Introduction

Democracy is ill and its promise needs revival. Indeed, the value, viability and future of democracy are more contested now than ever before in modern history, or at least since the 1930s. While the past four decades have seen a remarkable expansion of democracy throughout all regions of the world, recent years have been marked by declines in the fabric of both older and younger democracies. While the idea of democracy continues to mobilize people around the world, the practice of existing democracies has disappointed and disillusioned many citizens and democracy advocates.

Democratic erosion is occurring in different settings and contexts. New democracies are often weak and fragile. Their governments and political representatives face the challenge of building and strengthening democratic institutions in resource-constrained environments. Older democracies are struggling to guarantee equitable and sustainable economic and social development. The share of high-quality democracies is decreasing and many of them are confronted with populist challengers, which combine exclusionary claims with a disregard for democratic principles.

Both old and young democracies are suffering from a shrinking civic space, with declines in civil liberties, clampdowns on civil society, and restrictions on freedom of expression. The present report contains a number of examples of countries where governments intentionally limited the civic space and weakened constitutional checks on executive authority, resulting in democratic backsliding and a deteriorating rule of law. In some countries, this illness has been so severe that it has resulted in partial (with examples such as Nicaragua and Pakistan) or full democratic breakdown (Venezuela).

Modern democratic backsliding occurs from within the democratic system: through legislative and constitutional reforms and policy decisions by democratically elected majorities. The gradual hollowing-out of the non-electoral pillars in backsliding democracies ultimately damages democracy's core principles of popular control and political equality.

Democratic backsliding coincides with the rise of populist politicians and movements that appeal to growing numbers of voters, most notably in Europe but also in the Americas, and Asia and the Pacific, although forms vary according to cultural and regional contexts.

The rise of populist politics is linked to a variety of context-specific factors, but some common drivers include a disenchantment with traditional political actors; the perceived inability of current political systems to address core societal and economic problems; and a clash between expectations of what democracy should provide and what it actually delivers. Populists tap into citizen discontent about rising inequalities (perceived or actual), corruption, increasing mass migration (again, perceived or actual), unemployment and precarity of employment, and increased digitalization and its impact on labour market structures.

A feature of populist rhetoric and practice is disrespect for the accountability institutions that check government, protect political pluralism and constitute democracy. This inherent predisposition for unconstrained power turns populism into a threat for democracy. However, some also argue that populist politicians have helped put on the agenda important issues—such as corruption in democracies—that democracies need to tackle in order to regain their legitimacy.

At the same time, a number of large countries with political and economic clout seem immune to democracy. These political regimes not only persist as non-democracies (e.g. China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia) or hybrids regimes (e.g. Singapore), but have also begun to export their model of governance to other countries.

Despite this gloomy picture, there are also reasons for optimism. Democratic transitions continue to occur in political regimes that seemed staunchly undemocratic or stuck in the hybrid grey zone between democracy and non-democracy. Examples include The Gambia in 2017, promising democratic openings in Ethiopia in 2018, and the transitions to democracy in 2018 of two of the world's most enduring hybrid regimes: Armenia and Malaysia.

Popular demands for democratic reforms backed by intense social mobilization have been witnessed across the world in places such as Algeria, Armenia, Egypt, Hong Kong, Russia and Sudan. New democracies such as Timor-Leste and Tunisia and more recently The Gambia have also consolidated some of their democratic gains.

One of the main findings of this report is that democracy has not always produced the sustainable and prosperous

outcomes that many expected. A number of democratically elected governments have failed to substantially reduce corruption, advance gender equality, reduce social, political and economic inequalities or produce employment and economic growth.

However, the GSoD Indices data shows that most hybrid forms of democracy that flirt with authoritarianism, and non-democracies, have generally not delivered and sustained better policy outcomes, with some exceptions. The data shows that democracies are more likely to create the conditions necessary for sustainable development compared to non-democracies or hybrid regimes. Levels of gender equality are overall higher in democracies, access to political power is more equal, there is generally less corruption, there is generally more basic welfare, and it is often easier to do business in democracies. The choice is therefore not between non-democracy or illiberal or hybrid forms of it and democracy. The world needs more and better democracy, to revive the democratic promise.

What is the aim of this report?

International IDEA is trying to address the current ills of democracy with data; evidence-based, global and region-specific analysis; and solutions based on sound comparative global knowledge and tested good practices. This report therefore provides a health check of the state of the world's democracy, analysing trends, opportunities and challenges that are seen across various regions and within regions.

The report mainly targets policymakers and civil society organizations working at the national, regional or international levels, either implementing, supporting or advocating for democratic reforms. The report also targets those policymakers who may not be working directly on democratic reform but are involved in reform processes more broadly, be they economic, social or digital.

This report is important for other readers as well, as it argues that **democracy matters**. Democracy matters as a goal in itself, but it also matters for sustainable development. If democracy faces challenges producing sustainable societies for the survival of the planet, non-democratic and hybrid forms of democracy will certainly be even less able to steer future generations towards a better and more sustainable world.

That is why this report closely connects with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each chapter contains a section on progress on SDG 16 and SDG 5, as measured by the GSoD Indices.

In addition to providing a health check of the world's democracies, this report aims to infuse the democracy debate with evidence and data and describe how democracy's challenges and opportunities play out in different ways around the world, shaped by regional and country contexts. Beyond the diagnostic, the report also seeks to provide some solutions, building on the good practices and cases which have shown resilience in the face of challenges. These have been collected through International IDEA's more than 20 years of regional and country-level technical assistance in democratic reform throughout the world.

This, we believe, is the main contribution of the report—to move the debate beyond the diagnostic, to also point the way forward, inspire change and push for reform based on what has worked and what has worked less well in different parts of the world.

The democracy landscape is changing so fast that some of the events described in this report may already be outdated by the time it is printed. Nevertheless, the hope is that the data, concepts and good practices proposed to advance democracy will withstand the circumstantial events.

The report builds on the global and regional knowledge of International IDEA and is a collaborative institution-wide effort. Because the report covers all the attributes of the GSoD framework, in-depth analysis of each of the topics has not been possible this time. The report therefore seeks to provide highlights from International IDEA's global and regional knowledge, so that those interested in more in-depth analysis on specific topics can go into those publications, referenced at the end of each chapter.

The report has also benefited from the inputs of a number of recognized regional and country experts who have contributed their views and analysis to each of the regional chapters. All case study authors, and other contributors, are listed in the Acknowledgements section of this report.

The structure of the report

The Methodology section explains the conceptual framework of the GSoD Indices and provides an explanation of the new regime classification that this second edition of the report has introduced, as well as definitions of some of the key concepts used in the analysis.

The main body of the report is divided into five main chapters. They are written in a modular fashion, so that they can be read as stand-alone chapters, depending on the specific regional interests of the reader.

Chapter 1 looks at the global democracy landscape and is divided into two main parts: a section on global democratic trends, based on the GSoD Indices data, and a second part that zooms in on a selected number of issues in the current global democracy landscape for more in-depth analysis. The chapter includes a series of policy considerations that draw from International IDEA's regional and country-level technical assistance.

The four remaining chapters focus on the state of democracy in the different regions of the world.

Chapter 2 focuses on the state of democracy in two intertwined regions: **Africa and the Middle East**. It should be noted that the GSoD Indices classify the Middle East and Iran as a single region, referred to in this report as the Middle East. Furthermore, while the GSoD Indices classify the subregion of North Africa as part of Africa, the Middle East and North Africa are closely interconnected from a historical, religious, cultural, political, linguistic and ethnic perspective.

Chapter 3 focuses on **the Americas**, a region which is not defined in the GSoD Indices, but which is used in this report as an umbrella term for two regions covered in separate sections—Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America, including a case study on the state of democracy in the United States.

Chapter 4 offers an overview of the long-term democratic trends in **Asia and the Pacific**, the most populous region covered by the GSoD Indices, with 30 countries across five subregions. As the GSoD Indices only cover countries with more than one million inhabitants, data on most Pacific Islands is not included. However, in order to ensure coverage for the Pacific Islands, qualitative analysis and other data sources are used to assess these smaller countries.

Chapter 5 focuses on **Europe**, the region in the world with the largest number of democracies. The GSoD Indices divide Europe into a number of subregions including East-Central Europe, East Europe/post-Soviet Europe, North and West Europe, and South Europe. Europe as defined in the GSoD Indices also includes Israel and Turkey. For more information on these and other regional classifications see the Methodology section in this report.

Each regional chapter follows the same structure. For those who do not have time to read the full chapter, the key findings provide a quick overview of the key opportunities and challenges in each region. The reader can then choose which sections in the longer analysis they are interested in looking at in more detail. Each chapter contains a summary table on progress on SDG 16 and SDG 5 in the relevant region, a brief discussion of long-term democratic trends since 1975, and an analysis of current opportunities and challenges to democracy in each region.

Each chapter concludes with a table summarizing the GSoD Indices data for each attribute as well as a set of policy considerations that are linked to the data. A table of the countries covered by the GSoD Indices is provided for each region, including regime classifications and country-level democratic performance on each of the five GSoD attributes.

The conceptual framework of the GSoD Indices is used as the broad organizing structure of the bulk of the analysis in each chapter, with a focus on each of the five attributes: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement.

Finally, the GSoD Indices depict democratic trends at the country, regional and global levels across a broad range of attributes of democracy from 1975 to 2018. The Indices currently produce data for 158 countries and are updated annually. Anyone can freely access the country-level data for all Indices. The data can be downloaded via the Global State of Democracy Indices website <http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>