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In a time of democratic erosion around the globe, people's desire for political rights and civil liberties persists. Democracy requires interconnected champions to support their efforts. The Kettering Foundation's **Democracy around the Globe** focus area works with strategic partners around the world to protect rights, empower communities, amplify marginalized voices, and counter the influence of authoritarian regimes.

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FEATURED SPEAKERS

Paloma Dallas KF Senior Program Officer, Democracy around the Globe

Sharon L. Davies KF President and CEO

Elyssa Feder Executive Director, Rising Organizers

María Teresa Kumar KF Senior Fellow and President, Voto Latino and Voto Latino Foundation

Steven Levitsky KF Senior Fellow and David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies, Harvard University

Alexandria J. Maloney KF Director of External Affairs

Koketso Moeti KF Global Fellow, Civic Activist, and Founder of amandla.mobi

Chris Muriithi KF Global Fellow, LGBTQ+ Activist, and Founder of Bold Network Africa

Flávia Pellegrino KF Global Fellow and Executive Director of Pacto pela Democracia

Brad Rourke KF Chief External Affairs Officer and Director, DC Operations

Gábor Scheiring KF Global Fellow, Scholar, and Author of *The Retreat* of Liberal Democracy

Maria J. Stephan Co-lead and Chief Organizer, The Horizons Project

Ivan Vejvoda KF Global Fellow and Permanent Fellow and Head, Europe's Futures project

INTRODUCTION

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation convened the Kettering Global Conversation on Democracy: Solidarity across Borders on July 21, 2025, bringing together democracy practitioners, scholars, and activists to examine contemporary threats to democratic governance and develop strategic responses through cross-border collaboration. Featuring participants from Brazil, Hungary, Kenya, Serbia, South Africa, and the United States, the convening addressed the urgent need for coordinated resistance to global democratic backsliding while building more inclusive democracies.

Event Overview

The gathering explored three critical dimensions: understanding and resisting rising authoritarianism, organizing across borders to develop democratic coalitions, and building inclusive democracies. Keynote speaker Ivan Vejvoda provided a historical perspective on democratic transitions, emphasizing that current challenges represent a transition from "post-heroic" democratic complacency to a "heroic" period requiring active sacrifice. Panel discussions examined practical resistance strategies, international collaboration models, and inclusive democracy frameworks, demonstrating the interconnected nature of global democratic struggles while identifying concrete tactics for effective response.

Major Themes

Contemporary authoritarian threats operate through elected governments that maintain democratic facades while systematically capturing institutions, deploying fear-based politics, and securing international business cooperation. A key indicator of democratic erosion is when legal opposition activities become costly through harassment and retaliation. Successful resistance requires sustained mass mobilization (approximately 3.5 percent of the population), strategic noncooperation across sectors, and international pressure on enabling corporations and institutions.

Effective organizing emphasizes collective action over individual courage, building spaces for cross-ideological collaboration, and creating sustainable resistance infrastructure. International collaboration succeeds through bidirectional learning rather than one-directional expertise transfer, while integrating movement organizing principles within democratic institutions addresses the root causes of democratic vulnerability.

Demographic transformation makes inclusive democracy strategically essential rather than merely morally desirable. Historical narratives and cultural authenticity can effectively counter exclusionary politics, while universal design principles demonstrate that inclusive institutions benefit all participants. Successful resistance requires cross-sectoral collaboration, historical consciousness, and rejection of strategic rights compromises that weaken democratic coalitions.

Critical Recommendations

Democratic institutions must develop concrete organizing plans for crises, increase risk tolerance and the speed of response, and build systematic learning networks to match authoritarian coordination. Elite resistance must overcome accommodation tendencies through recognition that democratic preservation requires active sacrifice of privilege. Long-term success demands simultaneous defense against immediate threats and transformative institutional change addressing economic inequality and political alienation that create conditions for susceptibility to authoritarian appeals.

Global democratic challenges require coordinated international responses combining domestic mobilization with economic and political pressure on enabling actors. Democratic movements must develop knowledge-sharing networks, support cross-border coalition building, and recognize that local democratic health affects global stability.

Current democratic challenges represent both unprecedented threats and historic opportunities for renewal. Success requires sustained collective action, international solidarity, and commitment to building democratic institutions that serve all communities while defending fundamental principles against authoritarian assault.

OPENING REMARKS

Alexandria Maloney opened the convening by establishing the Kettering Global Conversation on Democracy as a priority institutional effort. Her opening acknowledgments signaled the Kettering Foundation's substantial organizational commitment to address global democratic challenges and to bring together diverse stakeholders in both physical and virtual formats.

Strategic Framework

Paloma Dallas established the strategic framework by centering the gathering around the theme of "Solidarity across Borders," which she positioned as both descriptive and prescriptive. The international composition of participants—including Kettering Senior Fellows María Teresa Kumar and Steven Levitsky alongside Kettering's 2025 Global Fellows from Brazil, Hungary, Kenya, Serbia, and South Africa—provided concrete evidence of this cross-border approach. Dallas emphasized that this international representation was not a matter of chance, but a deliberate statement of purpose, arguing that contemporary democratic challenges are interconnected patterns requiring coordinated international responses.

Dallas presented a diagnostic framework that acknowledged the acceleration of democratic backsliding worldwide while identifying common tactical elements: the systematic silencing of dissent, the deliberate shrinking of public space, and coordinated efforts to isolate those working for democratic change. However, she balanced this sobering assessment with recognition of emerging resistance patterns, highlighting movements that refuse to capitulate and coalitions that are forming across communities, countries, and continents. This dual recognition of threat and resistance established the analytical foundation for the day's programming.

Programmatic Objectives

The convening's four core objectives reflected both analytical and practical ambitions: highlighting shared threads connecting democratic challenges across regions, facilitating mutual learning from diverse contexts, catalyzing relationships among democracy practitioners, and providing essential courage and solidarity to participants engaged in challenging work. Dallas acknowledged the formidable strength of the current global authoritarian wave, yet expressed confidence that the popular demand for democracy ultimately proves stronger—a belief grounded in observable examples of organizing and resistance occurring globally.

The structured program progression moved participants from broad analysis through practical strategies toward constructive vision, beginning with a keynote providing a global perspective, followed by three sequential panels examining democratic resistance, coalition-building across borders, and building new democratic models that center on belonging, accountability, and participation for all. This framework positioned the convening as both diagnostic and generative, aimed at equipping participants with enhanced resolve and practical tools for democratic defense and renewal.

KEYNOTE: REGAINING THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION

Ivan Vejvoda opened the discussions with keynote remarks that highlighted his personal journey, providing a unique lens through which to examine contemporary democratic challenges. Born in Yugoslavia, he witnessed firsthand the dissolution of what seemed like a permanent political structure into seven separate nations, followed by life under the dictatorship of Slobodan Miloševic, participation in civic resistance movements, and ultimately the successful struggle to restore democratic governance in Serbia.

Vejvoda's biographical narrative spans several pivotal moments in modern democratic history, from participation in the 1968 Paris student uprising to witnessing the fall of communist totalitarianism in 1989. This personal timeline illustrates historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt's observation about "expecting the unexpected"—that political systems which appear unbreakable can dissolve overnight. It also demonstrates that sustained civic engagement can successfully challenge even the most entrenched authoritarian regimes.

The Current Global Democratic Crisis

Vejvoda situates contemporary challenges within broader historical patterns of democratic ebbs and flows, arguing that we are currently experiencing what Arendt called "dark times." The Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as the defining geopolitical crisis of our era, representing not merely a regional conflict but a fundamental challenge to the post–World War II democratic order. This invasion is a monumental test case for whether democratic nations will effectively support countries defending their sovereignty against authoritarian aggression.

The keynote emphasized that democratic erosion is occurring globally, requiring citizens to relearn the "apprenticeship of freedom" that Alexis de Tocqueville identified as essential to democratic life. Vejvoda argues that many people in established democracies have begun treating their rights and freedoms like "the air we breathe," taking them for granted until threatened. This complacency has created conditions where authoritarian movements can exploit citizens' assumptions that democratic institutions will naturally persist without active maintenance.

Philosophical Framework for Democratic Engagement

Drawing on classical political theory, Vejvoda presents democracy not as a static system but as an ongoing practice requiring constant civic engagement. Machiavelli's concepts of *vivere civile* (civic living) and *vivere libero* (free living) provide the foundation for understanding democracy as an aspirational project rather than an achieved state.

The tension between *fortuna* (external forces) and *virtù* (the capacity for purposeful action) becomes central to democratic survival. While citizens cannot control all circumstances, they retain the power to respond effectively to challenges.

The remarks distinguish sharply between governance and democracy, arguing that technocratic administration cannot substitute for genuine popular sovereignty. Vejvoda's emphasis on "We the People" moments—historical periods when citizens actively assert their sovereign authority—provides a framework for understanding both the Serbian democracy movement and the Ukrainian resistance as expressions of democratic principle rather than political preferences.

Serbia as a Contemporary Example

Drawing from his narrative, Vejvoda presented the ongoing democratic movement in Serbia as an exemplar of direct democracy in action, comparing current Serbian civic engagement to transformative historical moments such as the French Revolution and the Paris Commune. The Serbian case demonstrates that even countries with limited international attention can serve as laboratories for democratic innovation, providing practical lessons about civic engagement mechanics, nonviolent discipline, and persistent popular mobilization.

Global Solidarity and Ukraine

Historical examples of international solidarity provide the foundation for Vejvoda's arguments about contemporary responsibility. His invocation of Lafayette's and Thomas Paine's support for the American Revolution, along with his father's participation in anti-fascist resistance in three different countries during the 1930s and 1940s, establishes precedent for citizens supporting democratic struggles beyond their borders. Paine's *The Rights of Man* received particular emphasis as articulating the fundamental right to resist dictatorial authority.

Vejvoda argues for understanding democratic struggles as inherently interconnected across geographical and cultural boundaries, linking South Africa to Kenya to Serbia to India to Somalia, Sudan, the Middle East, and Ukraine. This interconnectedness means that authoritarian success in one region emboldens similar movements elsewhere, while democratic victories provide inspiration and practical lessons for resistance movements.

He closed by bringing particular attention to Ukraine's resistance efforts. He challenged those calling for rapid peace negotiations by asking whether they would accept an invader in their own homes. The characterization of Ukrainian resistance as a "battle royal" that will define future security arrangements elevates the conflict's significance beyond regional concerns, making sustained support for Ukraine not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for global democratic security. Vejvoda concluded by calling on democratic societies to recognize this moment as a critical juncture requiring active choice rather than passive observation, emphasizing that current challenges represent an opportunity for citizens to rediscover their agency in shaping democratic futures.

PANEL DISCUSSION: DEMOCRACY VS. AUTOCRACY

Maria J. Stephan moderated a panel featuring Steven Levitsky and Gábor Scheiring that examined contemporary authoritarianism and resistance strategies. The discussion focused on competitive authoritarianism, a form of governance that maintains democratic facades while systematically undermining democratic competition.

The Modern Authoritarian Playbook

Levitsky presented a framework for understanding 21st-century authoritarianism that differs significantly from traditional military juntas or single-party regimes. Contemporary authoritarian regimes are typically led by elected governments that preserve constitutional forms while systematically "tilting the playing field." Rather than banning opposition or suspending constitutions, these regimes engage in strategic institutional capture, purging professional civil servants and packing state institutions with loyalists who then weaponize government agencies against political rivals.

The key indicator of competitive authoritarianism is the cost of exercising constitutional opposition rights. In healthy democracies, legal opposition activities, such as writing critical articles, organizing protests, or running for office—should be relatively costless. Under competitive authoritarianism, these same activities expose citizens to investigations, audits, harassment, and retaliation. Levitsky argued that when citizens must "think twice" about legal political participation, they no longer live in a fully democratic system, contending that the United States has already crossed this threshold into "mild competitive authoritarianism."

The Hungarian Case Study

Scheiring provided detailed insights into Hungary's transformation under Viktor Orbán. Beginning immediately after the 2010 election, Orbán implemented a "shock therapy" strategy—swift, simultaneous legislative changes designed to paralyze opposition forces. The Hungarian model involved systematic constitutional revision, electoral system changes favoring the ruling party, and comprehensive media capture caused by deliberate regulatory pressure and loyal oligarchs purchasing struggling outlets. He then commented that while the Orbán administration moved with great speed, the second Trump administration has moved much more quickly.

Scheiring emphasized that independent institutions became captured through personnel changes, with Orbán loyalists installed in key positions throughout the prosecutor's office, regulatory agencies, and oversight bodies. This comprehensive institutional capture meant that even obvious corruption could not be effectively

investigated or prosecuted, creating a system of impunity for government allies while maintaining the appearance of legal process.

Beyond institutional changes, Scheiring highlighted the "software of illiberalism": cultural and psychological tactics that rely heavily on fear-based politics, encouraging majority populations to fear immigrants and minorities.

This approach exploits real economic anxieties while redirecting anger toward scapegoating rather than addressing root causes.

Further, he cited how international business cooperation enabled authoritarian consolidation in Hungary. German automotive companies and other investors played a critical role through their willingness to operate in environments of labor repression and weakened trade unions, thereby creating a feedback loop where authoritarian policies were rewarded with increased foreign investment.

Global Patterns and Resistance Strategies

Levitsky compared Hungarian systematization with Latin American patterns, noting that regional variations tend to involve less systematic institutional capture but greater reliance on corruption and direct financial incentives. In middle-income countries with weaker civil society institutions and greater economic vulnerability, states can more easily reward cooperation and punish opposition through the selective application of benefits and penalties.

The panelists emphasized that successful resistance requires sustained mass mobilization involving diverse sectors through noncooperation and noncompliance, such as workers striking, consumers boycotting, teachers refusing to comply with authoritarian directives, and professionals maintaining ethical standards despite pressure. Countries with recent authoritarian experience—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and South Korea—demonstrate quicker threat recognition, while the United States lacks widespread memory of authoritarianism, contributing to the belief that "it can't happen here."

The US civil rights movement was cited as a relevant domestic precedent, representing successful mass nonviolent resistance against authoritarian governance at the subnational level. The movement demonstrated how noncooperation could effectively challenge entrenched systems. Noncooperation through lunch counter sit-ins, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and civil disobedience campaigns all created unsustainable costs for maintaining authoritarian control.

Elite Resistance Failures

Despite unprecedented civil society resources, hundreds of billionaires, major corporations, and well-funded universities, US elites have largely chosen accommodation over resistance. Levitsky noted that extremely wealthy individuals, such as Jeff Bezos, and institutions like Harvard should be able to resist, unlike public universities in poorer countries. He attributed elite reluctance to wealthy individuals becoming accustomed to privilege and not wanting to risk losing it.

The discussion revealed asymmetric learning between authoritarian and democratic movements, with authoritarian leaders systematically sharing tactics while democratic movements proved less effective at building international networks. Levitsky observed it should be much harder to tilt the playing field in the US given its resources, yet it has been "surprisingly easy going for Trump so far," suggesting that civil society has been "punching below its weight."

Strategic Implications

Successful pro-democracy strategies must simultaneously address immediate threats and long-term institutional reform. Levitsky noted that democracy defenders have become "very conservative" in wanting to preserve 19th- and 20th-century institutions, which is "a hell of a lot better than where we are today, but clearly not enough." Democracy must be strengthened to address the economic inequality and political alienation that create fertile ground for authoritarian appeals through a transformative vision that responds to legitimate grievances while maintaining democratic principles.

Question and Answer Session

The panelists' discussion then opened to the audience, with questions focusing on practical implementation challenges, the role of different actors in resistance efforts, and lessons from successful democratic movements worldwide.

What can we learn from Hungary and other countries about encouraging courage within the authoritarian's own party to defy or defect, given Trump's consolidation of Republican Party control?

Levitsky shared the hope that Trump could be constrained if even a fraction of Republicans drew a line, but noted that Trump's control occurred very quickly. The McCain faction that existed when he wrote *How Democracies Die* seven years ago is gone. Levitsky cited Richard Nixon as a historical example but emphasized that

Republicans acted only when it was very late. He concluded that it is particularly difficult for parties to constrain sitting presidents in presidential democracies.

Scheiring acknowledged this as ideal but unlikely, noting that when a political style pays off electorally, there is little incentive for party members to oppose it.

Rather than expecting Republicans to restrain illiberal leaders, he recommended focusing democratic energies on winning elections against these forces so that illiberal politics does not pay off electorally.

Why do institutions with the most money and legal power show the least courage, while ordinary people demonstrate more courage? How can solidarity be developed to support collective action, especially in an individualistic culture?

Levitsky expressed disappointment that, despite America's unprecedented institutional resources, individual citizens have shown more courage than powerful institutions. He noted that with Jeff Bezos's wealth, it should be easy to be courageous, observing that it is "really hard to be courageous when you might lose that private jet." He highlighted America's weak labor movement and lack of encompassing organizations for collective action.

Scheiring argued that historically, democracy's biggest advances came from the masses organizing against collusion between economic and political elites. Democracy was never something elites gave to people, but rather something demanded by those who had nothing to lose. He concluded that democracies' biggest allies are the organized masses who demand dignity and inclusive democracy.

Stephan reinforced the mass mobilization point, citing research showing that no regime has remained in power when 3.5 percent of the population—approximately 11 million Americans—engages in active protest. She emphasized that effective resistance involves organizing within faith groups, unions, and businesses to prepare them for eventual noncooperation.

Has global pressure resulted in effective anti-authoritarian movements? What factors contribute to the success of global movements, and is this also possible in the US?

Levitsky described a critical period (mid-1980s to early 2000s) when the liberal West was the dominant global power, creating strong external pressure for democracy that coincided with the greatest expansion of democracy in history. However, with the rise of China and a more aggressive Russia, liberal Western dominance is gone and unlikely to return.

Stephan cited successful cases, including South Africa, Chile, Poland's Solidarity movement, and South Korea's response to martial law. She emphasized that successful campaigns involve mass mobilization using diverse tactics that bring about loyalty shifts in key pillars upholding regimes.

Given that American democratic institutions had become "stale," what proactive practices from other countries could help the US be more aggressive in positive democratic reforms?

Scheiring noted that Nordic social democracies cope better with authoritarian challenges because of low inequality and restrained economic elites, leading people to trust democracy as a system that works for them rather than one hijacked by elites.

Levitsky emphasized the challenge of addressing immediate authoritarian threats while building a more legitimate democracy in the long term. He acknowledged that democracy defenders have become very conservative in simply preserving old institutions, stressing that it is clearly not enough to just restore "Obama-era democracy."

PANEL DISCUSSION: ORGANIZING ACROSS BORDERS

Brad Rourke moderated a panel featuring Elyssa Feder and Flávia Pellegrino, examining practical strategies for incentivizing democratic action and building effective cross-border coalitions. The discussion shifted from how to incentivize courage to how to incentivize action, focusing on concrete organizing approaches and international collaboration models.

Building Collective Capacity

Feder emphasized that effective organizing begins with helping people understand they are not alone in democratic struggles. Rather than expecting individual courage, successful organizing creates collective action through shared understanding and practical support. She argued that most people in the US share common values—clean air, safe communities, good schools—but have been misled into fighting each other rather than working together toward shared goals.

The key to incentivizing action lies in providing both emotional support and practical tools. Feder stressed that organizing explicitly rejects the authoritarian message that "your freedom has to come at the expense of somebody else's." Instead, it demonstrates that collective freedom requires collaborative effort. This approach builds on universal instincts toward freedom, noting that authoritarianism "works so hard to protect itself because we all have the instinct to be free."

Creating Safe Spaces for Collaboration

Pellegrino highlighted the importance of building safe spaces and trust as fundamental prerequisites for democratic action. Drawing from her experience with Pacto pela Democracia in Brazil, she emphasized that democracy is "essentially a collective endeavor" requiring structures that enable diverse actors to set aside differences and focus on shared democratic goals.

This model demonstrates how broad, cross-ideological coalitions can effectively counter authoritarian threats by providing infrastructure for sustained collaboration. Pellegrino noted that building these coalitions requires a gradual approach. Relationship-building helps create the foundational trust necessary for actors to take risks, maintain solidarity during challenging periods, and undertake more complex collaborative actions.

International Coalition Building

The panel revealed several effective models for international democratic collaboration: electoral coalitions focused on defeating authoritarian candidates, political party alliances for campaign coordination, and civil society coalitions for long-term democratic infrastructure building. Latin American collaboration provides a concrete example, with Pacto's organizations in Brazil sharing coalition-building expertise with their counterparts in Argentina, Colombia, and Peru for seven years. This collaboration focuses on strategies for building cross-ideological partnerships and creating sustainable collaborative structures.

Institutional Critique and Reform

Feder offered a nuanced assessment of pro-democracy institutions, noting positive developments in cross-sector collaboration while identifying speed and risk tolerance as major weaknesses. While institutions demonstrate urgency about democratic threats, they struggle to translate this urgency into rapid action. She argued that effective democracy work requires accepting higher levels of risk rather than pursuing perfectly strategic investments, criticizing institutional culture as overly focused on conservative, well-funded approaches rather than engaging with the life-or-death reality of democratic threats.

A central theme was the need to bridge traditionally separate movement and democracy sectors. Feder argued that democratic institutions must incorporate movement organizing principles to address one of the root causes of democratic vulnerability—institutions that have been unresponsive to people's real needs. This integration requires democratic institutions to adopt organizing principles while movement organizations recognize that their specific goals depend on having responsive democratic institutions.

Practical Implementation

Feder challenged institutional actors to develop concrete organizing plans for potential democratic crises rather than relying solely on communications strategies. She stressed that institutions must be prepared to engage directly with communities and mobilize public action, as an effective response requires "something more than a press release." This involves understanding organizing principles, building relationships with community partners, and developing capacity for rapid mobilization. All institutional actors need to recognize themselves as organizers rather than viewing organizing as someone else's responsibility.

Question and Answer Session

The panel's focus on practical organizing strategies and international collaboration models prompted audience questions about implementing these approaches within existing institutions and scaling successful cross-border learning. The discussion then opened to explore specific examples of movement-democracy integration and concrete instances of transnational knowledge sharing.

What are your thoughts on younger elected leaders' organizing capabilities, given that few current leaders demonstrate the sophisticated organizing skills seen in the civil rights era?

Feder acknowledged young people's deep skepticism toward institutions based on their lived experience of repeated institutional failures. She emphasized taking their concerns seriously while helping them believe enough in institutions to either reform them or build alternatives. Feder noted that she left a recent training at Georgetown more hopeful. She saw young people respond positively when taken seriously and given practical organizing tools. She emphasized the importance of honestly acknowledging that "maybe everything has gotten worse," while providing historical examples and practical skills for addressing problems.

Pellegrino shared Brazil's experience with political renovation movements that successfully elected new, younger leaders in 2018 but failed to change underlying political practices. She explained that changing personnel without changing practices proved insufficient, leading to refocused efforts on transforming political culture and actively listening to young people's anti-establishment sentiments to understand the roots of political distrust.

Can you provide concrete examples of progress in integrating movement and democracy spaces and specific cross-border learning that shifted organizing strategies?

Feder credited convening organizations like Kettering with bringing different sectors together for deeper collaboration. She noted that movements are increasingly recognizing they cannot win on specific issues like climate or immigration without responsive democratic institutions, while democracy organizations are understanding their need for movement-organizing skills. She observed that there have been material conversations between these sectors since she entered the field in 2022.

Pellegrino provided a detailed example of bidirectional learning between Brazilian and US civil society on election integrity. After reading about US election protection efforts in 2020, she contacted everyone mentioned in the article to learn their strategies, then adapted these approaches for Brazil's successful 2022 election defense. In 2023, US organizations reached out to learn from Brazil's experience following their January 8 coup attempt, creating ongoing reciprocal collaboration that has since expanded to include other countries facing similar authoritarian challenges.

PANEL DISCUSSION: BUILDING INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

Paloma Dallas moderated a forward-looking panel featuring María Teresa Kumar, Koketso Moeti, and Chris Muriithi. The discussion examined strategies for building a democracy that embraces difference rather than merely tolerates it. It also explored how to counter the global backlash against inclusion while strengthening democratic institutions through diversity.

Historical Storytelling as Resistance

Muriithi emphasized the foundational role of narratives in African democracy-building, drawing on traditions where storytelling served as the mechanism through which communities learned and imagined their futures. Muriithi's organization, Bold Network Africa, leverages this tradition to counter harmful political narratives, particularly the claim that "being queer isn't African." By returning to precolonial history, the organization challenges authoritarian rhetoric that frames LGBTQ+ identity as a foreign influence.

This narrative strategy extends beyond historical correction to contemporary organizing. Bold Network Africa's 10,000-member network across Kenya uses personal storytelling to affirm their presence and belonging: "We exist. This is my story. And I am here to stay." This approach demonstrates how historical narratives can serve as powerful tools for resisting authoritarian attempts to delegitimize marginalized communities through false claims about cultural authenticity.

The Power of Narrative in Inclusive Democracy

Kumar identified the absence of compelling narratives about the multicultural reality of the US as a fundamental cause of current democratic challenges. She noted that Hispanic Americans born in the United States have been the fastest-growing demographic group and represent a key driver of continued US population growth over the past two decades. However, the lack of leadership articulating this multicultural reality, combined with massive economic inequality, created conditions where demagogues could blame recent arrivals for systemic problems.

Kumar provided striking demographic data illustrating America's generational transformation. The median age for White Americans is 58, for African Americans 32–33, and for Latinos 15. Her daughter represents Generation Alpha, a majority-minority group of bicultural youth who will define the country's future but currently lack representation in leadership positions. Despite this demographic shift's promise, she noted that these young Americans face immediate othering "the moment they step out that door."

Further, Kumar pointed to the 2018 midterms as proof of multicultural democracy's power, when Americans elected the most diverse Congress in the country's history, with unprecedented representation of women, Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ individuals, young people, and veterans. She remarked that this body "for the very first time looked closer to America." This Congress went on to produce 300 pieces of legislation addressing immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, fair wages, and reproductive freedom. The lesson was clear: When democracy reflects the actual diversity present in the US, it delivers results that serve the full range of US experiences and needs.

Inequality and Manufactured Division

Moeti identified inequality as South Africa's most significant threat to inclusion. She described how vigilante groups target migrants at public health facilities and that those with power encourage fighting among marginalized communities instead of demanding better services. She provided a concrete example of Operation Dudula, a xenophobic vigilante group that planned to march against organizations supporting migrants, arguing they were "stealing resources" from South Africans. The response to this threat demonstrated the power of inclusive coalition-building, as progressive organizations—including Abahlali baseMjondolo, the African Reclaimers Organisation, and street trader organizations—came together across racial and class lines to defend the targeted institutions. The unified response disrupted the hate group's strategy, and they abandoned their planned protests.

Moeti emphasized that despite efforts by "elites, powerful corporations and hate-filled provocateurs" to promote despair, transformative change remains possible. Drawing on her experience witnessing South Africa's democratic birth in 1994, she described the Bophuthatswana uprising, when teachers, street traders, and ordinary citizens refused to cooperate with attempts to prevent voting in the first democratic election. The resistance proved so effective that even the homeland government's army turned against the president and joined the people. This success resulted from combining internal resistance with sustained international pressure, including the 35-year boycott campaign against South African goods. She emphasized that such examples exist globally—from Guatemala to South Korea to Kenya—demonstrating that "a different world is possible and that, together, we can imagine and build it."

Youth Mobilization and Cross-Sectoral Unity

Muriithi began by remarking, "What a time to be Kenyan!" They described Kenya's transformative Generation Z movement that emerged in response to proposed tax

increases in June 2024. Young Kenyans, initially politically disengaged, mobilized around the slogan "We the people" to oppose a finance bill that would have increased taxation while rolling back beneficial policies. The movement's power came from its inclusive nature: For the first time, queer Kenyans marched alongside other citizens without experiencing othering and carrying both Kenyan and pride flags toward Parliament.

The movement's historical consciousness proved crucial to its success. Young protesters recorded themselves acknowledging they might die but accepting this risk because "our forefathers, the Mau Mau, the veterans who fought against colonialism, did it." This connection to liberation history enabled sustained mobilization that continued beyond the initial protest. The movement has established an annual tradition of returning to the streets to honor those killed and maintain pressure for systemic change.

American Challenges and Opportunities

Kumar addressed the particular challenges facing Latino communities, noting that 17 million of the 65 million Latinos in the United States live in mixed-status families. She contrasted the immediate response to the Muslim ban, when people "rushed out of their homes to a local airport and said, 'Not on our watch,'" with the relative silence around ICE operations targeting migrant workers and separating families. However, Kumar identified emerging patterns of local solidarity, citing an elementary school principal in upstate New York who mobilized his community when ICE wrongly detained the family of one of his students. This resulted in the family's return and demonstrated that "when we make noise, when we demonstrate our humanity and our dignity and that we care, that is our collective American value."

She further challenged common perceptions about young people's political engagement, highlighting their consistent participation in marches for various causes over the past 20 years, despite facing unprecedented instability and inequality. She described successful intergenerational collaboration during the pandemic, when Voto Latino organized Zoom calls that connected 2,000–3,000 participants, comprising young Latinos and elderly White people working together on voter engagement. These sessions created powerful moments of recognition, with young Latinos expressing surprise that others cared about their participation. This suggests possibilities for broader coalition-building across demographic lines.

Question and Answer Session

The panel's exploration of inclusive democracy strategies and universal design principles prompted audience questions about navigating practical challenges in coalition-building, including faith communities' complex role, technology's impact on organizing, and the strategic implications of rights-based compromises. The discussion opened to examine how these frameworks apply to specific institutional and advocacy contexts.

How do you navigate faith's dual role as both a major force in freedom struggles and a weaponized tool driving exclusion and authoritarianism, particularly given White Christian nationalism's influence on the MAGA movement?

Kumar emphasized that the largest US group sponsoring refugees is White Christians, suggesting bridge-building opportunities around shared values. She argued that progressive movements have missed faith's cornerstone role in coalition-building, noting that far-right evangelicals have "hijacked Christianity" to focus on material wealth rather than love and care. Kumar also stressed the importance of both faith communities and business leaders for a thriving democracy, arguing that stable markets are essential for democratic stability.

Moeti challenged Kumar's assertion about stable markets, arguing that neoliberal logic and massive wealth accumulation are precisely why inequality has reached current levels. She emphasized that peace without justice cannot work and that people are calling for futures where humanity can thrive collectively rather than through mass accumulation by the few.

Muriithi explained that in the African context, Christianity was introduced by colonial powers to divide spiritual communities and delegitimize Indigenous beliefs. They noted that anti-rights groups in East Africa are heavily funded by White Christians, but young Kenyans are returning to their African spiritual roots and holding Christian leaders accountable. Recent protests include "drain the swamp" campaigns targeting institutions that failed during crises. These accountability efforts have prompted some Christian leaders to acknowledge their failures, recognizing their responsibility in the broader democratic struggle.

How do you address technology's role in enabling both autocratic surveillance and algorithmic division while also using it to create inclusion and mobilize resistance?

Moeti responded that super-rich corporations and autocrats globally use digital platforms to sway public opinion, but argued that technology is neither inherently good nor bad—it is a tool whose scale has grown dramatically. Despite attempts to control it, the digital sphere has expanded civic space. It has been successfully subverted for organizing, underscoring the need for regulation that serves society rather than individual profit.

Muriithi described Kenya's successful use of social media for protest coordination and simultaneous mobilization across multiple cities. When the government restricted data access, protesters adapted by using VPNs, demonstrating technological resilience and social media's positive effects for pushing back against authoritarian rule.

Kumar acknowledged the growing sophistication of disinformation but suggested this crisis might create opportunities to reimagine 21st-century institutions with technology. She argued that current institutional destruction could allow for the rebuilding of systems to serve multicultural democracy more effectively.

How do you navigate necessary harm reduction and compromise while protecting core rights, particularly when multi-issue spaces pressure LGBTQ+ advocates to compromise on trans rights to grow coalitions?

Muriithi firmly rejected a compromise on strategic rights, asserting that deeming some rights less important than others "is how we ended up here." They argued for "democracy 2.0," where everybody sits at the table, noting that other movements now seek LGBTQ+ organizers' advice on sustained resistance.

Moeti cited the Grenfell Tower fire in London as an example of how inclusive design saves lives. The building's lack of accessibility features meant a disproportionate number of people with disabilities died. She emphasized that inclusive design benefits everyone, noting that accessibility ramps help both wheelchair users and parents with strollers. She concluded with a powerful framework for inclusive democracy: "When we are inclusive, we all win. It actually doesn't matter that you think you are okay and you don't need it right now, because you will come to a moment where you need it. And even if you don't, those you love will. And you will never thrive in a society when you are the only one who is doing well and no one around you is."

CLOSING REMARKS

Sharon L. Davies delivered closing remarks framing the current period as "the fight of our lifetimes" for democracy preservation. She emphasized that collective action is the essential ingredient for defending democratic governance both in the United States and around the globe.

Davies positioned the current moment as historically critical, noting the interconnected nature of global democratic struggles where developments in the United States have worldwide implications. She expressed particular concern about underestimating the gravity of current threats and warned against the pattern seen in countries where democratic backsliding has occurred. Practitioners consistently report recognizing the severity of these threats too late for an effective response.

Drawing inspiration from Chris Muriithi's earlier comment, "What a time to be Kenyan!" Davies reflected on "what a time it is to be an American," engaged in defending chosen systems of governance. She emphasized that while the stakes for democracy "couldn't be higher," corresponding resolve and resistance to autocratic threats must match this urgency through coordinated rather than individual efforts.

Call to Action

Davies concluded by affirming the Kettering Foundation's commitment to continue facilitating public and private convenings and directly inviting participants to join sustained collaborative efforts. She emphasized that effective democratic preservation requires ongoing institutional support rather than episodic engagement. Her closing statement was a call for all of us to be "proud Americans, proud of our democracy, and determined to keep it."















