



By: Joseph E. Stiglitz

Democracy Always - a ray of hope



On September 24, 20 democratic countries from the Global North and South – including Brazil, Chile, Norway, and Spain – came together at the United Nations not just to reaffirm their commitment to democracy, but to develop an agenda which would sustain and enrich it.

The membership of this **group**, Democracia Siempre (Democracy Always), has increased enormously since it first met a year ago.

The group's growth reflects its members' recognition that democratic backsliding is gathering pace around the world.

This is particularly true in the country that has often claimed to be the oldest and strongest democracy: the United States, where Donald Trump has waged a sustained attack on the constitutional order since returning to the White House in January.

Both within countries and internationally, the rule of law is being trampled, leading to rampant corruption, violations of basic human rights and due process, and systematic erosion of institutions.

Longstanding safeguards for our liberties and well-being are being dismantled before our eyes, with academic, press, and other freedoms under attack.

A ray of hope

In these dark times, Democracia Siempre is a ray of hope. Its members remain committed to defending democracy and the rule of law, setting an example for the timorous who have been cowed by Trump's bullying.

They have made it clear that national sovereignty and democracy are not something to be traded away. They refuse to follow the path of Esau, who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

As an economist who has studied why we have far higher living standards and longer lives today than 250 years ago, I understand the

importance of Enlightenment values and the role of science in enabling us to understand the world around us.

The unprecedented material progress we have achieved in the modern age stems from our commitment to reason and freedom.

Democracy and the rule of law are an essential bulwark against abuses of power

Enlightenment thinkers taught us that we can design institutions to coordinate individual actions, facilitate cooperation, and make our societies work better.

This matters, because humans are social beings. We have always been able to do far more working together than alone, and in our highly urbanized, globally integrated society, we have no choice but to cooperate.

Also, among the critical institutions that we inherited from the Enlightenment are those that enable us to ascertain and assess the truth, without which neither our economy nor our democracy can function well.

Democracy and the rule of law are an essential bulwark against abuses of power and are fundamental to the preservation of our human rights. History shows what happens when they are abandoned or dismantled.

Strengthening institutions

The UN itself was created to help ensure peace on our planet after World War II. Since we share one world, peace, stability, and common prosperity require a world body, international law, and multilateral cooperation.

This summer, as Democracia Siempre's second global meeting approached, 43 Nobel laureates from a wide variety of disciplines signed a **letter** of support, both for the initiative and for an agenda to achieve its goals.

That agenda includes strengthening institutions, addressing income inequality, and tackling online mis- and disinformation.

Our reasoning about the world must be based on facts

Critically, the signatories affirmed their commitment to reason. Their worldviews may differ, but all agree that facts cannot, and must not, be falsified.

All know that it was adherence to Enlightenment values that led to their own Nobel Prize-winning discoveries.

Our reasoning about the world must be based on facts, and those come from scientific research and objective news gathering. High-quality information and journalism are necessary to inform the public, promote constructive civil engagement, and preserve democracy.

Freedom of expression is an internationally recognized human right. Like academic freedom, it plays an indispensable role in ensuring government accountability and preventing the kind of agglomeration of power that undermines democracy.

Addressing inequality

Yet actions by governments in many countries have had a chilling effect on these freedoms.

Those in power have used defamation suits and other means to silence journalists, while massive technology companies allow their platforms to amplify mis- and disinformation, polluting the information ecosystem.

Generative AI threatens to make matters worse, and those training the models have been stealing information produced by the legacy media and others.

As a result, they have little incentive to produce high-quality information themselves.



For too long, many took democracy and human rights for granted. We now know that was a mistake – Joseph E. Stiglitz

Technologies that could improve how we disseminate and process information are instead likely to degrade our information ecosystem even further (hence Democracia Siempre's focus on this issue).

An essential feature of democracy is that everyone's voice counts – one person, one vote. But this cannot be the case when a few multi-billionaires control what has become the global town square.

Checks and balances inevitably break down in the face of yawning economic inequality, because political inequality follows, with oligarchic interests using their resources to bend rules in their favor.

But addressing inequality is critical for another reason: If democracies are to function well, the body politic must exhibit at least a modicum of solidarity. Yet today's extreme inequalities, combined with a hyper-polarizing media ecosystem, have eviscerated social cohesion.

For too long, many took democracy and human rights for granted. We now know that was a mistake. Sustaining and improving these institutions takes continual effort. The Democracia Siempre movement provides hope that this still can be done.

The following Nobel laureates signed the letter of support for Democracia Siempre:

Maria A. Ressa, Nobel laureate, Peace, 2021;
Klaus von Klitzing, Nobel laureate, Physics,

1985; Wole Soyinka, Nobel laureate, Literature, 1986; Óscar Arias, Nobel laureate, Peace, 1987; Elias J. Corey, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 1990; Richard J. Roberts, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 1993; José Ramos-Horta, Nobel laureate, Peace, 1996; William D. Phillips, Nobel laureate, Physics, 1997; Jody Williams, Nobel laureate, Peace, 1997; Louis J. Ignarro, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 1998; Anthony J. Leggett, Nobel laureate, Physics, 2003; J. M. Coetzee, Nobel laureate, Literature, 2003; Shirin Ebadi, Nobel laureate, Peace, 2003; Aaron Ciechanover, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 2004; Barry J. Marshall, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2005; John C. Mather, Nobel laureate, Physics, 2006; Edmund “Ned” Phelps, Nobel laureate, Economics, 2006; Andrew Z. Fire, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2006; Roger D. Kornberg, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 2006; Orhan Pamuk, Nobel laureate, Literature, 2006; Eric S. Maskin, Nobel laureate, Economics, 2007; Mario R. Capecchi, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2007; Martin Chalfie, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 2008; Jack W. Szostak, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2009; Leymah Gbowee, Nobel laureate, Peace, 2011; Tawakkol Karman, Nobel laureate, Peace, 2011; May-Britt Moser, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2014; Edvard I. Moser, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2014; Joachim Frank, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 2017; Richard Henderson, Nobel laureate, Chemistry, 2017; Michel Mayor, Nobel laureate, Physics, 2019; Gregg L. Semenza, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2019; Sir Peter J. Ratcliffe, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2019; Roger Penrose, Nobel laureate, Physics, 2020; Guido W. Imbens, Nobel laureate, Economics, 2021; Annie Ernaux, Nobel laureate, Literature, 2022; Narges Mohammadi, Nobel laureate, Peace, 2023; Geoffrey Hinton, Nobel laureate, Physics, 2024; Daron Acemoglu, Nobel laureate, Economics, 2024; Gary Ruvkun, Nobel laureate, Physiology or Medicine, 2024; Oleksandra Matviichuk, Center for Civil Liberties, Peace 2022; His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Nobel laureate, Peace, 1989;

Joseph E. Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and University Professor at

Columbia University, is a former chief economist of the World Bank (1997-2000), former chair of the US President’s Council of Economic Advisers, former co-chair of the High-Level Commission on Carbon Prices, and lead author of the 1995 IPCC Climate Assessment. He is Co-Chair of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation.