Some see the increasing demand for women's participation in governance as driven in part by such 'norm diffusion' or the global spread of ideas about women's political equality. Following the adoption in 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), patterns of women's political empowerment were enhanced globally because of internal drivers (the domestic economic and social gains for women won by women's movements) combined with international pressures to increase women's

> Systemic resilience emanates from institutions that can interact to achieve balance and ensure survival

participation globally (Paxton, Hughes and Green 2006). Clearly, networked domestic and international women's movements have played a strong role in advancing demands for democracy in specific settings, although the women's coalitions that pressed for the initial transition to democracy found it difficult to remain coalesced in post-transition periods (Baldez 2003).

Furthermore, the presence of a strong civil society has been theorized as critical to democracy's resilience. In many places, it is the ability of civil society and the media to 'protect' democracy through investigation, information transparency and advocacy that contributes to resilience (see e.g. Fox and Halloran 2016). Some have explained democracy's resilience as a consequence of a strong civil society, and argued that democracies with a strong civil society are more likely to be durable over time. Evidence points to the ability of a civil society to be resilient in restricted or partial democracies. Bouroman, for instance, has argued that this is the case in Iran (2007). In addition, where civil society is active and able to cut across major divisions in society, such as those along religious or ethnic lines, there is arguably less vulnerability to debilitating social violence (Varshney 2001). Generally, the argument is that a vigorous civil society helps to create an underlying trust and social cohesion that in turn allows for contestation and contention in a democracy and strengthens its overall resilience when democracy comes under pressure. This assertion is drawn from long-standing political theory (e.g. Gramsci) but is highly contentious in broad terms. For a recent unpacking of the linkages between civil society and democracy see Cheema and Popovski (2010).

When the above two propositions are found in a particular setting or context, democracies that are considered 'consolidated' are generally those which are inherently resilient even though there may at times be ebbs and flows in the overall quality of democracy, linked to its competitive or conflictual properties and the vicissitudes of political life. Here, 'consolidated' is a term used in the literature to refer to a situation in which democratic values, institutions and processes have become a 'habit' or 'the only game in town' (Schmitter 2016).

5. Design and innovation: crafting resilient democratic institutions

Can a democracy be designed to be resilient? This question is typically asked of any system that is being evaluated for its resilience—whether the nature of the stresses or challenges to a system can be known in advance or it might be possible, with understanding and deliberate action, to 'engineer' a system to be more resilient.

Many scholars and institutions have considered the question of whether democracy can be designed to enhance resilience. Some have argued that it is desirable to design a set of rules—or institutions—to engineer specific desirable outcomes such as consensus-oriented or 'centre-seeking' governance. The literature on 'constitutional engineering', pioneered by the eminent Italian political scientist, Giovanni Sartori, argues that considerations such as presidential system design, electoral system design and the delimitation of internal boundaries and decentralized governance (such as in federal systems) can promote specific desirable outcomes in democratic systems, most notably stability, inclusion or a politics that cuts across social divisions (Sartori 1997). Perhaps the most extensive application of this perspective is found in electoral system design (Reynolds 2011; Norris 2004).

The assumption that democracy can be redesigned to be more resilient, that is, to be more flexible, adaptive, able to recover and innovative, drives many of the findings and recommendations of scholars who have looked at the politics of deeply divided societies riven by ethnic, religious or racial differences. In this literature, there has been much debate

Women's movements have played a strong role in advancing demands for democracy

over whether more group-based and consensus-oriented institutions are more resilient, or whether those that are more competitive but seek to create cross-group coalitions, for example, in political parties, are more durable. This debate, which has produced many scholarly works, is in turn reflected in policy-related debates about how to help influence countries to make the 'right' decisions around institutional choice in order to 'hardwire' them for more peaceful outcomes. For an overview, and an application of these debates to political party regulation, see Reilly (2006) and Reilly and Nordlund (2008). For extensive scholarly research on political institutions in conflict-affected countries, see the Institutions for Sustainable Peace project (German Institute of Global and Area Studies n.d.).

In the cases they analysed, the scholars Bastian and Luckham (2003) found 'creative tension' between the international actors, scholars and national actors seeking to design resilient institutions to promote peaceful, democratic politics. While such scholarship is good in terms of what has worked and where, the analysis of whether conscious design led to resilient outcomes exposes an important limitation of the resilience concept: such outcomes can only be demonstrated in considerable hindsight.

A critical question looms for designers of resilient democracy: *How can future stresses such as challenges or crises be anticipated?* The question suggests that in order to design a resilient democracy, there would have to be prior knowledge of the types of challenges or crises it will face and whether or how they might be preventable. One possible example of this type of engineering is the creation of the Kenyan National Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion (NCIC) in the wake of the 2007–08 election-related violence and post-election crisis that escalated partly along ethnic lines. Today, the NCIC monitors hate speech, conducts workshops and publishes a periodic report on the state of social cohesion (NCIC n.d.).

While there has perhaps been insufficient passage of time to tell whether this innovative institution has been successful, a resilience perspective would suggest that a multiplicity of approaches could together contribute to an effective design that contributes to the overall level of resilience. For example, in conflict-affected countries, it appears that the proliferation of institutions at various levels, sometimes overlapping and mutually reinforcing, devoted to peacemaking and peacebuilding—or 'architectures for peace'—can help build resilience by providing multiple avenues for addressing grievances or disputes before they escalate to violence (Odendaal 2013).
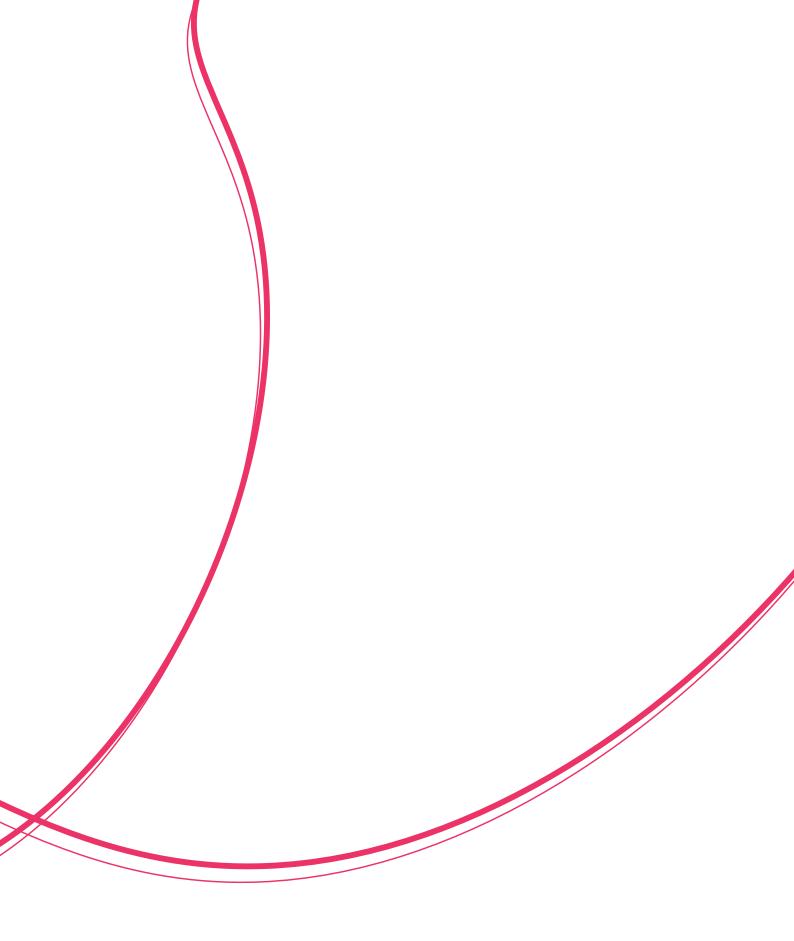
How can future stresses such as challenges or crises be anticipated?

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