

Defense and Recovery of Democratic Values in Times of Crisis: Strategies, Challenges, and Perspectives

Bienvenu Martial YALASSIME

Comillas Pontifical University Doctoral Program in Philosophy: Humanism and Transcendence

Abstract: The objective of this article is to offer a reflection on democracy by examining how economic, health, political, or security crises can weaken its values through power concentration, restrictions on fundamental rights, or institutional erosion. Additionally, it seeks to identify historical patterns of democratic backsliding in times of crisis and demonstrate that democracy, despite these challenges, has a capacity for resilience. Finally, the study aims to analyze effective strategies not only to defend democracy against these risks but also to recover and strengthen it in the current context, considering the challenges and perspectives it faces. Moreover, this article emphasizes the role of citizen engagement, ethical leadership, and the rule of law as essential pillars for sustaining democratic governance. It also explores the interplay between social, political, and economic factors that either support or undermine democratic stability. By drawing on both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how democracies can adapt, reform, and thrive even in the face of adversity. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on the practical and normative dimensions of democratic resilience in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Keywords: Democracy, democratic values, democratic erosion, rule of law, citizen participation, democratic recovery, defense strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy, more than a political system, is a model of coexistence based on essential principles such as freedom, equality, justice, and citizen participation. It is an imperfect yet profoundly human system, encompassing both our rational capacities and our ethical and social limitations. In times of stability, these principles tend to remain relatively steady; however, in periods of crisis (be they economic, health-related, political, environmental, or security-oriented) democracy often wavers, exposing its most vulnerable weaknesses (Bobbio, 1986; Castells, 2020). Such circumstances can lead to the weakening of institutional order, the restriction of fundamental rights, and the emergence of authoritarian discourses that, under the promise of order and efficiency, threaten the very foundations of the democratic system.

Historically, crises have acted both as catalysts for democratic regression and as opportunities for progress. In some cases, they have been used to justify consolidating power in the hands of a few, silencing dissenting voices, and undermining accountability mechanisms. In others, crises have fostered social unity, institutional reform, and strengthened citizens' commitment to freedom and justice. This tension between these two scenarios raises a philosophically significant question: How can democracies endure periods of crisis? What strategies are essential to safeguard democratic values during moments of

heightened threat, and what challenges must be addressed to restore them once weakened?

This article seeks to provide a detailed and well-founded reflection on these questions, based on the premise that democracy is not a static state but a continuous process of construction and revision. Three key areas are examined: (i) strategies for protecting democracy against internal and external threats, (ii) challenges faced by states and civil societies in restoring democratic values once eroded, and (iii) perspectives for the future, understood as potential horizons from which a more resilient, ethical, and participatory democracy can emerge. This work arises from a concern shared by scholars, analysts, and engaged citizens worldwide: the increasing fragility of democratic institutions globally. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of civic engagement and the role of informed citizenry in sustaining democratic norms. It emphasizes the interplay between political institutions, social movements, and cultural values in shaping democratic outcomes. The article also considers comparative historical cases to identify patterns of both democratic decline and recovery. Ultimately, it argues that democracy's survival depends not only on institutional strength but also on the collective ethical commitment of its citizens.

II. Strategies for the Defense of Democracy

2.1. Key Actions and Actors in the Defense of Democracy

In recent decades, concerning trends such as the rise of populism, corruption,

misinformation, authoritarianism, and political polarization have emerged (Abellán, 2011; Castells, 2020). Furthermore, one of the main challenges for democracies is increasing economic and social inequality, which has fueled dissatisfaction and distrust toward democratic institutions (Sen, 2010). In response, strategies to defend democracy have been developed as a set of actions, policies, and mechanisms designed to protect and strengthen democratic values, institutions, and principles against internal and external threats. These strategies can be implemented by governments, civil society organizations, international bodies, and citizens committed to preserving democracy (Bobbio, 1986; Held, 2006). Governments play a central role by enforcing the rule of law, ensuring institutional transparency, and regulating fair political competition.

Civil society organizations contribute by monitoring public policy, mobilizing citizens, and advocating for reforms that enhance accountability and participation. International institutions and networks also provide support and guidance through treaties, monitoring mechanisms, and diplomatic engagement (Ramos Pascua, 2007). Drawing on recent initiatives and expert recommendations, several key strategies have been identified to strengthen and protect democratic systems. These include fortifying constitutions and the rule of law, which ensures that democratic norms are legally protected and resistant to arbitrary changes (Rawls, 1996). Promoting citizen participation is also essential, as active involvement in political processes helps to legitimize decisions and reduce social alienation (Innerarity, 2011). Protecting freedom of expression and the press is crucial to guarantee transparency, enable public debate, and prevent the spread of misinformation (Lesaca, 2022). Combating corruption, reinforcing democratic institutions, defending human rights, engaging in international cooperation, and employing nonviolent resistance mechanisms are complementary strategies that enhance the resilience of democracies (Arblaster, 1992; Cortina, 2020). Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies often depends on the ability to integrate social, political, and legal actions simultaneously. For instance, promoting civic education can foster a culture of democratic values, while strengthening judicial independence ensures accountability and prevents abuses of power (Habermas, 1998). Nonviolent mechanisms, such as peaceful protests and civil advocacy, allow citizens to challenge authoritarian tendencies without destabilizing democratic structures (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Ultimately, these strategies aim to prevent democratic erosion, counter authoritarian threats, and ensure fairer and more participatory societies (Popper, 1995; Touraine, 2000). By adopting a comprehensive approach, democracies can not only defend themselves against current challenges but also

develop mechanisms to recover and strengthen institutions in times of crisis. The combination of legal safeguards, citizen engagement, and international cooperation provides a robust framework to maintain democratic legitimacy and responsiveness in the face of evolving threats.

2.2. Democratic Principles, Structural Challenges, and Citizen Action

Strengthening democratic institutions requires an integrated effort encompassing justice, active transparency, and respect for fundamental rights. Institutions such as an independent judiciary, legislative bodies, and oversight agencies are crucial for ensuring that power is not concentrated in the hands of a few. Maintaining their independence and effectiveness is essential to prevent abuses of power. Democracy must allow free criticism and the capacity to correct errors, since all political systems are fallible. Criticism should not be viewed as a threat but as a tool for continuous improvement. Democracy cannot be fully defined as mere majority rule, despite the importance of general elections. Even a majority could govern tyrannically. Following Popper's argument, the powers of leaders must be limited, and the fundamental criterion of their role is that they can be removed by the people without bloodshed. Therefore, if those in power do not safeguard institutions that allow minorities to pursue peaceful change, their governance becomes tyranny.

In a consistent democracy, only legal changes that threaten its democratic nature should be excluded. Full protection of minorities does not extend to those who break the law or incite violent overthrow of the democratic regime. Any policy aimed at creating institutions to safeguard democracy must assume latent anti-democratic tendencies among both rulers and citizens. If democracy is destroyed, all rights are destroyed, and even any economic benefits to the people occur at the cost of suffering. Democracy offers an invaluable arena for reasonable reform, allowing modification without violence.

However, if the preservation of democracy is not prioritized in every battle, latent anti-democratic tendencies can lead to its collapse. All political problems are institutional, relating to the legal framework rather than individuals, meaning progress toward equality must be supported by improving the liberal democratic system. Defending democracy requires concrete institutional action rooted in a deep understanding of structural principles.

As Norberto Bobbio emphasizes, democracy is not merely a set of formal procedures but a system ensuring transparency, mutual control of powers, and real alternation in office. Civic education plays a crucial role in consolidating democracy. An informed citizenry is the foundation of a strong democracy. Educating in democratic values, respect for differences, critical thinking, and social responsibility strengthens political culture and inoculates society against authoritarian drift.

This education extends beyond schools to include media, institutions, families, and community participation. In today's digital societies, defense strategies must also counter misinformation and manipulation. Fake news campaigns, hate speech, and extreme polarization on digital platforms not only deteriorate public debate but also threaten electoral integrity and trust in institutions. Media literacy programs and regulations that respect freedom of expression while safeguarding public discourse are essential. Social and political inclusion is another pillar of robust democracies.

Effective integration of all social strata into decision-making ensures legitimacy. Representation of historically marginalized groups (indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ+ communities, migrants, and people with disabilities) is not a concession but a condition of democratic legitimacy. Democracies cannot act in isolation; international cooperation with regional and multilateral bodies, as well as human rights networks, is crucial for establishing standards, sharing best practices, and collectively countering authoritarian regimes. Finally, democracy is an ongoing construction, never complete, always perfectible. Its defense requires vigilance, active participation, and constant renewal.

As Hannah Arendt noted, genuine democratic power emerges from the deliberate, collective action of citizens. Each generation bears responsibility for defending democracy not only from external threats but

also from apathy, indifference, and cynicism that can erode it from within. Each generation bears responsibility for defending democracy not only from external threats but also from apathy, indifference, and cynicism that can erode it from within. A resilient democracy is nourished by civic education, social trust, and institutions that remain open to criticism and reform. Strengthening democratic culture requires creating spaces for dialogue where diversity is valued and consensus is sought without suppressing dissent. Ultimately, the vitality of democracy depends on active participation, ethical leadership, and a shared commitment to justice. Citizens must recognize their role not only as voters but as engaged actors in public life.

III. Challenges in the Recovery of Democratic Values

3.1. Loss of Institutional Trust and Crisis of Democratic Values

Recovering democratic values requires understanding the root causes of their erosion and the complexities societies face in restoring them. Democracy is based on values such as freedom, justice, equality, respect for human rights, and active citizen participation. When these are threatened, recovery becomes a multidimensional challenge. A major challenge is the loss of trust in democratic institutions. When courts, parliaments, police, media, and electoral systems lose credibility due to corruption, lack of transparency, or inefficiency, the legitimacy of democracy is compromised. This fosters political disengagement, disconnect between rulers and citizens, and systemic weakening. Politicians, as public figures, can either cultivate trust through integrity, transparency, and accountability or erode it through corruption and nepotism. Policies promoting equity, social justice, and environmental protection strengthen societal cohesion, while unjust or self-serving policies exacerbate polarization and value crises. Disillusionment can fuel social movements demanding greater ethics in governance. Crises of values manifest in distrust of institutions, political polarization, and erosion of civil liberties. Growing support for populist movements and delegitimization of traditional parties reflects dissatisfaction with institutional representation. Polarization, where opinions harden and confrontational rhetoric replaces dialogue, undermines collaborative governance and often coincides with regression in human rights.

3.2. Social Consequences, Political Disaffection, and Information Manipulation

Value crises can intensify competition and social divisions, even in education, leading to environments where achievement is measured by status rather than merit or collaboration. Such crises diminish trust in political institutions, fostering political disaffection and opening space for populist leaders promising quick solutions at democracy's expense. Corruption, nepotism, and unequal access to power further erode democratic representation. Information manipulation and the spread of fake news compound these challenges. Digital platforms accelerate dissemination of unverified content, undermining critical thinking and amplifying prejudices and hate speech. Cass Sunstein warns that digital "echo chambers" reinforce existing beliefs, limit democratic dialogue, and encourage ideological radicalization. Weak civic education exacerbates vulnerability to authoritarian narratives. As Martha Nussbaum notes, without education fostering critical reflection, empathy, and justice, democracies risk fragility and manipulation. Economic instability, unemployment, precarious work, and social inequality further erode social trust and heighten the appeal of populist rhetoric. Liberal

democracy requires not only free elections but also institutional frameworks safeguarding freedoms and the rule of law; economic failure challenges this architecture (Zakaria, 2003). International organizations play ambivalent roles, promoting human rights and fair elections but sometimes prioritizing geopolitical interests over democratic principles, generating skepticism among civil society. Recovering democratic values demands active citizen participation beyond elections, including deliberative and oversight roles. Pierre Rosanvallon describes democracy as a "regime of trust" built through transparency, mutual vigilance, and

accountability. Restoration is multidimensional, requiring political, educational, economic, media, and international interventions. Preserving institutional forms is insufficient; ethical and participatory content must be revitalized to counter legitimacy crises and ensure societies founded on respect, justice, and freedom.

IV. Perspective for the Future

4.1. Strengthening the Rule of Law

Crises intensify threats to stability, the rule of law, and human rights. These are precisely the times when democratic values most need defense (Bobbio, 1986; Aron, 1968). The future of democracy entails adapting and strengthening democratic institutions during political, economic, social, or global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed weaknesses in governance and accountability (Castells, 2020). Institutions must act as pillars of recovery: the judiciary must operate independently, ensuring that decisions are impartial and free from political interference; governments must be transparent and accountable; and citizens must have effective mechanisms to participate in decisions affecting society, such as referendums, public consultations, and citizen forums (Ramos Pascua, 2007; Innerarity, 2011).

The rule of law guarantees that sovereignty is exercised according to established legal procedures, preventing arbitrary actions or abuse of power (Rawls, 1996). It is not merely a legal formality but a foundational principle that structures the relationship between the state and its citizens. Key principles include that the state exists to serve people, human dignity is inviolable, and public authority must respect and protect that dignity (Habermas, 1998; Cortina, 2020). Government authority is grounded in service rather than dominance, and the law acts as a safeguard to prevent coercive practices that undermine individual freedom. Strengthening the rule of law also requires reinforcing checks and balances, ensuring that executive, legislative, and judicial branches operate independently yet collaboratively (Held,

2006). Accountability mechanisms such as audits, anti-corruption bodies, and independent ombudsmen are crucial to maintaining public trust and deterring abuses (Popper, 1995). Furthermore, educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities enhances democratic resilience, enabling society to identify violations of the law and demand corrective measures (Sen, 2010). During crises, emergency powers must be exercised within constitutional limits and subject to judicial review to prevent the normalization of extraordinary measures that could erode democracy (Touraine, 2000). The rule of law provides a framework for balancing public safety and individual freedoms, ensuring that responses to crises do not compromise fundamental rights or entrench authoritarian practices.

4.2. Civic Ethics and Democratic Citizenship

Civic ethics fosters a democratic ethos by shaping citizens' predispositions to act according to positive values that sustain a habitable social sphere (Cortina, 2020). In practice, this means cultivating virtues such as prudence, reasonableness, tolerance, civility, solidarity, responsibility, and professionalism, which guide behavior in both private and public life. Adela Cortina emphasizes the importance of integrating political emotions with reason: democratic identification should be rational and reflective rather than merely emotional, allowing citizens to engage constructively in public affairs (Cortina, 2020). Democratic citizenship requires mature engagement, where individual responsibility is combined with institutional frameworks that promote shared accountability (Rawls, 1996; Bobbio, 1986). Ethical reflection is therefore essential for informed decision-making, applying prudence and moral justice as guiding principles. Such reflection ensures that citizens consider not only personal interests but also the broader implications of their actions for the common good.

In this sense, civic ethics acts as a foundation for democratic governance, reinforcing values that sustain institutions and public trust. Democracy's survival is also dependent on social equity, which ensures that all members of society have access to basic rights and resources (Sen, 2010). Structural prerequisites such as access to health care, quality education, dignified work, and social security not only improve quality

of life but also strengthen social cohesion, reducing vulnerabilities that authoritarian movements can exploit (Arblaster, 1992). Without such equity, democratic systems risk delegitimization, as citizens perceive political institutions as unresponsive or unjust. Media pluralism and independence play a central role in fostering public deliberation and informed civic participation (Habermas, 1998). A diverse and autonomous media landscape ensures that citizens have

access to multiple perspectives, enabling critical debate and holding leaders accountable. Democratic leadership, in this context, should be collective, ethical, and deliberative rather than charismatic and populist, respecting minority rights and fostering inclusive decision-making processes (Bobbio, 1986; Held, 2006). Civic pedagogy is a vital instrument to cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and solidarity from an early age (Freire, 1970). Education must go beyond technical skills and impart moral and civic competencies, enabling citizens to recognize injustices, engage in reasoned debate, and participate actively in democratic life.

In the digital era, technology offers new opportunities for transparency, participation, and civic engagement but also introduces risks of surveillance, manipulation, and misinformation (Lesaca, 2022). Clear regulatory frameworks, digital literacy, and ethical norms are essential to ensure that technology strengthens rather than undermines democracy. In sum, civic ethics and democratic citizenship are mutually reinforcing: ethical citizens sustain democratic institutions, while robust institutions cultivate and protect civic virtues. By embedding ethical reflection, social equity, participatory education, and responsible technological use, societies can nurture resilient democratic cultures capable of confronting contemporary challenges (Cortina, 2020; Sen, 2010; Habermas, 1998).

4.3. Global Challenges, Technology, and Ecological Democracy

Global challenges (climate change, mass migration, pandemics, energy crises) demand cosmopolitan democracy (Held, 2006). Multilateral democratic institutions, global justice, and governance mechanisms are necessary to integrate local identities within shared responsibilities. Ecological democracy integrates sustainability, intergenerational equity, and climate justice (Boff, 1995). Democracies must cooperate internationally, reform global institutions, and embrace cosmopolitan citizenship. A robust democratic future requires ethical, social, ecological, and cosmopolitan foundations. Democracy must be participatory, inclusive, and committed to human rights. Citizens must be aware of rights and duties, act critically and ethically, and defend universal values that ensure dignity for all. Technological innovation offers opportunities for transparency, global coordination, and citizen engagement but also introduces risks of surveillance, digital manipulation, and deepening inequality (Castells, 2020). Ecological democracy requires integrating technology responsibly, promoting environmental education, and encouraging global civic activism. Furthermore, addressing structural inequalities between nations and communities is essential to prevent democratic erosion on a global scale. Only by linking local action with global responsibility

can democracies effectively confront these multidimensional challenges. By combining technological progress with ethical responsibility, humanity can chart a sustainable and democratic path toward a just global order. This vision requires cultivating a planetary consciousness that recognizes the interdependence of ecosystems, societies, and generations. Ecological democracy thus becomes both a political framework and a cultural horizon, guiding the transition toward models of development that respect limits while expanding opportunities for all. The articulation of global governance with local participation will determine the ability of democracies to adapt and thrive, ensuring that justice, solidarity, and sustainability are not abstract ideals but lived realities. Ultimately, facing global challenges demands a new democratic ethos (one that unites innovation, equity, and ecological responsibility as inseparable pillars of a shared future).

To achieve this, democracies must invest in inclusive technological infrastructures that reduce the digital divide and guarantee universal Access to information and participation. Artificial intelligence, big data, and digital platforms can enhance collective decision-making processes, provided they are regulated

transparently and ethically to avoid reinforcing authoritarian dynamics or corporate monopolies. At the same time, ecological democracy requires a renewed emphasis on environmental justice, recognizing that vulnerable communities and future generations often bear the greatest burden of global crises. Strengthening international cooperation, empowering civil society, and promoting transnational networks of solidarity are indispensable steps to address these asymmetries. Ultimately, the future of democracy in the face of global challenges depends on its capacity to balance innovation with justice, efficiency with inclusion, and progress with sustainability.

By embedding considerations and ecological responsibility into governance, democracies can foster resilience and long-term stability. Encouraging global civic engagement ensures that everywhere contribute to shaping policies that are equitable and sustainable. In this way, democratic societies can navigate crises while preserving dignity, rights, and opportunities for present and future generations. Moreover, education and awareness campaigns can cultivate a global citizenry that values solidarity, accountability, and environmental stewardship. Collaborative networks among governments, NGOs, and communities further reinforce democratic resilience. Ultimately, sustaining democracy requires an ongoing commitment to adapt, innovate, and act collectively in the face of evolving challenges.

V. CONCLUSION

The defense and recovery of democratic values in times of crisis is complex, requiring defined strategies, overcoming challenges, and envisioning a clear future. Crises pose risks but also opportunities to reform and strengthen democracies. Defense and recovery strategies should focus on robust institutions, citizen participation, rule of law, and human rights. Civic education, transparency, and anti-corruption efforts are essential to restore public trust. Challenges include concentration of power, information manipulation, polarization, lack of accountability, and resistance to reform. Resilient democracies adapt to change without compromising principles, embracing inclusive governance and international cooperation. Democratic values are strengthened when citizens actively participate, respect freedoms, and uphold justice and equity. True democratic resilience lies in renewal, learning from mistakes, and evolving toward a more just, participatory, and sustainable future. Democratic consolidation also demands a culture that supports pluralism, tolerance, deliberation, and civic responsibility. Civic and ethical education, media literacy, and responsible use of technology are indispensable to prepare citizens to face modern challenges. Moreover, democracies must combine institutional reform with cultural and ethical regeneration, ensuring legitimacy, equality, sustainability, and respect for human dignity. A living democracy embraces dissent, learns from errors, reinvents itself, and remains committed to justice, freedom, and dignity. By integrating ethical principles, social equity, and ecological responsibility, democratic societies can not only survive crises but emerge stronger, more resilient, and capable of addressing global challenges in a cooperative and inclusive manner.

Furthermore, fostering a sense of shared responsibility among citizens strengthens social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions. Public engagement in policymaking, community initiatives, and oversight mechanisms ensures that democracy remains responsive and accountable. Leadership grounded in ethics and transparency reinforces the social contract, mitigating the risks of populism and authoritarianism. Finally, a forward-looking democracy recognizes the interconnectedness of local, national, and global issues, promoting policies that are equitable and protective of human dignity for current and future generations. In this way, democracy becomes not only a political system, but also a shared ethical Project that nurtures solidarity, justice, and peace. Its endurance depends on the continuous engagement of citizens, the adaptability of institutions, and the courage to confront emerging challenges collectively. By fostering a culture of dialogue, critical reflection, and mutual responsibility, democratic societies can ensure that freedom, equality, and human dignity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abellán, J. (2011). *Democracy: Fundamental Political Concepts*. Alianza, Madrid. [2] Arblaster, A. (1992). *Democracy*. Alianza, Madrid.
- [3] Arendt, H. (1970). *On Violence*. Harcourt, New York.
- [4] Aron, R. (1968). *Democracy and Totalitarianism*. Seix Barral, Barcelona.
- [5] Bobbio, N. (1986). *The Future of Democracy*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico. [6] Boff, L. (1995). *Ecological Democracy*. Orbis Books.
- [7] Castells, M. (2020). *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (3rd ed.). Alianza, Madrid.
- [8] Cortina, A. (2020). *Cosmopolitan Ethics: A Commitment to Reason in Pandemic Times*. Paidós, Madrid.
- [9] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, New York.
- [10] Habermas, J. (1998). *Facticity and Validity: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trotta, Madrid.
- [11] Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.
- [12] Trans. J.A. Bravo. Debate, Barcelona.
- [13] Held, D. (2006). *Models of Democracy*. Alianza, Madrid.
- [14] Innerarity, D. (2011). *The Knowledge Democracy*. Paidós, Barcelona. [15] Lesaca, J. (2022, November 12). The Zombies of Disinformation. *El País*.
- [16] Popper, K. (1995). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Madrid.
- [17] Ramos Pascua, J. (2007). *The Internal Ethics of Law: Democracy, Human Rights, and Principles of Justice*. Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao.
- [18] Rawls, J. (1996). *Political Liberalism*. Crítica, Barcelona. [19] Sen, A. (2010). *The Idea of Justice*. Taurus, Madrid.
- [20] Touraine, A. (2000). *Will We Be Able to Live Together? Equal and Different*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires.
- [21] Zakaria, F. (2003). *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. W.W. Norton, New York. Archibugi, D., & Benhabib, S. (n.d.). *Cosmopolitan Democracy*. Company, New York.