

# Principles of Democracy

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## INTRODUCTION



This page contains 21 pieces in a new series of one-page primers on the fundamentals of democracy produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs. Each of these short papers is available in English, Arabic, Chinese, Dari, French, Korean, Pashto, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish versions.

Although the term is ubiquitous in today's world, explaining "democracy" can be challenging. This series provides the reader with an overview paper and then breaks down the specific elements of democratic governance into individual topics. Each paper in the series reflects both the thinking of mainstream theorists and common practices of the many free societies now flourishing under systems of democratic governance.

What questions do you have about democracy? Would you like to suggest a topic? Please send comments or suggestions to: [liptcp@state.gov](mailto:liptcp@state.gov).

OVERVIEW:  
**What Is Democracy?**



Democracy comes from the Greek word, "demos," meaning people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over legislator and government.

Although nuances apply to the world's various democracies, certain principles and practices distinguish democratic government from other forms of government.

- Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives.
- Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom.
- Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups.
- Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
- Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.
- Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people.
- Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system.
- Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation's unique political, social, and cultural life. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.
- Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.
- Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit."

# Majority Rule, Minority Rights



On the surface, the principles of majority rule and the protection of individual and minority rights would seem contradictory. In fact, however, these principles are twin pillars holding up the very foundation of what we mean by democratic government.

- Majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues; it is not another road to oppression. Just as no self-appointed group has the right to oppress others, so no majority, even in a democracy, should take away the basic rights and freedoms of a minority group or individual.
- Minorities -- whether as a result of ethnic background, religious belief, geographic location, income level, or simply as the losers in elections or political debate -- enjoy guaranteed basic human rights that no government, and no majority, elected or not, should remove.
- Minorities need to trust that the government will protect their rights and self-identity. Once this is accomplished, such groups can participate in, and contribute to their country's democratic institutions.
- Among the basic human rights that any democratic government must protect are freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion and belief; due process and equal protection under the law; and freedom to organize, speak out, dissent, and participate fully in the public life of their society.
- Democracies understand that protecting the rights of minorities to uphold cultural identity, social practices, individual consciences, and religious activities is one of their primary tasks.
- Acceptance of ethnic and cultural groups that seem strange if not alien to the majority can represent one of the greatest challenges that any democratic government can face. But democracies recognize that diversity can be an enormous asset. They treat these differences in identity, culture, and values as a challenge that can strengthen and enrich them, not as a threat.
- There can be no single answer to how minority-group differences in views and values are resolved -- only the sure knowledge that only through the democratic process of tolerance, debate, and willingness to compromise can free societies reach agreements that embrace the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights.

# Civil-Military Relations



Issues of war and peace are the most momentous any nation can face, and at times of crisis, many nations turn to their military for leadership.

Not in democracies.

In democracies, questions of peace and war or other threats to national security are the most important issues a society faces, and thus must be decided by the people, acting through their elected representatives. A democratic military serves its nation rather than leads it. Military leaders advise the elected leaders and carry out their decisions. Only those who are elected by the people have the authority and the responsibility to decide the fate of a nation.

This idea of civilian control and authority over the military is thus, fundamental to democracy.

- Civilians need to direct their nation's military and decide issues of national defense not because they are necessarily wiser than military professionals, but precisely because they are the people's representatives and as such are charged with the responsibility for making these decisions and remaining accountable for them.
- The military in a democracy exists to protect the nation and the freedoms of its people. It does not represent or support any political viewpoint or ethnic and social group. Its loyalty is to the larger ideals of the nation, to the rule of law, and to the principle of democracy itself.
- Civilian control assures that a country's values, institutions, and policies are the free choices of the people rather than the military. The purpose of a military is to defend society, not define it.
- Any democratic government values the expertise and advice of military professionals in reaching policy decisions about defense and national security. Civilian officials rely upon the military for expert advice on these matters and to carry out the decisions of the government. But only the elected civilian leadership should make ultimate policy decisions -- which the military then implements in its sphere.
- Military figures may, of course, participate fully and equally in the political life of their country just like any other citizens - but only as individual voters. Military people must first retire from military service before becoming involved in politics; armed services must remain separate from politics. The military are the neutral servants of the state, and the guardians of society.
- Ultimately, civilian control of the military ensures that defense and national security issues do not compromise the basic democratic values of majority rule, minority rights, and freedom of speech, religion, and due process. It is the responsibility of all political leaders to enforce civilian control and the responsibility of the military to obey the lawful orders of civilian authorities.

# Political Parties



To preserve and protect individual rights and freedoms, a democratic people must work together to shape the government of their choosing. And the principal way of doing that is through political parties.

- Political parties are voluntary organizations that link the people and their government. Parties recruit candidates and campaign to elect them to public office, and they mobilize people to participate in selecting government leaders.
- The majority party (or the party elected to control the offices of government) seeks to enact into law a number of different policies and programs. Parties of the opposition are free to criticize the majority party's policy ideas and offer their own proposals.
- Political parties provide a way for citizens to hold elected party officials accountable for their actions in government.
- Democratic political parties have faith in the principles of democracy so that they recognize and respect the authority of the elected government even when their party leaders are not in power.
- Like any democracy, members of various political parties reflect the diversity of the cultures in which they arise. Some are small and built around a set of political beliefs. Others are organized around economic interests, or shared history. Still others are loose alliances of different citizens who may only come together at election time.
- All democratic political parties, whether they are small movements or large national coalitions, share the values of compromise and tolerance. They know that only through broad alliances and cooperation with other political parties and organizations can they provide the leadership and common vision that will win the support of the people of the nation.
- Democratic parties recognize that political views are fluid and changeable, and that consensus can often arise out of the clash of ideas and values in peaceful, free, and public debate.
- The concept of the loyal opposition is central to any democracy. It means that all sides in political debate -- however deep their differences -- share the fundamental democratic values of freedom of speech and faith, and equal protection under law. Parties that lose elections step into the role of opposition -- confident that the political system will continue to protect their right to organize and speak out. In time, their party will have a chance to campaign again for its ideas, and the votes of the people.
- In a democracy, the struggle between political parties is not a fight for survival, but a competition to serve the people.

# Citizen Responsibilities



Unlike a dictatorship, a democratic government exists to serve the people, but citizens in democracies must also agree to abide by the rules and obligations by which they are governed. Democracies grant many freedoms to their citizens including the freedom to dissent and criticize the government.

Citizenship in a democracy requires participation, civility, and even patience.

- Democratic citizens recognize that they not only have rights, they have responsibilities. They recognize that democracy requires an investment of time and hard work -- a government of the people demands constant vigilance and support by the people.
- Under some democratic governments, civic participation means that citizens are required to serve on juries, or give mandatory military or civilian national service for a period of time. Other obligations apply to all democracies and are the sole responsibility of the citizen -- chief among these is respect for law. Paying one's fair share of taxes, accepting the authority of the elected government, and respecting the rights of those with differing points of view are also examples of citizen responsibility.
- Democratic citizens know that they must bear the burden of responsibility for their society if they are to benefit from its protection of their rights.
- There is a saying in free societies: you get the government you deserve. For democracy to succeed, citizens must be active, not passive, because they know that the success or failure of the government is their responsibility, and no one else's. In turn, government officials understand that all citizens should be treated equally and that bribery has no place in a democratic government.
- In a democratic system, people unhappy with their leaders are free to organize and peacefully make the case for change -- or try to vote those leaders out of office at established times for elections.
- Democracies need more than an occasional vote from their citizens to remain healthy. They need the steady attention, time, and commitment of large numbers of their citizens who, in turn, look to the government to protect their rights and freedoms.
- Citizens in a democracy join political parties and campaign for the candidates of their choice. They accept the fact that their party may not always be in power.
  - They are free to run for office or serve as appointed public officials for a time.
  - They utilize a free press to speak out on local and national issues.
  - They join labor unions, community groups, and business associations.
  - They join private voluntary organizations that share their interests -- whether devoted to religion, ethnic culture, academic study, sports, the arts, literature, neighborhood improvement, international student exchanges, or a hundred other different activities.
  - All these groups -- no matter how close to, or remote from government -- contribute to the richness and health of their democracy.

# A Free Press



In a democracy the press should operate free from governmental control. Democratic governments do not have ministries of information to regulate content of newspapers or the activities of journalists; requirements that journalists be vetted by the state; or force journalists to join government-controlled unions.

- A free press informs the public, holds leaders accountable, and provides a forum for debate of local and national issues.
- Democracies foster the existence of a free press. An independent judiciary, civil society with rule of law, and free speech all support a free press. A free press must have legal protections.
- In democracies the government is accountable for its actions. Citizens therefore expect to be informed about decisions their governments make on their behalf. The press facilitates this "right to know," by serving as a watchdog over the government, helping citizens to hold government accountable, and questioning its policies. Democratic governments grant journalists access to public meetings and public documents. They do not place prior restraints on what journalists may say or print.
- The press, itself, must act responsibly. Through professional associations, independent press councils, and "ombudsmen," in-house critics who hear public complaints, the press responds to complaints of its own excesses and remains internally accountable.
- Democracy requires the public to make choices and decisions. In order for the public to trust the press, journalists must provide factual reporting based on credible sources and information. Plagiarism and false reporting are counterproductive to a free press.
- Press outlets should establish their own editorial boards, independent of government control, in order to separate information gathering and dissemination from editorial processes.
- Journalists should not be swayed by public opinion, only by the pursuit of truth, as close as they can get to it. A democracy allows the press to go about its business of collecting and reporting the news without fear or favor from the government.
- Democracies foster a never-ending struggle between two rights: The government's obligation to protect national security; and the people's right to know, based on journalists' ability to access information. Governments sometimes need to limit access to information considered too sensitive for general distribution. But journalists in democracies are fully justified in pursuing such information.

# Federalism



When diverse groups of free people -- with different languages, religious faiths, or cultural norms -- choose to live under an agreed constitutional framework, they expect a degree of local autonomy and equal economic and social opportunities. A federal system of government -- power shared at the local, regional, and national levels -- empowers elected officials who design and administer policies tailored to local and regional needs. They work in partnership with a national government and with each other to solve the many problems the nation faces.

- Federalism is a system of shared power and decision-making between two or more freely elected governments with authority over the same people and geographical area. It grants and protects decision-making ability where results are most immediately felt -- in local communities, as well as at higher levels of government.
- Federalism fosters government accountability to the people and encourages citizen participation and civic responsibility by allowing local governments to design and administer local laws.
- A federal system is strengthened by a written constitution granting authority and outlining the scope of shared responsibilities enjoyed by each level of government.
- While it is generally agreed that local governments should satisfy local needs, some issues are best left to the national government. Defense, international treaties, federal budgets, and postal services are often cited as examples.
- Local ordinances reflect the preferences by which local communities choose to live - - police and fire patrols, school administration, and local health and building regulations are often designed and administered locally.
- Intergovernmental relations means that various governments in a federal state (national, regional, and local) work together when issues of statutory authority imply the need to address issues cooperatively. The national government often has authority to mediate disputes between regions.
- In a geographically large and economically diverse nation, disparities in income and social welfare among regions can be addressed by the national government through policies that redistribute tax revenues.
- A federal system is responsive and inclusive. Citizens are free to run for government positions at all levels -- local and regional governments offer the most positions and, perhaps, the most opportunity to make a difference in their communities.
- Federalism provides multiple opportunities for political parties to serve their constituents. Even if a particular party does not hold a majority in the national legislature or the executive, it is permitted to participate at the regional and local levels.

# The Rule of Law



For much of human history, rulers and law were synonymous -- law was simply the will of the ruler. A first step away from such tyranny was the notion of rule *by* law, including the notion that even a ruler is under the law and should rule by virtue of legal means. Democracies went further by establishing the rule *of* law. Although no society or government system is problem-free, rule of law protects fundamental political, social, and economic rights and reminds us that tyranny and lawlessness are not the only alternatives.

- Rule of law means that no individual, president or private citizen, stands above law. Democratic governments exercise authority by way of law and are themselves subject to law's constraints.
- Laws should express the will of the people, not the whims of kings, dictators, military officials, religious leaders, or self-appointed political parties.
- Citizens in democracies are willing to obey the laws of their society, then, because they are submitting to their own rules and regulations. Justice is best achieved when the laws are established by the very people who must obey them.
- Under the rule of law, a system of strong, independent courts should have the power and authority, resources, and the prestige to hold government officials, even top leaders, accountable to the nation's laws and regulations.
- For this reason, judges should be well trained, professional, independent, and impartial. To serve their necessary role in the legal and political system, judges must be committed to the principles of democracy.
- The laws of a democracy may have many sources: written constitutions; statutes and regulations; religious and ethical teachings; and cultural traditions and practices. Regardless of origin the law should enshrine certain provisions to protect the rights and freedoms of citizens:
  - Under the requirement of equal protection under the law, the law may not be uniquely applicable to any single individual or group.
  - Citizens must be secure from arbitrary arrest and unreasonable search of their homes or the seizure of their personal property.
  - Citizens charged with crimes are entitled to a speedy and public trial, along with the opportunity to confront and question their accusers. If convicted, they may not be subjected to cruel or unusual punishment.
  - Citizens cannot be forced to testify against themselves. This principle protects

citizens from coercion, abuse, or torture and greatly reduces the temptation of police to employ such measures.

## Human Rights



All human beings are born with inalienable rights. These human rights empower people to pursue lives of dignity -- thus, no government can bestow them but all governments should protect them. Freedom, built on a foundation of justice, tolerance, dignity, and respect -- regardless of ethnicity, religion, political association, or social standing -- allows people to pursue these fundamental rights. Whereas dictatorships deny human rights, free societies continually strive to attain them.

Human rights are interdependent and indivisible; they encompass myriad facets of human existence including social, political, and economic issues. Among the most commonly accepted are:

- All people should have the right to form their own opinions and express them individually or in peaceful assemblies. Free societies create a "marketplace of ideas" where people exchange their views on any number of issues.
- All people should have the right to participate in government. Governments should create laws that protect human rights while justice systems enforce those laws equally among the population.
- Freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture -- whether one is an opponent of the ruling political party, an ethnic minority, or even a common criminal -- is a basic human right. A professional police force respects all citizens as it enforces the laws of the nation.
- In ethnically diverse nations, religious and ethnic minorities should be free to use their language and maintain their traditions without fear of recrimination from the majority population. Governments should recognize the rights of minorities while respecting the will of the majority.
- All people should have the opportunity to work, earn a living, and support their families.
- Children deserve special protection. They should receive at least an elementary education, proper nutrition, and healthcare.
- To maintain human rights, citizens in any free society need to be vigilant. Citizen responsibility -- through a variety of participatory activities -- ensures that government remains accountable to the people. The family of free nations is committed to work toward protection of human rights. They formalize their commitment through a number of international treaties and covenants on human rights.

# Executive Power



Leaders of democratic governments govern with the consent of their citizens. Such leaders are powerful not because they command armies or economic wealth, but because they respect the limits placed on them by the electorate in a free and fair election.

- Through free elections, citizens of a democracy confer powers upon their leaders that are defined by law. In a constitutional democracy, power is divided so that the legislature makes the laws, the executive authority enforces and carries them out, and the judiciary operates independently.
- Democratic leaders are neither elected dictators nor "presidents-for-life." They serve fixed terms in office and accept the results of free elections, even if it means losing control of the government.
- In constitutional democracies, executive authority is generally limited in three ways: by a system of checks and balances separating the national government's executive, legislative, and judicial powers; by federalism, which divides power between the national government and the state/local governments; and by constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights.
- At the national level, the executive is limited by the constitutional authority vested in the legislative branch and by an independent judiciary
- Executive authority in modern democracies is generally organized in one of two ways: as a parliamentary or a presidential system.
  - In a parliamentary system, the majority party in the legislature forms the executive branch of the government, headed by a prime minister.
  - In a parliamentary system, the legislative and executive branches are not entirely distinct from one another, since the prime minister and members of the cabinet are drawn from the parliament. In such systems, the political opposition serves as a chief means of limiting, or checking the authority of the executive.
  - In a presidential system, the president is elected separately from the members of the legislature.
  - In a presidential system, both the president and the legislature have their own power bases and political constituencies, which serve to check and balance each other.
- Democracies do not require their governments to be weak, only limited. Consequently, democracies may be slow to reach agreement on national issues; yet when they do, their leaders can act with great authority and confidence.

- At all times, leaders in a constitutional democracy function within the rule of law that defines and restricts their authority.

## Legislative Power



Elected representatives in a democracy -- whether members of a parliament, assembly, or congress -- are there to serve the people. They perform a number of roles essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy.

- Elected legislatures are the principal forum for deliberating, debating, and passing laws in a representative democracy. They are not so-called rubber stamp parliaments merely approving the decisions of an authoritarian leader.
- Oversight and investigation powers allow legislators to publicly question government officials about their actions and decisions, and otherwise serve as a check on the power of various government ministries -- especially in the presidential system of governing where the legislature is separate from the executive.
- Legislators may approve national budgets, conduct hearings on pressing issues, and confirm executive appointees to courts and ministries. In some democracies, legislative committees provide lawmakers a forum for these public examinations of national issues.
- Legislators may support the government in power or they may serve as a loyal political opposition that offers alternative policies and programs.
- Legislators have a responsibility to articulate their views as effectively as possible. But they must work within the democratic ethic of tolerance, respect, and compromise to reach agreements that will benefit the general welfare of all the people -- not just their political supporters. Each legislator must alone decide on how to balance the general welfare with the needs of a local constituency.
- Legislators often provide constituents with a sympathetic hearing for their individual complaints and problems -- along with help in getting assistance from large government bureaucracies. To do this, they often maintain a staff of trained aides.
- National legislators are usually elected in one of two ways. In plurality elections, sometimes called "first past the post," the candidate with the most votes wins. In the proportional system, often used in parliamentary elections, voters usually cast ballots for parties, not individuals, and representatives are chosen on the basis of their party's percentage of the vote.
- A proportional system tends to encourage multiple, tightly organized smaller parties. Plurality elections encourage a looser, two-party system. Under either system, representatives engage in the debate, negotiation, coalition building, and compromise that are the hallmarks of democratic legislatures.
- Legislatures are often bicameral, with two chambers, and new laws generally require passage by both the upper and lower chambers.

# An Independent Judiciary



Independent and professional judges are the foundation of a fair, impartial, and constitutionally guaranteed system of courts of law known as the judiciary. This independence does not imply judges can make decisions based on personal preferences but rather that they are free to make lawful decisions -- even if those decisions contradict the government or powerful parties involved in a case.

- In democracies, independence from political pressures of elected officials and legislatures guarantees the impartiality of judges. Judicial rulings should be impartial, based on the facts of a case, individual merits and legal arguments, and relevant laws, without any restrictions or improper influence by interested parties. These principles ensure equal legal protection for all.
- The power of judges to review public laws and declare them in violation of the nation's constitution serves as a fundamental check on potential government abuse of power -- even if the government is elected by a popular majority. This power, however, requires that the courts be seen as independent and able to rest their decisions upon the law, not political considerations.
- Whether elected or appointed, judges must have job security or tenure, guaranteed by law, in order that they can make decisions without concern for pressure or attack by those in positions of authority. A civil society recognizes the importance of professional judges by providing them with adequate training and remuneration.
- Trust in the court system's impartiality -- in its being seen as the "non-political" branch of government -- is a principal source of its strength and legitimacy.
- A nation's courts, however, are no more immune from public commentary, scrutiny, and criticism than other institutions. Freedom of speech belongs to all: judges and their critics alike.
- To ensure their impartiality, judicial ethics require judges to step aside (or "recuse" themselves) from deciding cases in which they have a conflict of interest.
- Judges in a democracy cannot be removed for minor complaints, or in response to political criticism. Instead, they can be removed only for serious crimes or infractions through the lengthy and difficult procedure of impeachment (bringing charges) and trial -- either in the legislature or before a separate court panel.
- An independent judiciary assures people that court decisions will be based on the nation's laws and constitution, not on shifting political power or the pressures of a temporary majority. Endowed with this independence, the judicial system in a democracy serves as a safeguard of the people's rights and freedoms.

# Constitutionalism



A written constitution contains the most important laws by which a nation's citizens agree to live, and it outlines the basic structure of their government. Thus, democratic constitutionalism -- based on ideals of individual freedom, community rights, and limited government power -- creates the framework for governing a democracy.

- Constitutionalism recognizes that democratic and accountable government must be coupled with constitutional limits on the power of government.
- A constitution defines the basic purposes and aspirations of a society, including the common welfare of the people.
- All laws must be written in accordance with the constitution. In a democracy, an independent judiciary allows citizens to challenge laws they believe to be illegal or unconstitutional and to seek court-ordered remedies for illegal actions by the government or its officials.
- A constitution provides the framework for government power -- its scope of authority, mechanisms for exercising that authority, and the procedures for passage of future laws.
- A constitution defines citizenship and establishes the basis for deciding who shall have the right to vote.
- A constitution establishes the political, administrative, and judicial foundations of the state including the structure of the legislature and courts, requirements for holding elected office, and terms of office for elected officials.
- A constitution lays out responsibilities of government ministries and grants authority to collect taxes and create a national defense force.
- In a federal system, the constitution divides power among the various levels of government.
- Since a constitution is written at a certain point in time, it must be amendable so that it may adapt to the changing needs of the people in the future. Since the flexibility to meet unpredictable and unforeseeable challenges in the future is important, constitutions are usually written to specify general principles of government.
- Constitutions generally contain two different types of rights -- negative and affirmative rights.
  - Negative rights tell the government what it cannot do. These rights limit government and prevent it from affecting certain behaviors of its citizens. For example, the government must refrain from limiting free speech and the ability of citizens to peacefully assemble, and from illegal imprisonment.

° Affirmative rights tell the government what it must do and citizens what they are entitled to. Such "entitlements" may include social, economic, and cultural rights in the form of government guarantees of various social indicators. There may be guarantees of primary and secondary education for all boys and girls, guaranteed "well being" after retirement, or jobs and health care for all citizens.

# Freedom of Speech



Freedom of speech and expression, especially about political and other public issues, is the lifeblood of any democracy. Democratic governments do not control the content of most written and verbal speech. Thus democracies are usually filled with many voices expressing different or even contrary ideas and opinions.

According to democratic theorists, a free and open debate will usually lead to the best option being considered and will be more likely to avoid serious mistakes.

- Democracy depends upon a literate, knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information enables it to participate as fully as possible in the public life of their society and to criticize unwise or tyrannical government officials or policies. Citizens and their elected representatives recognize that democracy depends upon the widest possible access to uncensored ideas, data, and opinions.
- For a free people to govern themselves, they must be free to express themselves - - openly, publicly, and repeatedly; in speech and in writing.
- The principle of free speech should be protected by a democracy's constitution, preventing the legislative or executive branches of government from imposing censorship.
- The protection of free speech is a so-called negative right, simply requiring that government refrain from limiting speech, unlike the direct action required of other so-called affirmative rights. For the most part, the authorities in a democracy are uninvolved in the content of written and verbal speech in the society.
- Protests serve as a testing ground for any democracy -- thus the right to peaceful assembly is essential and plays an integral part in facilitating the use of free speech. A civil society allows for spirited debate among those in deep disagreement over the issues.
- Freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute, and cannot be used to justify violence, slander, libel, subversion, or obscenity. Consolidated democracies generally require a high degree of threat in order to justify banning speech which may incite violence, untruthfully harm the reputation of others, overthrow a constitutional government, or promote lewd behavior. Most democracies also forbid speech that incites racial or ethnic violence.
- The challenge for a democracy is one of balance: to defend freedom of speech and assembly while countering speech which truly encourages violence, intimidation, or subversion.

# Government Accountability



Government accountability means that public officials -- elected and un-elected -- have an obligation to explain their decisions and actions to the citizens.

Government accountability is achieved through the use of a variety of mechanisms -- political, legal, and administrative -- designed to prevent corruption and ensure that public officials remain answerable and accessible to the people they serve. In the absence of such mechanisms, corruption may thrive.

- The primary political accountability mechanism is free and fair elections. Fixed-terms of office and elections force elected officials to account for their performance and provide opportunities for challengers to offer citizens alternative policy choices. If voters are not satisfied with the performance of an official, they may vote them out of office when their terms expire.
- The degree to which public officials are politically accountable is a function of whether they occupy an elected versus appointed position, how often they are up for reelection, and how many terms they can serve.
- Legal accountability mechanisms include constitutions, legislative acts, decrees, rules, codes, and other legal instruments that proscribe actions that public officials can and cannot take and how citizens may take action against those officials whose conduct is considered unsatisfactory.
- An independent judiciary is an essential requirement for the success of legal accountability, serving as a venue where citizens bring claims against the government.
- Legal accountability mechanisms include:
  - Ethics statutes and codes of conduct for public officials, outlining unacceptable practices;
  - Conflict of interest and financial disclosure laws, requiring public officials to divulge the source of their income and assets so that citizens may judge whether the actions of those officials are likely to be influenced improperly by financial interests;
  - "Sunshine" laws, providing the press and the public access to government records and meetings;
  - Citizen participation requirements, dictating that certain government decisions must include input from the public; and
  - Judicial review, providing courts the power to review the decisions and actions of

public officials and agencies.

- Administrative accountability mechanisms include offices within agencies or ministries and practices within administrative processes designed to ensure that the decisions and actions of public officials account for the interest of the citizens.
- Administrative accountability mechanisms include:
  - Agency ombudsmen, responsible for hearing and addressing citizen complaints;
  - Independent auditors who scrutinize the use of public funds for signs of misuse;
  - Administrative courts, that hear citizens' complaints about agency decisions;
  - Ethics rules protecting so-called whistleblowers -- those within government who speak out about corruption or abuse of official authority -- from reprisals.

# Free and Fair Elections



Free and fair elections allow people living in a representative democracy to determine the political makeup and future policy direction of their nation's government.

- Free and fair elections increase the likelihood of a peaceful transfer of power. They help to ensure that losing candidates will accept the validity of the election's results and cede power to the new government.
- Elections alone do not assure democracy since dictators can use the resources of the state to tamper with the election process.
- Free and fair elections require:
  - Universal suffrage for all eligible men and women to vote — democracies do not restrict this right from minorities, the disabled, or give it only to those who are literate or who own property.
  - Freedom to register as a voter or run for public office.
  - Freedom of speech for candidates and political parties — democracies do not restrict candidates or political parties from criticizing the performance of the incumbent.
  - Numerous opportunities for the electorate to receive objective information from a free press.
  - Freedom to assemble for political rallies and campaigns.
  - Rules that require party representatives to maintain a distance from polling places on election day — election officials, volunteer poll workers, and international monitors may assist voters with the voting process but not the voting choice.
  - An impartial or balanced system of conducting elections and verifying election results — trained election officials must either be politically independent or those overseeing elections should be representative of the parties in the election.
  - Accessible polling places, private voting space, secure ballot boxes, and transparent ballot counting.
  - Secret ballots — voting by secret ballot ensures that an individual's choice of party

or candidate cannot be used against him or her.

- Legal prohibitions against election fraud — enforceable laws must exist to prevent vote tampering (e.g. double counting, ghost voting).
- Recount and contestation procedures — legal mechanisms and processes to review election processes must be established to ensure that elections were conducted properly.
- Voting methods — varying by country and even within countries — include:
  - Paper ballots — votes are marked on or punched through paper.
  - Ballots with pictures of candidates or party symbols so that illiterate citizens may cast the correct vote.
  - Electronic systems — voters use touch-screen or push-button machines.
  - Absentee ballots — allowing those who will not be able to vote on election day to cast their ballots prior to the election.

# Freedom of Religion



All citizens should be free to follow their conscience in matters of religious faith. Freedom of religion includes the right to worship alone or with others, in public or private, and to participate in religious observance, practice, and teaching without fear of persecution from government or other groups in society.

- All people have the right to worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes.
- Like other fundamental human rights, religious freedom is not created or granted by the state, but all states should protect it. Democracies include language pertaining to protection of religious freedom in their constitutions.
- Although many democracies may choose to recognize an official separation of church and state, the values of government and religion are not in fundamental conflict.
- Democracies generally do not create governmental agencies or other official bodies to regulate religious affairs, although they may require houses of worship and religious groups to register for administrative or tax purposes.
- Governments that protect religious freedom for all their citizens are more likely to protect other rights necessary for religious freedom, such as free speech and assembly.
- Genuine democracies recognize that individual religious differences must be respected and that a key role of government is to protect religious choice, even in cases where the state sanctions a particular religious faith. Democracies also:
  - Do not determine the content of religious publications, education, or sermons.
  - Respect the right of parents to direct the religious education of their children.
  - Prohibit incitement of religious-based violence against others.
  - Protect members of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities.
  - Allow people to observe days of rest associated with their faith and to celebrate holy days in accordance with their beliefs.
  - Allow interfaith movements to flourish, as members of different faiths seek common ground on various issues and cooperate to solve challenges facing the entire population.

- Provide the freedom for government and religious officials, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists to investigate reports of religious persecution.
- Respect the right of religious organizations to freely participate and contribute to civil society — to operate faith-based schools, run hospitals and care for the aged, and create other programs and activities that benefit the society.

## The Rights of Women and Girls



**Discrimination against women means that specific laws or practices create a distinction, exclusion, or restriction on the basis of gender.**

- Democracies should strive to protect women's rights, encourage women's participation in all aspects of society and government, and create places for women to associate freely and express their views openly.
- Legal rights for women include equal representation under the law and access to legal resources.
- Women's rights must be clearly stated — ambiguity of women's legal status remains a leading cause of poverty worldwide.
- Women should have rights to ownership and inheritance.
- Women should have the opportunity to take part in the drafting and implementation of constitutions and legislation.
- Women's political rights include the right to vote in elections, to run for public office, to participate in government, and to organize politically.
- Democracies should support civil society initiatives — public and nongovernmental — that teach women how to vote and train them in political campaign techniques and the legislative process.
- Women's activism at all levels of civil society and government strengthens democracies.
- Women and girls should have access to primary education. They should not be barred from attending or teaching in secondary schools and universities.
- Economic rights give women control over their economic assets and help them avoid risky sexual and abusive relationships. These rights include:

- The same employment opportunities and criteria as men.
- Protection from job termination because of pregnancy or marriage.
- Participation in programs, such as microenterprise lending and vocational training, that enable women to generate income.
- The right to equal pay and to equal treatment and respect at work.
- Democracies should strive to ensure the health and well-being of women and girls and provide equal access to programs such as:
  - General health care, disease prevention, and prenatal care.
  - Preventing HIV/AIDS, improving health care delivery to those infected, and reducing mother-to-child transmission of the disease.
  - Combating traffickers who lure women and girls into forced prostitution or domestic servitude through deception, fraud, or coercion.
  - Fighting so-called sex tourism that often exploits women and children.
  - Educating families about the social and health consequences of early marriage.
  - Supporting victims' organizations, including domestic violence and rape crisis centers.
  - Training police, lawyers, judges, and medical personnel to reduce domestic violence.
  - Eliminating female genital mutilation.

# Governing by Coalitions and Compromise



Every society has (or includes) groups of people with differing views on subjects of importance to all citizens. A liberal democracy recognizes this as a benefit to the nation and thus supports tolerance for and expression of different points of view.

- Democratic governments succeed when politicians and officials understand that complex issues rarely present solutions that are clearly "right" or "wrong" and that differing interpretations of democratic principles and social priorities exist.
- Freedom of assembly and the press foster open debate and exchange of ideas. This openness allows a government to identify problems and permits groups to meet and resolve differences. (In the private sector, this same "marketplace of ideas" offers opportunities for innovation and investment that are the engines of economic growth.)
- Coalitions are formed when interest groups or political parties join together on issues of common interest, even if they strongly disagree on other issues. Compromise on important decisions allows the government to go about the business of governing.
- Legislative bodies in democracies rely on coalition-building to pass laws:
  - In a parliamentary system, political groups form partnerships with other groups to promote their own interests and form governments.
  - In a presidential system, lawmakers sometimes cross party boundaries to vote on issues they and their constituents care deeply about.
- Coalitions often require that a political party be willing to put aside certain differences with other groups in order to achieve more important parts of their agendas.
- Because coalition governments are made up from parties representing sometimes-opposing viewpoints, there does exist the potential for dissolution of the government. In some democracies, it is common for ruling coalitions to form and disband several times, even in a single year.

# The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations



In democracies, ordinary citizens may organize independent groups that serve the needs of the community or nation they live in and complement, supplement, or even challenge the work of the government. Such organizations are often called nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, because they are not an extension of the government's offices.

- NGOs allow citizens to improve their society by advocating, educating, and mobilizing attention around major public issues and monitoring the conduct of government and private enterprise.
- NGOs enable citizens from different backgrounds to learn to work together and build the skills, relationships, and trust necessary for good government.
- NGOs serve a great variety of citizen interests. They may act as social service providers, advocates for the environment or for living standards, work standards, or as the catalysts for democratic change.
- NGOs often represent the interests of those citizens who might otherwise be left out of national policy debates. They open the public discourse to people of all economic and social classes and to women and minorities.
- Funding for NGOs may come from individual private donations, private trusts and philanthropies, corporations, religious institutions, international institutions, other NGOs, sales of goods and services, and even governments.
- Governments and NGOs frequently work as partners. NGOs may provide local and regional expertise and personnel on the ground for implementation of government-funded projects. NGOs may be politically unaffiliated, or they may be based on partisan ideals and seek to advance a particular cause or set of causes in the public interest. In either model the key point is that NGOs should operate under minimal political control of states.
- NGOs develop local and international programs in virtually all areas that contribute to the promotion of the principles of democracy, including:
  - Human rights — by promoting international standards and monitoring for violations and abuses.
  - Rule of law — through low-cost or free legal aid, educating all citizens regarding their rights, and advocating for legal reforms.
  - Women's participation — by preparing them for political participation and

protecting them from socioeconomic discrimination.

- Civic education — through education programs focusing on the role of the citizen in a democratic and diverse society.
- A free press — by promoting independent media, training journalists, and setting standards for ethical journalism.
- Political party development — through election monitoring by trained domestic observers and nonpartisan voter registration drives.
- Government accountability — by conducting policy analysis and serving as watchdogs over governmental actions.

# Education and Democracy



Education is a universal human right. It also is a means of achieving other human rights and it is an empowering social and economic tool. Through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the world's nations have agreed that everyone has the right to education.

- Every society transmits its habits of mind, social norms, culture, and ideals from one generation to the next. There is a direct connection between education and democratic values: in democratic societies, educational content and practice support habits of democratic governance.
- This educational transmission process is vital in a democracy because effective democracies are dynamic, evolving forms of government that demand independent thinking by the citizenry. The opportunity for positive social and political change rests in citizens' hands. Governments should not view the education system as a means to control information and to indoctrinate students.
- Governments should value and devote resources to education just as they strive to defend their citizens.
- Literacy enables people to stay informed through newspapers and books. Informed citizens are in a better position to improve their democracy.
- Education systems in democracies do not preclude study of other political doctrines or systems of government. Democracies encourage students to develop reasonable arguments based on careful research and a clear understanding of history.
- Private and religious groups should be free to create schools or parents may choose to teach their children at home.
- Government-run schooling must be equally accessible to all citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, gender, or physical disabilities.
- Democratic norms and practices should be taught in order for people to understand and appreciate their opportunities and responsibilities as free citizens.
- Education for democratic citizenship includes knowledge of national and world history and of basic democratic principles.
- School curricula in democracies include history, geography, economics, literature, philosophy, law, the arts, social studies, mathematics, and science courses available to all students -- girls and boys.
- Students should also be free to organize clubs and activities where democratic norms can be put into practice. For example,
  - Student government gives pupils experience in the democratic process.
  - Mock elections teach students about citizen participation and encourage in them lifelong voting habits.
  - School newspapers educate students about the role of a free media and

responsible journalism.

- Civic clubs promote a connection to the larger community.