



Democratic Resilience

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

Democratic resilience. Would you recognize it if you saw it? What does it take to build it? Today we're joined by Ambassador Derek Mitchell, the President of the National Democratic Institute, who will share with us his profound story witnessing the dramatic rise and fall of democracy in Asia, including his eyewitness account at Tiananmen Square in 1989. But first, let's head to the Republic of Sudan for the latest from two team members on the ground in Khartoum, as the country tries to navigate its earliest work building democratic resilience in the midst of an extremely fragile transition. More now from the Consortium's Ebie DuPont.

Ebie DuPont

In 2018 and 2019, a popular uprising spread across Sudan, resulting in the ouster of President Omar al Bashir's regime and ushering in hopes for a fresh transition to peace and democracy. The country's provisional constitutional charter establishes the democratic framework for the transition and stipulates that a major goal of the transition is to "strengthen the role of young people of both sexes and expand their opportunities in all social, political and economic fields". But as the transition heads into its third year, the stakes are more challenging than ever for Sudan. The country needs institutions that can accommodate its size and diversity, including an electoral and legal framework that encourages the revival of political parties, civil society organizations and the media, and most importantly, participation by all its citizens.

Adrienne Ross

Sudan's Resident Country Director for the National Democratic Institute Samia Mahgoub and Hayya Ahmed the Deputy Country Director for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems joined me direct from Khartoum to talk more about the country's path to democratic resilience. Tensions since we spoke have now escalated to an all-time high, illustrating in real time, democracy's fragility. In addition to this difficult political transition, Samia and Hayya have also had to navigate COVID-19 and day to day challenges like regular electrical outages, and difficult internet access. But these two ladies are dedicated to walking with the Sudanese as they pursue a more democratic age. They spoke to me about their work just before the recent political crisis began.

Samia Mahgoub

As you know, in Sudan we are facing a power outage, a daily power outage, and it's something that really impacts our work at the office. So, this is the first thing that we have to think about to guarantee to have enough to allow our staff to work. We cannot also forget that we are now at the end of the rainy season. So, three weeks ago, I cannot even imagine conducting any activity in the field outside Khartoum itself. So, for sure Sudan faced the same impact related to COVID. The vaccination is available, but unfortunately, some people still resist that. I don't think that there is a lot of awareness to inform people to go for vaccination. We have more than 10 centers here in Khartoum, less outside Khartoum, but still more our next campaign will be to encourage people to get vaccinated.

Adrienne Ross

When we talk to democratic strengthening teams, we often talk to teams who have been on the ground a long, long time, but not always. And in the case of Sudan, you all have arrived in the country relatively recently. Can you give us a little status on how long you've been in the country and where your work stands?

Samia Mahgoub

And I can say starting from April 2021, we can say that our program already started to implement activity, but even in the beginning because also the capacity of the government or the transition period is still very low so we cannot go faster than that. But still, we can say we are in the beginning of the implementation of activity. Unfortunately, because of the political situation, sometimes we feel that we move forward and on the second day we can find our self still stuck in the same level.

Hayya Ahmed

We were here in January and in February we started implementing our activities. That is because of the first, like, obviously, our association with USAID and the trust that the government of Sudan

had on USAID assistance. And secondly, it's also the reputation. You know, NDI has been here for a while working on other projects, but IFES was here in 2009 and 10. And there were so many people who had worked with IFES at that time. As soon as like, you know, we said that we are from IFES, there were people who already recognized us and remembered the work that organization did at that time.

Adrienne Ross

So Hayya, you've talked to me offline about how you've had some really difficult challenges, or you've, you've been able to accomplish some very difficult things. Can both of you talk a little bit about some of that, why it's been difficult and what you've been able to achieve?

Hayya Ahmed

Yes, it has been very challenging. In the beginning, it was difficult, as I just very quickly mentioned, you know, in terms of setting up operations, we had to face a lot of challenges. Finding an office was like a very difficult task, which in other countries could have been not as difficult as it was here. And all this because of the long period of isolation from the rest of the world. So again, we'll see for them to absorb incoming international assistance was difficult. So even like the property dealers one day would tell you that something is for \$3,000 a month, and the next day, when you go back to see that place, it would become \$5,000. But when you come to Sudan, and where they have had this dictatorship for like 30 years and isolation, in that setting, it becomes a little difficult, we have to pursue a lot. We have to explain a lot. And we have to try and do advocacy on simple things, like let's have more consultations. Let's talk to people about these things. But this is working. It's been challenging, but it is working. That's the best part.

Samia Mahgoub

We are working in transition period. So, we came in the country and unfortunately, according to the Constitution documents and the Zuber peace agreement, they should have a display ahead of time, at least some institutional level or clear framework that allows the government and us as a national partner to start to work and to provide technical assistance. So based on that, CEPPS base for us for objective one, for example, we need to work with the Legislative Assembly. Until now, there is no formulation for the Legislative Assembly. So, you see, we cannot work for this component or this part. So, we try to be as creative as we can, working with the ministries that we have in front of us for myself at NDI. I work with the Ministry of Local Government because Sudan country decentralization country, but even if you don't have just a legislative body, a piece we can work with ministries that exists.

Adrienne Ross

Can you both talk a little bit about the personal one on one conversations that you have with the Sudanese? Or what skills you have to bring to the table to do this job? Well, you're already in a really challenging situation. And now you've got people who are really learning about democracy, maybe don't understand how it works? Where do you start with that? And what do you say to these people?

Hayya Ahmed

This is exactly what we are working on these days. So, when it started, like, obviously, we have to create our networks and then talk to people to understand the situation on ground and everything. And in our meetings with different people from different walks of life, politicians, members of the sovereignty Council, civil society, organizations, academics and so on. The one thing that was very fascinating was that most of them, including members of the Sovereignty Council, they felt as if the making of the election commission is synonymous with elections. And this is something which was, which was fascinating because it was like, you know, people don't understand how much work and how much effort goes into building a strong institution, the institution of election management, which is then capable enough to administer elections and elections, you know, it's the largest activity in any country for them to be transparent and free and credible. The institution has to be strong and professional and skilled enough to administer that kind of an election.

Samia Mahgoub

Yes, I think it's understandable that after 30 years of isolation, that a country really needs a lot of assistance. When it comes to what is democracy, what are the first steps, how we can start, then we need to start from the scratch at the national, even at the institutional level also, we sometimes are in contact with very high-level people at the Ministry level. And you can see clearly that they don't understand. And this is the best thing is to start from the beginning with them, it could be as a formal way or informal way. And according to my understanding for the Sudan society, I found that the informal way sometimes works better, I found also that sometimes it's very important to give them another example from abroad from outside, because there are always at times in that Sudanese context. So, I think this also one of our ways to push them to have the kind of comparative analysis and then they just see the different options, and then they can select the best option for Sudan.

Adrienne Ross

So much hinges on that personal relationship and understanding what do you think people should look for from Sudan in the next year, two years, five years?

Hayya Ahmed

There are already some developments during this period, which is like the tussle between the military faction of the transition and the civilian government. So, let's see what comes out of that. However, when you talk about longer, medium to longer term, being here for now almost a year, we have been here for 10 months, there is a lot of potential for Sudan to position itself, within the international community and also for democracy as well as for economic growth. The biggest asset that Sudan has, in addition to the national resources is the people. The people here are very aware. And this consciousness and awareness has helped them bring a revolution in this country. This was not a revolution, which was led by a certain leader, which was led by a single ideology, as we see in other countries in the world. This was a revolution led by young people, youngsters who still are working in different areas as like small resistance communities and they are still here.

Samia Mahgoub

The most important thing is to see how the transition period could advance peace process.

Adrienne Ross

Hayya, Samia in Sudan. Thank you.

I am truly delighted to welcome the President of the National Democratic Institute to the Democracy pod, Ambassador Derek Mitchell. In his extraordinary career, Ambassador Mitchell has worked in nearly every aspect of democracy, starting at NDI's field programs in the former Soviet Union and Asia, to a leading international think tank in Washington, DC. He has also served in senior leadership posts at the US Department of Defense and the State Department. And of course, Ambassador Mitchell was the first US ambassador to return to Burma in 2012, after a 22-year diplomatic absence after the 1988 military coup there. We couldn't ask for a wiser, more worldly guests to talk about democratic resilience. Can you explain a little bit about the national security implications for a country that cares about democracy in the face of the challenges we see today? Like rising authoritarianism?

Derek Mitchell

Well, it's a pleasure to be here first of all, thank you for asking me to join. I think anybody who cares about international security should care about democracy. If I told you that one factor was the essential component for better economic development for health, education, peace outcomes, you'd say we need that. And in study after study after study, democracy has shown to have a correlation to all those better outcomes. And those outcomes are more stable societies and better international security. It just is a logic to it. It's not an ideology it is an absolute logic. And how people organize themselves internally in a country or governments will have something to do with how they engage internationally. So, if you don't have transparent, accountable, inclusive, responsive governance, under law at home, you're not going to be promoting that abroad. And if

you don't have that abroad, you're not going to have security in international affairs. And the fact is the autocrats are on the offensive. They have a sense that democracy is fragile and the small democrats around the world feel that they're on the defensive. And they're playing a weak hand where they're playing it with confidence, and they're trying to gain advantage. While I think that the democratic world is playing its strong hand quite weakly, and we need to get in the game, we need to act accordingly. And I've always talked about the fourth D, we talked about diplomacy and defense and development is the three Ds of foreign policy, I would add democracy, because without these values, both at home and in the international system, we are not going to have the kind of world secure, stable, developed, prosperous world that we all seek,

Adrienne Ross

Is there one or two things off the top of your head that you think is really vital that's not happening?

Derek Mitchell

Well, I think going out and putting it at the center of our foreign policy of promoting these values, we talk about them. But when it comes down to it, we end up sort of sidelining them in favor of what we consider more hard realist values. But it's not realist, in my view, to sideline values and encourage even our partners to be better at home and being more transparent. Having more accountable systems, it's not realist to let that slip to the sidelines, and then allow for corrupt regimes to flow, for people's dignity to be offended. And therefore, these countries will always be on the precipice of instability. For a short time, it could seem like there's stability in these countries, and they can be good partners because of that stability. But ultimately, it lives on a knife's edge. And in the absence of our ability to integrate them into our foreign policy engagement with other countries, to put more emphasis on it in our bilateral and multilateral engagements, and to ensure in the international system, we are pushing these ideas, along with our allies, we will not have a secure world.

Adrienne Ross

You tell a story from a period of time when you lived in Taiwan. And you and your brother decided to take a trip to China, I hope I have this story, right? And it ultimately changed your life. What was it like to witness the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in person? And how has that experience in Taiwan really shaped these views you have a democracy?

Derek Mitchell

Well, it's my brother who came over to China, I was living in Taiwan, first time I'd ever lived overseas in my life, I was 24, I guess, almost 25 years old at the time. And we found ourselves in Tiananmen Square during the demonstrations in mid-May. And it was the first time in my life, I'd been a witness to history in real time. And that was heavy on the one hand, of sitting in the square that first night

of the hunger strike, and having all the students come and asking me as an American, how are we doing? How does this look? Are we doing it right? And even then, I knew this wasn't my fight. It wasn't about America; it was about them. And I said, look, I don't have an opinion on what you're asking for. But your ability to speak, that as an American, we support your ability to have a say in your own futures. So, I remember sitting with them, but I also know that it just taught me a lesson that you can study 50/100 books on something. But there's no substitute for firsthand experience from being there.

Adrienne Ross

Did you know what you were walking into? Or was this sort of just something you stumbled into?

Derek Mitchell

I actually went to see the Gorbachev summit; I was more of a Sovietologist then. I mean, as much as you can be just coming out of college, but I studied the Soviet Union. And I thought, well, the first Sino-Soviet summit in 30 years, that'd be fascinating to be there for but there's no way they're going to allow those demonstrations that go on during that. So, my brother and I went, and the first day that we were there first night, we heard the bicycles going by to the square. And the Chinese students thought, well, because Gorbachev is here and because the international media are going to be here, we should take advantage of this. So, to get access to international media, for our desires for our goals, so we actually hit both, we did not expect to see the demonstrations, we did not expect to interact with students. But again, we found ourselves in the middle of a revolution of a kind that was remarkable to be part of, we would spend our time, you know, out in the outside outskirts of Beijing watching the various demonstrations, talking to some students, trying to get food where we could because restaurants would be closed and just trying to experience China for the first time in our lives. But, you know, the students got in the way of that normal experience of China.

Adrienne Ross

Yeah, and I bet you think of them from time to time.

Derek Mitchell

I thought about that a lot after the shooting and you know, the massacre on the fourth and what may have happened to many of the people that I've spoken with and it made me come away from that experience wanting to study China much more deeply and Asia. And I should also note in those days, that was when I was living in Taiwan, but Taiwan was engaged in a democratic transition at that time, they were starting to open up. And I was working at a newspaper during the time of more media freedom. So, Taiwan became a beacon of democracy, the leading democracy of Asia, according to Freedom House today.

Adrienne Ross

How did living there in that early experience that you had help your understanding of China and the rising role that government is playing in the world today?

Derek Mitchell

Well, I've lived in China twice, once was in 1990, I wasn't living there, as I said, in 1989, but I did this 1990 studying Chinese and then again, in 2007, I believe, but I studied China from then on. So, it was really 20 years, 25 years straight of really studying what was happening there. That was in grad school, that was at CSIS, at the Pentagon, twice including the early Obama years. And you know, I had a lot of interactions, a lot of conversations with Chinese think tankers and academics. And they always, you know, would always sort of reassure us that would rise was peaceful that the rise would not come at the US or other's expense. And then it never saw hegemony or promoted political system internationally. And of course, they always play the victim, they always blame the US, Japan and others for trying to keep them down and contain their growth. So, you know, it was important in those days for us to try to, talk to them and try to bridge those differences, try to find common ground because no one wanted conflict. But China's line never changed. And they use that victimization narrative over and over no matter what we tried to do, and what we did in those, you know, in those days and these days, to welcome them into the system to bring their students over to invest in their country. But that victimization narrative held, and they use it to foment nationalism at home, to gain sympathy abroad, to put the US and allies on the defensive, and as an excuse for aggressive international and domestic activity. So that became, over time, quite frustrating. So, when they ultimately sort of lifted their mask and became much more assertive, publicly, I thought it was surprising because I didn't expect them to do that so brazenly so soon, but it wasn't entirely surprising.

Adrienne Ross

When people think of China, what's the number one thing that they should understand that they don't understand about the country?

Derek Mitchell

Well, I think it goes back to Tiananmen Square, the fact that that the Chinese people want what we want, ultimately, they want rights, and they want a voice. And it may not seem like that. Now there's the Communist Party which has done a great job of diverting attention and distracting people towards nationalism, which is common from dictatorships to prey on victimization, use nationalism to distract and divert. There is a very vibrant community online and grass roots that are angry about environmental degradation, angry about corruption. And when they had the opportunity, they wanted to speak out. So that still remains in China, and they have hundreds of billions of dollars

they have to put into suppressing that through internal security. So, I think as people look at China, and they think, well, they're different, or they simply, you know, love communism or repression. They want whenever they get a chance, they want the same voice, as the rest of us do. There was an app called Clubhouse, which some of your listeners may know about, which promotes conversation. They opened in China Clubhouse for just two or three days, and it led to all kinds of conversations just maybe six months ago, about Hong Kong, about Taiwan, about the Uyghurs, that had never happened before, a vibrant conversation and honest conversation. And then of course, the communist shut that down. Democracy is universal. It is not a Western concept, that the desire for rights and dignity and a voice is something every human being seeks for themselves. There are different cultures and contexts but this demand for dignity is universal. It's Chinese, it's American.

Adrienne Ross

People are reading about the Uyghurs and are understanding that that the situation is incredibly dire.

Derek Mitchell

You know, Tibet, Uyghurs. You name it. There's repression everywhere. But it is systematic, in a way in Xinjiang, in the West, that you don't see. We just haven't seen and certainly should never tolerate anywhere in the world. And there's still a lot of question marks still about what's going on there the extent of it, but enough information has come out to offend the conscience of the world.

Adrienne Ross

I'd like to talk about your extraordinary ambassadorship to Burma. You were the first ambassador to return to the country after a 22-year diplomatic absence. Can you talk a little bit about what living in Burma taught you about democracy and democratic resilience?

Derek Mitchell

It's just a special place and more complex than anyone can imagine. It's a highly diverse country, highly fractious country, longest running civil war going on in the world and now it's only gotten bigger since the coup. They've never had a single unifying identity and the failure to reconcile the country in its vast diversity has been one of the most important things holding the country back. At the same time, the desire for democracy is very deep, abiding, it cannot be extinguished, despite the military attempting to extinguish it over decades and most recently, on the February 1 coup. When I was there, as Ambassador, it was considered this sort of Golden Age, this moment, where there was a moment of possibility. And young and old, just reacted to that moment of opportunity and openness, with energy, with hope, with a palpable sense of optimism and promise with this great spirit. So, it just teaches me that you cannot squash democracy in the hearts of people. And

even now they're facing this military violence. The people are saying, no, not this generation, we're not going to stand, we're not going backwards. We're going to whatever it takes, we're going to protect our voice, we're going to defend ourselves. And we're going to fight even if the world is not going to do what we would like them to do in our defense, we will do it for ourselves. But you know, it teaches you that even when democratic mindsets take longer than processes. So even when the democratic opening was happening, there were still as you know, the Rohingya issue, there was intolerance, there is injustice, there is not a spirit necessarily of compromise and of communication, that the instincts were still listen to me, listen to what I have to say, rather than I will listen to others. So, you know, this stuff is hard. Democracy is not easy. But that spirit, that desire was just so deep, and it remains in my heart every day that those are people I think about every single day of my life now.

Adrienne Ross

Is their enthusiasm for democracy retained or have they sort of lost some of that? Do you think?

Derek Mitchell

That's precisely what they're finding when people say, you know, young people don't care about democracy or look what's happening, democracy is in decline. In fact, there was a poll on the eve of the elections last year, the democratic elections that the Burmese had in Myanmar last November. The polls suggested lesser support for democracy among young people among the population, a little bit more frustration with it. Okay, fine, you can poll them at that moment when there's frustration. But the moment the coup happened, poll people now about democracy, there, the desire for democracy is deep, even today around the world, it's just frustration at whether democracy is delivering according to their expectations, and whether democracy is strong. Democracy is not easy. It is hard. And in some ways, it's not natural, handing over power peacefully, it is not natural to any leader, or any party, or any group. And compromise is not easy. That mindset takes time. And it's not simply about a process or an election. It's a culture that has to be developed. And it's a culture that has to be reenergized by the citizens every generation.

Adrienne Ross

And we see that all the time. That's why we see these extraordinary breakthroughs in democracy and why they really take our breath away and give us goosebumps all at the same time.

Derek Mitchell

That's sort of the sexy part is when you see people pushing back against the authoritarians, and they take over. That's the exciting moment. But then that's a moment. Even you can have an election, that's a moment. But democracy is in the day-to-day mundane interactions among people

and in the ways people engage with one another on a daily basis, in the way they engage their government, in the way the government engages them.

Adrienne Ross

When you explain to somebody who does not work in this field, why is democracy so important? What are the words that you say?

Derek Mitchell

I say if you don't give people dignity, you don't create a system that leads to better health, education, peace, security outcomes, you will have unstable world, you will have injustice, and the more unsafe world to live in. And it's not the world that free peoples want to live in. So, democracy matters, it's hard, but for all its faults, in all its deficiencies, it works in all its messiness. This is the challenge of our time and that we are not where we were, say 30 years ago, there are authoritarian opportunists who want to prey on those who are frustrated or concerned about the course of democracy, and they're willing to get out there and use our moments of weakness to gain advantage. We can't let that happen. And I think we all need to, as frustrated as we are made by under our own democracy. And maybe by what's happening in the world, we can't retreat, we cannot retreat.

Adrienne Ross

What is the one thing people can do to help this process of democracy all over the world?

Derek Mitchell

Well, if you were talking about Americans, first, I think let's try and work on our own democracy. I think we need to be recognizing that the strength of American democracy goes a long way to the ability of democracy to resonate abroad. It's not simply about ourselves, but if we can focus on ourselves and get ourselves right and regain, recapture that sense of solidarity at home, and compromise and communal thinking, that will go a long way. The other is, you know, watch the news and just be inspired by what happens abroad and support people abroad where you can, through universities or through your daily engagement. Just be aware of what others are doing and support American policies that support them.

Adrienne Ross

Well, President and Ambassador Derek Mitchell, thank you so much for joining us today.

This concludes the first season of *Democracy! The Podcast*. If you've made it this far, I must first thank you for listening to our inaugural season, but also maybe congratulate you. During these first 10 episodes, we have just barely scratched the surface of some of the biggest issues facing democracy today. And you've at least been able to meet a few of its champions, but as autocracies continue to blatantly assault open societies around the world, from Afghanistan to Venezuela, to Cuba and China, those fighting for democracy are playing the long game, and we will continue to stand with people around the world who fearlessly fight against abuse of power. I must thank all of our friends at the United States Agency for International Development for helping to get this project off the ground and of course, for always being the world's beacon and delivering aid and assistance on behalf of the generous American people. We are particularly grateful for the support and collaboration from USAID's Democracy Rights and Governance Center and Director Rosarie Tucci. Plus, the consortium's exceptional partners at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute. We really couldn't do any of this work without the fearless leadership of IFES President Tony Banbury, IRI President Dr. Dan Twining and NDI President Ambassador Derek Mitchell, along with their extraordinary Vice Presidents, Scott Mastic, Michael Svetlik, and Nicole Roswell, and of course their incredibly creative communications teams, led by Jerry Hartz, Clayton McCluskey, Brian Mahoney, Angela Canterbury, as well as the DC leadership team of Jerry Lavery, Kira Ribar, Alix Lawson, Amy Radlinski, and Ebie DuPont. Plus, those who keep the trains running Peter Tietjen, David Sands, Sophia Toumbalakis and of course I cannot overlook our dynamic production company of Simpler Media and its audio magician Evo Tara. Most importantly, I think I can safely speak for democracy lovers everywhere when I say we are endlessly grateful to the partners on the ground for their tireless work supporting resilient, inclusive governments. I would be remiss not to thank the Honorable Mayor of Kyiv Vitali Klitschko, Internews President Jeanne Bourgault, the Task Force for Global Health CEO Dr. David Ross, Ambassador Roger Noriega, EDYN President Malik Sakić, Guatemalan Congressman Nineth Montenegro, and of course the stars of the pod, the Consortium's country teams from Armenia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Kosovo, Libya, Ukraine, Tunisia and Sudan for their thoughtful conversations this season. Plus, I cannot overlook the exceptional contribution from Secretary Madeleine Albright, who graciously made time for democracy in Episode Five. Well, this does mark the end of season one, please promise me that you'll continue to subscribe to this feed as we lay the groundwork for an exceptional second season of *Democracy! The Podcast*, which will include a remarkable deep dive into the righteous indignation of empowered autocrats everywhere, as we continue to shine light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe. Until then, I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

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