

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have talked of an acceleration of democracy's retreat around the globe. Against that backdrop, members of the Democracy for the Future project research team discussed their assessments of the current state of democracy, how democracy has been challenged by this infectious disease, how Japan should engage with democracy around the world, and why democracy is important anyway. The following is a record of discussions held on January 25, 2021, which were originally published in Japanese.

## Research Team Trialogue 2: The Spread of COVID-19 and Its Impact on Global Democracy

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### Democracy in Recent Years

**Moderator:** Today, as one year has passed since COVID-19 began to spread, we look at how democracy has changed and even regressed in Japan and the world. I would like to discuss with you how we should respond to the present situation.

President Biden was inaugurated in the United States exactly five days ago (January 20, 2021), and in his inaugural speech, he used the word “democracy” more than ten times to emphasize its importance, even saying, “democracy has prevailed.” This focus on the word democracy speaks to what has taken place in recent years. Of course, Biden’s references to democracy were a response to the storming of the Capitol two weeks earlier, on January 6.

But in the past few years we have also witnessed the spread of populism, divided politics, dissemination of false information, and the gathering of intelligence on elections and political parties by foreign countries, which have all put a spotlight on democracy. Fears of a retreat in democracy in countries around the world related to the spread of COVID-19 have also been raised by many organizations. I don’t think democracy has drawn this kind of attention since immediately after the Cold War ended. And I believe special mention must be made of the boom in democracy theories and growing alarmism about democracy in the past few years.

Today, I would like to ask you both to share your expert perspectives on what is happening to

democracy of late. Looking forward several years and even more long-term, I would like to ask where you see global democracy heading, what issues exist, and why democracy has gone in the direction it has. Mr. Shiga, would you mind going first?



**Shiga:** By way of a brief self-introduction, I work for the Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, which is connected to JICA—an agency for implementing development aid. I am more of a researcher now, but I was originally a development aid field worker.

I joined JICA’s predecessor, known as the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund, in 1991—the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, it was a period of great activity in terms of support for transition of systems. My work was totally intertwined with the global issue of the day, namely, how former Soviet and other Eastern European nations could switch from socialism to capitalism and from communist authoritarian governments to democracies. I was also engaged in post-conflict support, helping the countries of former Yugoslavia rebuild from nothing after suffering a dreadful ethnic conflict. Daily, I was troubled by how to resolve the clash and contradiction between the lofty ideals of democracy and rule of law from the West and the reality on the ground in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This has become the driving force for my research, and I will reflect on those experiences as I speak today.

People in countries undergoing transition around the world were excited about the advance of democracy during the “third wave of democratization” in the 1990s. (The third wave actually began in 1974, but I don’t think anyone will argue

that the main “wave” came in the 1990s.) But not even ten years later, things were not looking good. By 2010, the situation was described as an “authoritarianism counter-attack” and here we are today.

On this point, I would like to separate out two sets of issues: issues of democracy in developing countries and countries in transition, and issues of democracy in advanced countries. Many experts can speak on the latter, so I would like to talk specifically about the issues of the former, while weaving in challenges related to development assistance.

First, for those working in development assistance, awareness of the growing trend toward a retreat of democracy started around 2010. Much debate centered on the incredible economic might of China—an authoritarian country—and the impact on democracy in developing countries of this former aid recipient becoming a donor.

I would like to share my experience in Cambodia. After the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia received development aid from influential Western agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as well as support from Western countries for democratization under the banner of aid for good governance. For many years, the biggest donor in Cambodia was Japan. Because finances were so tight in Cambodia, for want of a better phrase, the government listened obediently to Western governments and international agencies. However, according to stories shared with me by World Bank and ADB representatives based in Phnom Penh, a rapid increase in aid from China in the 2000s led the Cambodian government to stop listening to advice from the West on democratization and corruption countermeasures. It seems they calculated that even if funds from the World Bank and advanced nations stopped, they could still easily secure aid from China. This situation was not only observed in Cambodia; the rise of authoritarian governments like China, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia caused a slowdown in democratization and governance reforms all over the world. This is a major challenge for development aid agencies and one that is becoming more serious all the time.

Setting aside the issue I just raised about China's aid, it is arguable that we must be concerned about a return to authoritarianism in countries that democratized during the third wave. But for people like me who have seen the situation first-hand, if you put yourself in the position of people in these countries, there are justifiable reasons for the retreat of democracy. You can understand it to some extent. I will talk about Russia as one example of this.

When it comes to Russia, people are critical, saying, "Russia's shift back to authoritarianism is outrageous." Of course, I agree. But we in the West need to ask why it has happened this way and carefully reflect on whether some responsibility lies with us and our failure to properly support Russia's transition. In response to the trend of authoritarianism in China and around the world, I think perhaps there will be a movement among Western countries, including Japan, to rally together once more. When that time comes, we must take lessons from the 1990s and see where major issues lie in our transition support and democracy promotion in countries undergoing democratization. My fear is that this kind of reflection is totally missing from discussions about the state of Russia's democracy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the independent Russian Federation was formed with the birth of the Yeltsin administration in 1991, the West saw it simply as a switch from dictatorship to democracy and believed the Russian people would be delighted at their release from the Communist one-party dictatorship. Everyone assumed the Russian people would be enjoying their freedom. But this is totally misguided. Of course, there are many different people in Russia, and the people I know—intellectuals—were delighted they could speak freely about anything. However, for about 80 percent of the population, the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union is remembered as a period of confusion, broadening economic gaps, and injustice.

During the transition period, Western countries and international agencies pushed Russia to undergo extremely rapid economic reforms referred to as "shock therapy." On January 2, 1992, government support for basic consumer goods, including food, was abolished, leading to hyperinflation. The

price of bread rose tenfold instantly, and in one case, an elderly woman suffered a heart attack and died from shock when she heard the price at the market. Regular people lost their stable jobs, free education, and free medical care—vested rights from Soviet times.

And worse yet, in the process of radical privatization led by the West, a small fraction of people took state assets—community property belonging to all citizens—and put it in their own pockets to become oligarchs and some of the richest people in the world. They forged ties with key people in the Yeltsin administration, took over the media, and worked to move politics in their favor. It is no surprise that regular people were filled with discontent; they wondered why democracy, which is supposed to be for all, was causing them to suffer so badly, while a handful of politicians and oligarchs had such a good deal. That is the memory of Russia's first foray into "democracy" in the 1990s: chaos, injustice, and disparity.

Then Putin emerged, gallantly vowing to bring order to the chaos. He kept the oligarchs' despotism under check, brought the economic chaos under control, realized economic growth, and resolved the problems directly affecting citizens' lives, such as unpaid wages and lost pensions. The reason Putin has been able to remain in power for such a long time is that he has support from citizens based on these results. There have been some shadows on his approval rating in the past few years, but he still enjoys very broad support. And even without the assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who had been critical of the government, and the arrest of his political rival Alexei Navalny, Putin would easily have won the election. Western countries criticize Putin, but the Russian assessment is totally different. The chaos that Putin eventually brought under control was the consequence of failures of the West in their aid for transition and democratization. Russia's democratization was run not only on the Russians' agenda but on ours as well, so we need to pay serious attention to the experience of these failures. That is one issue I would like to raise.

Outside Russia, countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan have received democratization aid on the path to becoming democracies, but the major issue is that many people do not see the fruits of democratization. People have no real sense that their voices are now reflected in politics and their lives are better under a democracy. Many people discuss the difficulty of democratic consolidation, but one thing that can be said without question from looking at the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe is that, as long as there is a growing economic gap and visible injustice, the standards of democracy will not take root among regular citizens. And because of that, even if the West appears to have succeeded in governance reform through the introduction of democratic systems, democracy will not take root. I feel very strongly that we must carefully review these lessons.



**Moderator:** Thank you for raising those points. Next, we would like to hear from you, Prof. Shoji.

**Shoji:** I teach US politics at Gakushuin University. Because of my specialization, I have spent a total of ten years living in the United States. I will focus my discussions on the US, sharing my thoughts on how I see the present situation.

In your introduction, you talked about how democracy came up as a keyword in President Biden’s inaugural speech. If you consider the assault on the Capitol building and the fact that the United States was still able to hold a peaceful inauguration ceremony, it is reasonable to use an expression like “democracy has prevailed.” However, back in December, when ballot-counting was done and Biden’s election win was confirmed, after

broadly criticizing the Trump campaign for not admitting defeat, claiming irregularities, and starting legal battles without any proof, Biden said, “In this battle for the soul of America, democracy prevailed.” His words in that case were clearly expressing a win over Trump, and that is how many audiences heard it. I wondered about this choice of words and if Biden genuinely wants to realize unity and healing, and whether he intends to extend a hand to Trump supporters. Most media outlets described the Trump era and an America with so many Trump supporters as “divided” and welcomed Biden’s call to overcome this division and “return to normalcy.” But I think this amounts to negating close to half the US population.

I think it is extremely dangerous to describe the presidential election win by a candidate from one political party—the Democratic party—as a “win for democracy.” Despite the issues surrounding President Trump, it is only natural that with the choice between two major political parties—Republican or Democratic—that some people will choose the Republican Party. Describing a win by the candidate from one of the major parties as democracy prevailing, I feel, is arrogant and insensitive. How many of those who voted for Trump were happy with this rhetoric? Repeated expressions of “unity” and “democracy has prevailed” in speeches immediately after the election right through to the inauguration seem appealing, but I think they contribute to the alienation of massive social groups in America. And despite that, the fact that Japanese and other media outlets lionized those words unconditionally was also, I believe, extremely dangerous.

Related to this are the facts that many feel American democracy has come under threat in recent years, and that there were multiple issues with the Trump Administration. The most critical of those for me is the fact that America, the country with the most democratic candidate selection process in the world, could produce a demagogue president who threatened democracy and the rule of law. America’s system of primary elections held to select candidates for almost every public office, is the ultimate in democratic approval processes because anyone can participate as long as they are a registered voter (or in some states, registered

with a political party). Someone can enter as a candidate even if they have never contributed to the party, and Trump proved that if you gain popularity in the primaries, you can seize the presidential nomination. That is the kind of system the US primaries operate under. The past four years have made us really think about how, in this system of democracy, there are no guarantees about the kind of person that will be elected.

The second point I would like to discuss is the database being very carefully compiled by the Washington Post on the amount of false and misleading claims made during Trump's presidency. They found that he told more than 30,000 lies during his term, eroding trust in the media and democracy. In some further interesting data, the frequency of his lies increased rapidly over time, and more than half of these lies were told during his last year in office. People like Trump who outright refuse to recognize their faults or mistakes need to keep telling more lies to support the initial lie told, and so the frequency of lies keeps increasing. Looking at Trump's daily rate of lies, it was six per day in his first year, 16 in the second, 22 in the third, and by his fourth year in office it reached 39 lies per day. In America, there is a pattern of naturally following, supporting, and believing the words of the democratically elected president. That explains why even lies that would normally never be believed are taken at face value when told consistently by someone in the post of president. It creates an enormous pool of people who believe in those lies. Results of one study also showed a strong tendency among Trump supporters to seek and be subordinate to an authoritarian-style leader. It seems that America's strong democratic norms worked as a mechanism to highlight the virtues of the democratic selection process and normalize the insistent and baseless claims of the president, treating them as highly charismatic behavior.

My third point is about social media. I think this is perhaps the first time that issues caused by social media have been so prominent. In the end, President Trump's Twitter and Facebook accounts were suspended on the basis that posts there incited the assault on the Capitol. Debate unfolded from many perspectives following that. On one hand, there were strong voices of concern related

to freedom of speech and whether a leader who continues to spread rumors that disrupt democracy and freedom should have guaranteed access to social media. Others showed a preference for strengthening the selection of targets for regulation based on content and subject matter, saying that if Trump's access is going to be restricted, we should also be placing limits on leaders in Iran. One study showed that the incidence of misinformation spread through social media dropped dramatically after Trump's Twitter account was suspended. America and indeed the whole world witnessed just how much influence a demagogue can wield by maximizing their audience via social media.

Trump's impact was so strong that in analyses of the 2020 election, the debate is focused on him. But the fact is that voter suppression has been an issue in America since its foundation. The voter suppression seen in recent years did not start under Trump; we need to look carefully at the fact that, especially over the last ten years, the Republican Party, with its base of conservative white supporters, has been working on it deliberately. In other words, there has been a medium- to long-term trend among conservative whites to intervene in the fundamental democratic process through voter suppression of minorities, driven by a sense of fear that they will become a minority in the near future. The Republican Party of course stresses the pretext of preventing voter fraud, but they have in fact been making the voting process tougher in a variety of ways that exclude minorities. The fact that insecurity around falling from majority status has led to voter suppression and even attacks on democracy is a critical point when considering the survival of mature democracies. And we must pay attention to the trends taking place over much longer spans of time than just Trump's time in power.

There was substantial suppression of human rights under the Trump Administration. There are too many examples to mention them all, but I think the biggest issue to touch many in America was the handling of immigrants. In particular, the Trump administration was fiercely criticized for its inhumane border control policy on the Mexican border. This caused children to be separated from their parents for long periods of time, to the point, in

some cases, that their parent-child relationship could no longer be verified. Meanwhile, in foreign diplomacy Trump focused on the performance, showing himself arguing with dictatorial and authoritarian leaders over “deals,” but never demonstrating leadership on advocating for human rights. This severely damaged America’s status as a leader of democracy in international society.

The extremely shocking thing is that, despite this, in the end, more than 74 million people still voted for such a person. One possible explanation for Trump’s election in 2016 was that many voted for him with hope that he may be a good president, not really knowing the kind of person he was. But the fact that there were so many people who voted for him again after seeing his four years in office was an enormous shock to countless people inside and outside America. There were some disaffected Republicans who found Trump intolerable and voted for Biden, but an overwhelming majority still supported Trump. I think it is impossible to explain this simply from the angle of people being forced to decide between two parties. There was, without a doubt, an enormous pool of people who approved of Trump and his speech, conduct, and style as president, including the continuous lies, attacks on the media, contempt for democratic processes, and self-righteous behavior.

It was four years in which we were all forced to rethink democracy and how it could easily collapse at any time if we do not foster the standards of democracy like our own flesh and blood. And it was a period in which an enormous issue was thrust upon us: how do we build strength and how do we train voters in media literacy to be able to stand up to a president or anyone at the top who lies constantly?

I would also like to touch on some points that gave me great hope. These events served in some way to revitalize democracy in the face of an enormous threat. I think this is an extremely important point that shows the real strength of democracy in America.

The first point I would like to make is how the record for numbers of women in Congress is being continuously updated. For a long time, the numbers were not increasing much, and America ranked quite low among advanced nations in terms

of the number of female parliamentarians. But unable to endure Trump’s words and actions, women dove into politics in great numbers after Trump’s election in 2016. One of the reasons long given for the low numbers of female parliamentarians has been a lack of confidence as a result of discrimination and prejudice against women in society. But there was explosive growth in the numbers of female candidates who thought, “If someone like Trump can be president, ...” The result was clear in the 2018 midterm elections and continued through to 2020, when there were gains in the number of female parliamentarians at both the state and federal levels. Triggered by the rise in Democratic Party congresswomen, the Republican Party increased their number of congresswomen in the 2020 election too.

My second point is on Black Lives Matter. Black people being murdered senselessly by white police officers has been an ongoing issue in US society, but the reason it became such a huge movement this time, with the participation of many white people too, was because of the sense of crisis caused by constant discriminatory speech during the Trump administration. And I think the reason it expanded into a movement that went beyond a protest by the minority group that was being victimized was because of a shared sense of crisis on a broad range of issues. That sense of impending crisis led to extremely high voter turnout and record voting numbers in the most recent presidential election.



**Moderator:** Thank you very much. First, I would like to hear a little more from Mr. Shiga. I completely agree that an authoritarian government’s

rise to economic superpower has caused a slow-down in and distortion of initiatives for governance reform on the path to democracy.

On the other hand, if you look at the personnel choices of the Biden administration, there is a clear positioning in key posts of people concerned with democracy and human rights. The new director of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is Samantha Power, the former ambassador to the UN, and a number of people with a deep knowledge of democracy occupy high-level posts in the National Security Council. In that regard, I think America might once again move in the direction of aid and governance reform.

Mr. Shiga, you take a rather harsh viewpoint, saying it will not work out unless there is a wholesale review of democracy promotion to date. Is that to say you feel it is impossible? Is there a chance that the switch to the Biden Administration and a return to the American way of advancing democracy and human rights in the world once more could be a major game changer in the face of China's methods?

**Shiga:** As Prof. Shoji mentioned earlier, the Trump Administration showed practically no interest in issues of democracy and human rights, so I do think the focus in international politics going forward will be on how America under a Biden administration will roll back tendencies towards authoritarianism.

I have both hope and fear about these moves America is making. Or to put it another way, I think America's moves are a "double-edged sword." My first hope is that the United States will restore leadership and interest in spreading universal values around the world. JICA has opportunities to coordinate with USAID and other agencies, and I hope Japan will form a united front with the United States.

However, the question is how the US will engage in the promotion of universal values going forward. I think there are two possibilities. One possibility is that, as shown in President Biden's declaration that "democracy has prevailed," the US will conclude that American democracy is the strongest after all, and they'll view it as a model for democracy in other countries so that, even if

they do not push or force it on others, they'll engage in aid for democratization with the overarching attitude that they are number one.

The other possibility is that the United States takes a more modest approach. Up until now, the US operated with a sense of exceptionalism, seeing itself as the very model of democracy and not considering that there might be lessons to be learned from other countries. But through Trump's term and the experience of the COVID-19 crisis, we now see—even among Americans—the emergence of the idea that we need to review past errors and rebuild democracy incorporating lessons learned from other countries, no longer taking a superior position and lecturing to others. In discussions during the November 24, 2020, "Democracy for the Future" project online forum, Michael J. Green said, "We need to coordinate more and think harder about how we expand the democratic space because it's under assault, including at home in the US, and we all have to pick up our game." If this humility not before seen in the US becomes mainstream, I think things will move in the right direction. However, while saying "we are not the model," Green also lectured Japan on issues in Japanese aid for democratization (*laughs*). If deep down Americans still view their system as the model for democracy, the people of Southeast Asia and other developing countries will be terribly displeased. Add to that the temptation of China's "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy" and people may really start to think the Chinese model is better.

How will the US reflect on the disastrous scenes of its own liberal democracy exposed by the crisis of COVID-19, and how humble will it be? And will America be able to commit to actions based on "democracy partnerships" to build democracy together through shared experiences and lessons learned rather than simply promoting democracy based on its own model? Those are the essential factors in whether America will serve as a game-changer or not.

**Moderator:** Thank you. I would also like to ask Prof. Shoji about the extremely important issues of voter intimidation, social media, and misinfor-

mation. What you mentioned about voter intimidation was raised in a movie about Stacey Abrams called *All In: The Fight for Democracy*. The movie has recently become available in Japan, so I think many people can now access it.

It goes without saying that problems of social media and misinformation are highlighting critical issues in America's democracy. Prof. Shoji, you mentioned a feeling of great hope, but even so, some feel still more proactive measures are necessary to better manage democracy in America and the countries of the world.

Regulations including the suspension of President Trump's Twitter account and restrictions on a host of other accounts were handed down in quick succession, like a domino effect, based entirely on the judgement of the social media platform owners. Some extreme conservatives could no longer use the Parler app and were even thrown out from Amazon Web services in the end. It may be accurate to describe these restrictions by platform owners as "self-purging" for the purpose of protecting democracy. However, they can also be seen as furthering division in democracy and cornering people genuinely trying to engage in debate about democracy.

I would like to ask about the kind of actions that must be taken to manage democracy and lead it in the right direction. Is it something that private businesspeople like platform owners should be leading, or should governments be instituting regulations? Who should be taking what kinds of measures in response to issues of disinformation, the infodemic, and social media that have caused the problems we see in democracy today?

**Shoji:** I think it is an enormous risk to cut off not just an individual like Trump, but also the venues for exchange between right-wing people, even if only temporarily. For example, when we see news about the less-than-stable democratic governments of African countries restricting social media use around the time of elections, we think it is awful, right? It is the same situation except it was the administration itself that was restricted this time. The fact that such a thing can happen even in America was incredible.

With the attack on the Capitol, strong short-term measures were necessary. But be it Trump or anyone else, a lot of the debate now emerging is that there must be no permanent banning of accounts or access. Recently, the fact that there are strong voices saying that it was an emergency situation, but also that this kind of intervention is extremely dangerous, show how healthy American democracy actually is. I think it is a great comfort that even after these experiences, the mainstream media still has a deep awareness of the need to continue as a venue for sharing diverse opinions.

Even after the events on this occasion, most Americans do not think the government should impose restrictions on democracy. In the end, with diversity in opinions and interests, every person is free to say whatever they want. And with that backdrop, this debate made me realize anew the importance of securing spaces for the convergence of ideas on what people believe to be right.

**Moderator:** From January 6 onwards, there was an avalanche of restrictions put in place. Given the shocking events that unfolded with the restrictions put on President Trump's personal account and the incursion of the Capitol it's easy to forget, but if you remove those events think about it in more general terms, many people feel that the regulations imposed by these social platforms were extremely harsh in terms of the balance with freedom of speech. In normal times, such regulations would only be handed down after extensive debate in society.

**Shoji:** In general, there is a very broad concern around the control of public debate under authoritarian regimes and fascist systems. But on this occasion in the United States, it was the liberal side constantly saying that Trump's words should be regulated. I think this is an extremely important point. In America, there are many on the conservative side who assert their freedom to say whatever they want. We must pay attention to the fact that this time it was the people on the left, the liberals, seeking controls on speech under the Trump administration. In other words, I think we saw firsthand the risk that people from either side can call for regulation and control depending on who is causing the problem. There is not only the risk that

certain subjects are constantly targeted, but it also creates a situation where it is impossible to gain widespread support from the American public. Further, even if you can control dangerous statements through abstract frameworks such as prohibiting the “incitement of violence,” the removal of radical conspiracy theorists from major social media platforms risks marginalizing them into less visible spaces where they become further radicalized. I think debate and investigation into these matters will continue for some time.

## Threats Posed to Democracy by the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Moderator:** Thank you for your thoughts on that. I would like to move on now to the next discussion point. COVID-19 has been spreading around the world for more than a year. What impact has the COVID-19 crisis had on the various issues already seen for democracy?

First, Mr. Shiga, what would you say has been the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on developing nations and in places transitioning to democracy or where democracy had not long been established?

**Shiga:** Rather than talking about individual countries, I would like to discuss overall trends. My first point is that the credibility of liberal democracy in advanced Western countries has been damaged by this COVID-19 crisis.

There is an unspoken assumption that the political and socioeconomic systems of advanced Western nations are the model when it comes to development aid. And the US and European nations have until now dispatched experts on democracy, local government, corruption countermeasures, and electoral systems to implement systems for separation of powers (legislative, executive, and judicial), ombudspersons, and the decentralization of power in developing nations. But the credibility of Western liberal democracy as a model has declined greatly as the result of this pandemic. Over the past year, I have had many opportunities to talk online with people in developing

countries, and this has been a very powerful take-away from those discussions.

Over the past decade, even with growing awareness in many developing countries around the Chinese authoritarian model as an option, there has still been trust, if not conviction, that they should strive for the Western model of government. This changed with the COVID-19 crisis. There has been a dramatic decline in trust for Western liberal democracy as a model of governance. Trust in America’s style of liberal democracy has suffered especially badly.

I too have lived in America, and of course I never thought Black people had totally equal standing, but I have to say the events that led to the Black Lives Matter movement were shocking. I did not think things like this, an incident like the Black man George Floyd dying after being pressed on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds by a white police officer in public view, still happened in this day and age. Prof. Shoji mentioned this too, but I did not know that white people were effectively stealing Black people’s voting rights by manipulating the early voting system in Southern states. These kinds of things that many people did not know or want to know, and which had been brushed aside, all came bubbling to the surface, triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. I suspect a lot of developing countries gained new awareness of the current state of America’s liberal democracy.

My second point is about how China and Russia are skillfully taking advantage of a loss of credibility for the Western political and economic model. Symbolic of this was the response to the assault on the US Congress by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying. After first making a sarcastic comment about “praying for a rapid return to stability and safety for the American people,” she criticized America for a double standard, citing its treatment of the US incident as violence at the hands of extremist elements, while pointing out that the US had praised those involved in the violent destruction of the Hong Kong parliament in July 2019 as heroes of democracy.

Of course, it is possible to put forward counterarguments to this statement, but it had a certain degree of persuasiveness, leaving many in developing countries thinking, “Huh, that’s true.” And

China and Russia are using this loss of credibility to go on the offensive. “Mask diplomacy” and “vaccine diplomacy” are good examples. Not even 13 percent of the world’s population lives in advanced Western nations, and yet they have purchased more than half of the world’s vaccines and are criticized by developing nations of “vaccine nationalism.” Then China goes and supplies its vaccine to many developing nations, including Indonesia, Chile, Ukraine, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, even before its own 1.3 billion citizens have been immunized. So it is not that hard to see how developing countries might view China as a better leader in international society. A Thai health ministry official said, “Because Western governments are democracies, their government leaders are forced to answer to the citizens who voted for them. In times of crisis, authoritarian governments are more equipped to supply public goods.” Hearing statements like this makes us painfully aware that Western nations may have lost their predominance as a model. For us going forward, when we are figuring out how to reverse this trend toward authoritarianism, I think we will see the biggest issue caused by COVID-19 is the loss of morality and predominance of the Western model.

**Moderator:** Thank you. From the perspective of developing nations, it seems possible then to interpret the word “credibility” as “persuasiveness.”

**Shiga:** Yes, that is exactly right.

**Moderator:** I have another question for you. You said that COVID-19 has eroded the appeal and persuasive power of democracy. Looking at the actual situation on the ground—the difficulty of restricting private rights in a democracy and the slow pace of decision-making because of issues in internal politics compared to authoritarian countries—do these things make people reconsider the virtues of democracy?

**Shiga:** There are two issues. The first pertains to the COVID-19 measures that you mentioned and the rise of the perception among developing nations that authoritarian systems are much faster

and more effective at implementing necessary measures than democratic systems. Of course, even looking at the response among authoritarian countries, it has not gone well in places like Russia and Iran, but it has in China. And in democracies, some countries in Europe failed in their response while others like Taiwan and Korea have seen success. If you take a very close look, the argument that authoritarianism is an advantage does not stand. But the reality is that the claim of superiority by and for authoritarianism has gained some traction.

The second issue relates to the superiority of democracy in terms of achieving human security. Advanced nations have long said to developing countries that with its channels allowing citizens’ voices to directly impact politics, democracy can better protect their citizens’ human security, that is, better guarantee opportunities for the realization of healthy and happy lives. However, in the very birthplace of democracy—America—the COVID-19 crisis exposed the reality that the human security of Black people has not been guaranteed. Many people in developing countries are thinking, it took 100 years from the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves until Black people had the right to participate in politics, and now another 50 years on, they still suffer so badly.

To summarize, from the perspective of developing countries on the issues of implementing COVID-19 countermeasures and enhancing human security, there is a question mark on the persuasiveness of the claim that liberal democracy is superior to authoritarianism.

**Moderator:** That was very clear. Thank you very much. Next, Prof. Shoji, could you talk to us a bit about US democracy and the direction of democracy in the world.

**Shoji:** As Mr. Shiga just mentioned, the biggest impact of COVID-19 has been a decline in the credibility of democracy around the world. But here I will speak specifically about America.

In America’s case, first and foremost, the past four years have been about issues with Trump. COVID-19 was then layered on top of that. But because the issues surrounding President Trump were so extensive, there is not a lot of argument

that democracy suffered more because of COVID-19. Conversely, people feel that Trump lost the election because of COVID-19's negative impact on the economy. So, if Biden supporters say this was a win for democracy, then there is one side to the argument that COVID-19 in fact helped save democracy.

America is a society in which it is extremely difficult to control people's freedoms. Trump's stance was one of prioritizing the economy and downplaying COVID-19, and the fact that this extended into partisan positions is an extremely important point to remember when considering the US situation. It is unthinkable in other countries, but the response to the life-and-death issue of COVID-19 came down to a test of loyalty in terms of support for one's political party and the president, even going so far as to influence people's understanding of this serious infectious disease. Wearing a mask became a symbol of opposition to Trump—in areas with many conservatives you had to be careful about wearing a mask—and the idea that wearing a mask could even cause harm spread around the country. When people around the world saw news from the United States, they were shocked beyond belief that these could be scenes from an advanced nation. This is absolutely the issue of credibility that Mr. Shiga was just discussing.

Many Republican supporters are in rural areas, whereas many Democratic Party supporters are in urban areas. The impact of COVID-19 was enormous for low-income earners and minorities, many of whom are Democratic Party supporters, because so many of them work at city locations doing jobs that cannot be done from home. On the other hand, the risk of infection is relatively low for people in isolated areas—home to many whites and Republican supporters—meaning they felt very little danger of the virus and had very little sense that they might be infected. I think that's the reason why when Trump said that COVID-19 was nothing to worry about, so many believed him—even though they were hanging out without masks, they were in fact mostly fine. The downplaying of COVID-19 touted by Trump correlates closely with the geographical distribution of Republican supporters.

It is terrifying to imagine what would have happened if the tables were turned; COVID-19 could have taken the lives of influential party supporters on an enormous scale. If a president with widespread support from urban minorities and low-income earners had said, "You don't need to wear masks," what would the scale of damage have been then?

In terms of timing too, because COVID-19 spread throughout the country during the term of an economy-focused president like Trump, we do not know what he, a demagogue-like president, would have done had he chosen to impose restrictions on people's lives. He neglected to implement a national response, basically turning a blind eye, and because of that a horrifying situation ensued with more than 400,000 lives lost. But if he had used COVID-19 as an excuse to impose restrictions, what might have happened then? I shudder to think.

It is quite difficult to assess the impact COVID-19 has had on democracy within America, but one thing that suffered was the Black Lives Matter movement. It had been growing on a grand scale not only among Black people, but also swelling to include white people and Asian and Latinx communities. My impression was that the Japanese media, in particular, focused solely on the violent portions, which were one very minor part of the picture. The protest movement that spread across the United States was an extremely peaceful one with regular people participating as families. One survey showed that especially among white people in rural areas where protests were rare, their image of the Black Lives Matter movement was that it was violent and dangerous because of the sensational media coverage of the violent cases. Despite excitement that it had permanently changed the nature of protest movements in America, I think the street protests died down as the presidential election neared as a direct result of COVID-19.

Anti-Trump individuals took COVID-19 very seriously, and this showed in a clear trend for voting via mail ballots. And I think fear of infection had a role to play in limiting their action on the streets. Trump supporters, on the other hand, did

not wear masks or limit their activities, so the media picture, as it were, gave a biased impression that there were greater numbers of Trump supporters and that they were more active. I think that may have served to further embolden Trump supporters.

However, the political donation culture was reinvigorated precisely because of this environment, which prevented people from heading out into the streets. People who could not go out donated instead. For better or worse, money spurred on every election campaign. Because door-knocking—a crucial component in election campaigns—was not possible, greater weight was placed on costly television commercials. This raised the risk of a dogfight in which the battle is won or lost based on the amount of money one can raise.

The widespread expansion of remote meetings and events made geographical isolation a non-issue, enabling people who could not leave their homes or who had physical limitations on their time to participate in politics. This meant anybody anywhere in the country could join in the conventions of either party, which had previously been limited to activists with sufficient time on their hands. This was especially the case for Democrats, whose national convention was conducted entirely online. The expansion of mail-in ballots had a similar effect in promoting participation among people in situations or types of employment that typically prevent them from voting on election day. These changes opened up a new path in a country with the infrastructure to overcome such challenges, even at a time when the disease was spreading with explosive speed.

**Moderator:** I feel really pleased listening to you, Prof. Shoji, to hear grounds for optimism that America is not lost and democracy is still alive and well. But at the same time, I feel the negative aspect, from the points you raised at the outset, that America's COVID-19 response has been politicized. Even areas that rely heavily on skill and expertise have become part of the political agenda. I appreciate you explaining very clearly the truly worrying nature of those developments. The thing that scared me the most was your question of what would have happened if the Trump administration had wielded its political power and strengthened

its control. This is very important in terms of counterfactual thinking.

## How Japan Should Engage in Democracy Around the World

**Moderator:** That brings us to our final discussion point, centered on Japan. For those of us living in Japan, how do we engage with democracy around the world, and what should we make of the state of democracy in the world? Mr. Shiga just spoke about how people in developing countries are starting to feel some doubt with regard to democracy. So, I would like to hear your thoughts on why democracy is still important. Prof. Shoji, could you please go first this time?

**Shoji:** First, I would like to talk about the possibilities for Japan's engagement in global democracy. My focus is the United States. Looking at the US and the reasons why its democracy has been transmitted around the world comes down to a sense of faith in American democracy. If that faith wavers, America loses its influence in foreign affairs. Over the last 10 to 20 years, faith has been maintained through incredibly impactful messages of success and reform in American democracy sent out to the world, as seen in the emergence of a Black president and female vice president.

I think Mr. Shiga will discuss what Japan can do in the world, but from this perspective, the way I see it is that if there is not sufficient respect for Japanese democracy from the outside, we have no messaging power and absolutely no power of persuasion.

I am sure some will say there are no issues because Japan is a full democracy that guarantees free elections, but Japanese people tend to overlook the point that when viewed from outside, Japan is essentially a single-party system. Despite the spate of issues and improprieties in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), there will never be any momentum for an administration change if no one has any expectations for the opposition party. It makes me wonder how much trust a country like ours earns as a model for democracy. Conversely, a case like ours becomes grounds for the argument by authoritarian governments that we may sing the praises of democracy but that a stable government

run by one party is better after all. It is extremely important to have a choice between two major parties when you feel one has veered from the correct path and change is needed. Both Taiwan and South Korea have achieved such a situation, although each may have its own issues. That is the first point that comes to mind when considering the extent of Japan's power of persuasion in the world.

Next, I would like to return to a point I raised at the start—that of candidate selection. This is not something that comes up often in Japan, but it is a critical point. Many countries, including South Korea, Taiwan, and various places in Africa and Latin America, hold primaries as part of their candidate selection process. Many of these countries hold primaries not only for the president or national leader, but for the selection of candidates for national parliament too. It is only Japan where candidates are still chosen inside a “black box,” and yet there are no complaints from Japanese citizens. It shows how little interest there is in the political process. Is it possible for a country like that to be a model for others? It is easy to see just how far behind Japan is when you look at the candidate selection process.

And I must mention the lack of progress in female representation in politics. A governor mistakenly used the term “glass ceiling” in a recent incident that revealed to many just how infrequently people in positions of high public office are engaged in discussions about female advancement in politics and society. A law was established in 2018 to promote gender equality in politics aimed at equal numbers of male and female candidates. But it is obviously not good enough to simply set targets. Mexico is one country that has achieved parity. I traveled there to survey people involved in achieving that goal and they all said you have to make it compulsory. Laws and clauses to promote parity are totally ineffective. Since laws promoting parity have been enacted in Japan, there has been very little debate about it.

Earlier, I spoke about the increase in US congresswomen, but even so, looking at the House of Representatives after the January 2021 gains, women still make up just 24 percent of all seats. This puts the US at 68th out of 200 countries on a list compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union

(IPU)—an extremely low rank for an advanced nation. Then you look at Japan and it ranks 166th—shockingly low. The House of Councillors has reached a figure of 20 percent women, but the House of Representatives barely reaches 10 percent. Japan is a long way behind when it comes to women in politics, but not much issue is made of it. Debate seems to be kicking off somewhat, but there are no clear indications of movement in this regard.

This ties into the candidate selection process I mentioned earlier: if there is no way to challenge incumbents from within the party, we will never see an increase in women under LDP one-party rule. Candidate selection and female political participation are all linked. To countries in Asia and Africa engaged in democracy head-on, Japan is neither special nor a model, and it pains me to say that we must question whether Japan is in any position to lead others. Until quite recently, people looked up to Japan based on economic strength, but in the face of the rising economic superpower of China, we are reaching the limit of our wealth-dependant branding. Did Japan hone its democracy during those bountiful years? This is a question that will be asked by our neighbors in Asia who are working to find their own styles of democracy while building economic strength.

I believe we need to create more opportunities for Japanese people to contemplate democracy. Out in the world when asked, “What is Japan proud of?” would anyone respond “democracy”? Activists putting their lives on the line in Hong Kong were shocked at the low turnout in Japan's elections. They are astounded that people choose not to exercise their right to vote, especially when there is no political suppression.

I also think media literacy is an area that Japan needs to consciously educate people on. In connection with recent events in the United States, even after fact checks of Trump supporters and the purging of all sorts of rumors, a group of people calling themselves J-Anon (not QAnon) endeavored to further spread the rumors. Why would such a strange thing happen? Of course, there are all kinds of reasons behind such scheming, but when considering the circumstances influencing a case like this, I think English language education is an extremely important factor. I think that English

will be the global language in the end, and we live in times with the Internet where you can get whatever information you want if you can just read English. Only being able to engage and interact in Japanese creates a totally closed information space. This is an issue we need to take a hard look at now.

**Moderator:** Thank you. I understood that you were stressing how Japan must first solidify democracy at home. I would like to come back to you again later to get your thoughts on why democracy is important in the first place, but first, Mr. Shiga, please go ahead.

**Shiga:** I'll speak from my perspective as a development aid worker. I spoke earlier about how most theories on development in developing countries are of Western origin. Western systems of government, economy, and society are the models, and there is an unspoken assumption that development is about getting close to achieving those models. When providing development aid, Japan also references its own experiences with economic and political development, but at least in Japan's case, it recognizes that it is doing so. I do not think Americans or Europeans have any awareness or recognition of themselves in that way.

This is a somewhat abstract example, but when I spoke with someone working for the German aid agency I said, "We insert a sense of Japan-ness into Japanese aid. In what ways do you incorporate German-ness into your aid?" The response I got was "I don't understand the question." I probed further saying, "Does Germany not assert some unique aspect of itself from its own development history and experiences to developing countries?" And the retort was, "Absolutely not. Germany is working to share universal human values." To which I said, "The universal human values you talk about originally came from the West—Germany, France, and America—so, wouldn't you agree that they contain some sense of German-ness? That's how people in developing countries see it." But no matter what I said, I could not make myself understood and we could not find agreement.

Bearing this in mind, and also in light of concerns around a decline in the credibility of liberal democracy, I feel Japan is the only country in the

development assistance field that can advocate for viewing our models as relatives rather than as absolutes. The US and European countries do not have that awareness. In the past, we have seen that the argument that developing countries each have their own logic, culture, and history, and that there is no panacea has not been taken seriously in the Western-led aid sector. I think now is the time for Japan to actively advocate these ideas.

So far, I have only talked about the decline of acceptance of democracy, but that is not to say there is a yielding to the authoritarianism seen in China and Russia. The key going forward to being able to counteract authoritarianism is for each of us to reform our own systems—in Japan, Japanese liberal democracy, and in the United States, US liberal democracy—and come out confident in the values of liberal democracy. In the aid sector, this is referred to as Build Back Better (BBB).

Biden used these words as a slogan during the presidential election, but the idea was originally proposed at a UN disaster prevention meeting held in Sendai after the Great East Japan Earthquake. It means to make improvements to infrastructure and society damaged by disasters so that ultimately they end up better than before the disaster struck. In the post-COVID-19 world, once the crisis has passed, it will be crucial for Japan, the United States, and other liberal democracies to extend a hand and help developing countries build back better. But it is also important to rebuild our own societies better than before, thereby raising the value of liberal democracy. I think that will raise the appeal and value of liberal democracy in developing countries vis-à-vis authoritarianism.

We need the West to reflect carefully on its approach to date of "you have to accept it because this is the standard." Japan needs to lead, implement, and make mainstream the approach that says, "Our country's liberal democracy is just one model, so let's share our knowledge and work together to determine how to fine-tune it to fit your country's cultural, political, and economic situation." I think Japan has an important role to play in persuading the United States, Germany, and others to adopt this approach.

**Moderator:** Some may be a little confused about the links between the points just made by Mr. Shiga and those raised earlier by Prof. Shoji, so I would like to ask some follow-up questions. Prof. Shoji said that there are many issues in Japan's democracy at home, specifically the lack of a two-party system, the candidate selection process, the slow process of advancement for women, and relations with the media. And at the same time, Mr. Shiga has said that when it comes to aid for global governance reform, Japan can exert a kind of Japan-ness. In other words, irrespective of the issues in the domestic Japanese political situation, you suggest, Mr. Shiga, that Japan has unique qualities to share. Is that right?

**Shiga:** Yes, that is what I mean. I think the good qualities of Japan-ness can be seen in the way it implements its development assistance. Japan tends to listen more to the unique circumstances of aid recipient countries. Aid recipients in Southeast Asia and other areas tell us that America forces their ideas on them, but Japan listens to what they have to say and determines the nature of the aid through joint discussions. This is not to say that Japan's democracy is superior to that of the West. Just like Prof. Shoji said, there is no question that Japan must also build back better.

**Moderator:** This relates to something Prof. Shoji said too. There probably is a Japan-ness to how we promote democracy, as with other countries, but do you think there are consistent standards for the ideal state of democracy?

**Shiga:** To be referred to as democracy, there are of course minimal elements required that transcend each country's unique people, history, and culture. These are not negotiable. But there are also parts that must be fine-tuned for each country. I know it is difficult to separate them, but for those parts other than the fundamental principles that are non-negotiable, it is a question of showing flexibility.

JICA President Shunichi Kataoka says that there are universal values, but we must define them in a flexible manner. By way of explanation, in universal values such as liberal democracy and the

rule of law, some aspects must be adjusted for the unique local situation—that is what I believe he means by defining them flexibly. It is important to separate out the universal components and the components that should be implemented with flexibility.

**Moderator:** Prof. Shoji, please share with us your thoughts on the points Mr. Shiga has raised as well as your ideas on why democracy is important.

**Shoji:** As Mr. Shiga mentioned, I think we must come to a major agreement on which parts are absolutely not negotiable. And I think there are many ways we can make that happen.

In terms of why democracy is important, ultimately it is because no other system guarantees freedom. And freedom does not mean being able to do whatever you want to; it is about freedoms that we must protect, and that is where the concept of human rights comes in. If you look at the various forms of government in the world today, ultimately, democracy is the only system that protects these. I am pretty sure we can agree on that point.

Many paths lead to democracy and there are many variations in the shape democracy takes in the end, so why ultimately must it be democracy? We must respect those different forms, but what aspects must absolutely be protected? It is impossible to debate these points without including the human rights perspective. There is still work to be done at home in Japan regarding the protection of human rights, and Japan must commit to improvements, or it will have no sway in foreign affairs.

Take, for example, the events in Hong Kong. Is it acceptable for Japan to not say anything? Japan is wary of China, but usually it appears to be in step with the United States. When you think about how other countries see Japan, it is essential for Japan to convey its position on the need to protect values such as democracy and human rights at every key juncture.

In relation to Hong Kong, debate has been raised on the Magnitzky laws (sanctions for human rights abuses). These are laws for economic sanctions such as the refusal of visas or freezing of assets belonging to individuals or organizations subject to the sanctions because of human rights

violations. I think we need to have much more vigorous debate on these kinds of things. Even Taiwan, which is in an extremely difficult situation, is welcoming people who have been suppressed in Hong Kong. I have been asked by friends in Hong Kong and Taiwan why Japan will not take these people in. Do countries not taking any action in times like this have a right to speak to others about democracy and freedom? I think this is something we Japanese must consider.

**Moderator:** Lastly, I would like to ask you, Mr. Shiga, why democracy is important.

**Shiga:** This is a crucial point especially when considering the implementation of development assistance. I think there are two schools of thoughts. The first is the argument that there are instrumental values and democracy is an essential means for the realization of higher-order values. This relates to what Prof. Shoji spoke about. Churchill said, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.” We can take from this that democracy is the best system in terms of achieving human rights and other higher-order values.

However, I find the idea that democracy is a means to achieving some other values a little dangerous. What I mean is, for example, there remains a question mark on issues of whether American democracy has guaranteed the human rights of minorities and women, in particular, and whether it has brought prosperity to all citizens. China, on the other hand, insists to developing countries that it has brought wealth to its citizens and realized a stable and peaceful society while maintaining order

under an authoritarian system. This enables them to make the argument that “if democracy is a means to something and there is an alternative means, then it does not necessarily need to be democracy. In fact, with COVID-19, authoritarian countries did a better job, right?”

There is no question that democracy as a means is extremely important. However, my second point—that there is intrinsic value in democracy itself—is critical. And by that, I mean that there is unrelinquishable value in the democratic process itself for creating a better society based on debate in which every citizen joins the discussion and has their say. So, on the question of why democracy is important, if we do not arm ourselves with these kinds of theoretical arguments, we will lose out to China’s aggression. Thinking about democracy’s *raison d’être*, its value to society, and how to share that message with the world will determine whether democracy can serve as a breakwater to the waves of authoritarianism.

**Shoji:** Because democracy is a process and does not guarantee results, the universal values that lead to democracy are critical. And there are elements that can only be guaranteed through the democratic process itself. I agree with you totally.

**Moderator:** Thank you very much for this great discussion on a wide range of issues.



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