



DEMOCRACY AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Democracy is one of the universal and indivisible core values and principles of the United Nations. It is based on the freely expressed will of people and closely linked to the rule of law and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.ⁱ

Democracy in international law

Although the United Nations Charter includes no mention of the word “democracy”, the opening words of the Charter, “We the Peoples”, reflect the fundamental principle of democracy that the will of the people is the source of legitimacy of sovereign states and therefore of the United Nations as a whole.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, clearly projected the concept of democracy by stating “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government.”ⁱⁱ The Declaration spells out the rights that are essential for effective political participation. Since its adoption, the Declaration has inspired constitution-making around the world and has contributed greatly to the global acceptance of democracy as a universal value.ⁱⁱⁱ

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) lays the legal basis for the principles of democracy under international law, particularly:

- freedom of expression (Article 19); the right of peaceful assembly (Article 21);
- the right to freedom of association with others (Article 22);
- the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 25);
- the right to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors (Article 25).^{iv}

The Covenant is binding on those States that have ratified it. As of April 2008, the number of parties to the Convention was 161, which constitutes approximately 80 per cent of the United Nations membership.



People showing ink stained fingers after having voted in Burundi. Credit: Gaspard Nakumuryango.



Supporting democracy around the world

United Nations activities in support of democracy and governance are implemented through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), among others. Such activities are inseparable from the UN's work in promoting human rights, development, and peace and security, and include:

- assisting parliaments and decentralized local governance structures to enhance the checks and balances that allow democracy to thrive;
- promoting human rights, the rule of law and access to justice by helping to strengthen the impartiality and effectiveness of national human rights machinery and judicial systems;
- ensuring freedom of expression and access to information by strengthening legislation and media capacities;
- electoral assistance and long-term support for electoral management bodies; and
- promoting women's political empowerment.



People wait in line to cast their votes in Gulmi district, Western Region, Nepal. OHCHR

Approximately \$1.5 billion each year is provided through UNDP alone to support democratic processes around the world, making the United Nations one of the largest providers of technical cooperation for democracy and governance globally.

The political work of the United Nations requires that it promote democratic outcomes; the development agencies seek to bolster national institutions like parliaments, electoral commissions and legal systems that form the bedrock of any democracy; and the human rights efforts support freedom of expression and association, participation and the rule of law, all of which are critical components of democracy.

The UN General Assembly and democracy

Since 1988, the General Assembly has adopted at least one resolution annually dealing with some aspect of democracy. Democracy has emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits since the 1990s and in the internationally agreed development goals they produced, including the Millennium Development Goals. Member States at the World Summit in September 2005 reaffirmed that “democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.”^v



The Summit Outcome Document also stressed that “democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing,” and pointed out that “while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy.”

Five years earlier, world leaders pledged in the Millennium Declaration to spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They resolved to strive for the full protection and promotion in all countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all and to strengthen the capacity of all countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights.^{vi}

First International Day of Democracy

On 8 November 2007, the General Assembly proclaimed 15 September as the International Day of Democracy, inviting Member States, the United Nations system and other regional, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to commemorate the Day. The International Day of Democracy provides an opportunity to review the state of democracy in the world. Democracy is as much a process as a goal, and only with the full participation of and support by the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals, can the ideal of democracy be made into a reality to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

ⁱ World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 119

ⁱⁱ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21

ⁱⁱⁱ *In Larger Freedom*, A/59/2005, paragraph 148

^{iv} General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI)

^v World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 135

^{vi} General Assembly resolution, A/res/55/2

