



# GlobalPDX Podcast

## Season 2, Episode 1 Transcript

*With Suparna Chaudhry*

### **Andrea Johnson**

Hello, and welcome to the [GlobalPDX](#) podcast. As we kick off the New Year, and try to navigate (both personally and professionally) the ever-changing world we find ourselves in, we are excited to continue this podcast and provide connection, content, and support to Oregon's Hub of Global Changemakers.

My name is Andrea Johnson and I'm the Chair of the GlobalPDX Advisory Board, and the Executive Director at *Green Empowerment*.

In today's *Speaking Change* podcast I am joined by Suparna Chaundry. Suparna is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at Lewis & Clark. Her research includes human rights, international law, and political violence, with a focus on the causes and consequences of state persecution of NGOs and activists. In the past, she was a post-doctoral Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy and International Security at the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College. She received her Ph.D. from Yale University, an M.A. from the Committee on International Relations at the University of Chicago, and a B.A. in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Suparna thank you so much for joining me today.

### **Suparna Chaudhry**

Thanks so much for having me!

### **Andrea**

So I had the opportunity to actually see you present, in late 2021, so I am really excited to dive deeper with you today and share your work with our audience. I think it overlaps with so many of our experiences. Before we dive in though, could you define "Democratic Backsliding" for our audience?

### **Suparna**

Yeah so today we will be talking a little bit about Democratic Backsliding (or *democratic erosion*). This is basically when their deterioration of qualities associated with Democratic governance in any regime and if left unchecked it can often mean that the



regime can turn into autocracy or an authoritarian regime. So, various scholars have developed four indicators of how to figure out if a democracy is actually going through a backsliding process. And these four are:

1. First rejecting the Democratic rules of the game
2. Second denying the legitimacy of political opponents
3. Third the toleration or encouragement of violence
4. And fourth readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents

Scholars like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have really talked about how this is the process that leads to a country eventually backsliding from a democracy to an authoritarian regime.

**Andrea**

So you're obviously speaking about something that is very topical for those of us in the U.S. but also so many of us working globally. So you didn't just start doing this yesterday though, so what got you into this field of research?

**Suparna**

After my Master's Degree I was living in Turkey and I ended up in a network of NGOs and activists that were facing troubles around State repression which really sparked my interest in the challenges that local and international NGOs face around the globe. I was also seeing similar processes happening in India. When I started my Ph.D. at Yale it led to an overall interest in state control and repression of civil society organizations and activists, and how that really fits into this broader trend of Democratic Backsliding.

**Andrea**

That's really great. And you have been at Lewis and Clark for a few years?

**Suparna**

I started last year, so this is my second year at Lewis and Clark.

**Andrea**

Oh, so started in a really calm time in the world?

**Suparna**



Yes (laughing).

### **Andrea**

So in November of 2021 I read [an article from the Guardian](#) that said that the United States was added to the list of countries that had democratic backsliding, and it was added for the first time. So, can you tell us a little bit more? Like how do we know that Democratic backsliding is actually happening, who's tracking this, what trends have been noted, etc? Your presentation was my first time knowing that this was actually a legitimate area of research that people were tracking and then I happened to see The Guardian article right after. So tell us a little bit more.

### **Suparna**

There's a bunch of different organizations (both think tanks and academic institutions) that have been documenting levels of democracy for a long time but I have especially all the document decline for the last 10 to 15 years. And these organizations like [Freedom House in Washington D.C.](#), the [V-Dem Institute based out of Sweden](#), [The Guardian piece](#) that you're referring to, also talked about the Stockholm-based [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#). And all of them have said that democracy is declining across the globe and this is notable because all of them measure democracy differently. They all conceptualize democracy differently. Some focus more on the procedural side, some focus more on individual rights and liberties, and yet despite the differences in how they're tracking this information all of them come to the same conclusion: that democracy is backsliding. So the Stockholm-based IDEA institute that they were talking about in The Guardian article, they were the one who this year said the U.S. is no longer democracy, it is what they classify as "a backsliding democracy".

### **Andrea**

So can you dive into that a little bit more? What turning point for that type of analysis would lead to that being the case for the U.S.?

### **Suparna**

Yeah so the institute typically categorizes countries into four different types of countries (four different regime types). So you can either be:

- A democracy
- Or you can be a backsliding democracy



- Or you can be a hybrid regime where you have multi-party elections but there are significant irregularities and people aren't guaranteed individual rights and liberties
- And then finally you can be an authoritarian regime.

So in the most recent report the reason that they classified the U.S. as a backsliding democracy (as opposed to just a democracy) was because they said it was around the legitimacy of the 2020 election, which according to them was, you know, in courts historic turning point undermined the fundamental trust in the electoral process and goals. And moreover the bigger concern is also that the tactics around the January 6th insurrection and how it's been tackled and approached is going to have spillover effects around the globe (including in Brazil, Mexico, Myanmar, and Peru) where authoritarians might look at what was happening in the U.S. and justify their own practices because the U.S. is also engaging in these practices.

### **Andrea**

Yeah that was something interesting for me when you were sharing at the presentation I got to see how common these trends are. It seems from your perspective (even if the world isn't talking about it very much yet) you are seeing a lot of these trends globally. You just mentioned some countries, I know in the conversation you mentioned something in Russia that had taken place that later Green Empowerment had actually seen happening in Nicaragua (around the Foreign Agent Law passed there). Given how broad and disturbing these Trends are, why don't we see more discussions about it? Could you speak a little bit more to some of those trends?

### **Suparna**

Yeah so typically when we think of democratic backsliding we tend to think about big, dramatic, noticeable events so we might think about things like military coups or suspension of the Constitution. This country still continues to hold elections, it's just that back sliding is happening by other means. So elected leaders might weaken checks on their powers. They might hamper media access. They might pack the courts or other neutral agencies. Even if we think about beyond the institutional environment, the media might be bought off, or Citizens might face all kinds of harassment, So because there's no one single moment, no coup, no declaration of Martial law, no suspension of the Constitution, nothing really sets off society's alarm bells. And those who point to what's happening might be exaggerating or "crying wolf". And many of these actions, because they are legal, it makes it really hard to track them unless you are systematically tracking them in some way. So this



is what makes democratic backsliding so insidious, and so hard to talk about, and point towards, and organize against.

### **Andrea**

Could you give an example...You just said these things are *legal*. I think that is something that is very interesting. Could you share what you mean by that? How is it *legally* happening?

### **Suparna**

That's a really good question. You just gave the example of Russia and foreign agent law. And you know, other challenges that you have been seeing in Nicaragua and in countries across the globe. So this is when countries pass laws to repress some form of opposition but they are not doing it in a violent way. They are not going and attacking these organizations, they're not going and attacking their employees. Rather there is one law (which I also call *administrative crackdown*) to control or repress opponents to the regime. So for instance in the case of Russia, we have the foreign agent law that was passed in 2012 to control NGOs and civil society organizations. And according to this law any NGO that is receiving money from abroad (which most NGOs across the world do), and any NGO engaging in political activities (where "political" is intentionally left vaguely defined) can be termed as a "foreign agent". And then consequently they either have to completely shut down, or pay a large fine in order to survive. So the government is not going after these groups using the kinds of violence and means of repression that we typically tend to think. They have passed a law, so it's a *legal policy*, and that's how they are going after opponents to stop them from criticising the government, or challenging any actions that might be seen as going against the political authority.

### **Andrea**

So one of the things I find interesting is when you shared that the first time I saw you present, I was like "Man, that was 2012 in Russia, and we just saw the same thing in 2019 in Nicaragua." So there is obviously some process or trends that you see in your research, and people that do your type of work, see. How does this type of process of backsliding unfold? Are there patterns, things that folks could be aware of that would help people understand where this is happening.

### **Suparna**

Yeah so typically this follows a similar pattern. It's not as if leaders are going after and changing institutions right from the get-go. They tend to start more informally. So they



will first attack Media, or try to control the media, and then Civil Society organizations. And then you start polarizing society by either disrespecting opponents, spreading misinformation. And only after this basis has been laid, that's when leaders really start undermining formal institutions. So we tend to see a lot more attacks on broader Civil Society groups before we see leaders change institutions from within.

### **Andrea**

You mentioned just now "misinformation". I'm kind of interested in this question around social media and misinformation. Obviously there's a lot of criticism out there, I think we in the U.S. are very aware of that right now but how does this fit into the conversation and then the research that you're doing and maybe how is it different here in the U.S. to other places in the world?

### **Suparna**

Social media and misinformation there's a lot of conversation around it as to: how do we prevent misinformation from also contributing to back sliding, from fermenting violence within Society, also polarizing society even more. So there's been a lot more research in Western countries about how we can stop misinformation on social media channels, and this has mostly revolved around Facebook and Twitter. So we have some pretty good research showing that explicit warnings can reduce the effects of misinformation. Or that corrections from fact-checkers are at least somewhat successful in reducing misperceptions from this information. But the main challenge that we're facing is that, across the rest of the world, most populations have different forms of vulnerabilities but also misinformation largely spreads on encrypted platforms. So it's not as if the organization can just go in and correct something, or add a disputed tag, or a warning tag, or something like that. For instance, a lot of misinformation across the world today is spread on WhatsApp. Because it's protected by end-to-end encryption and because of privacy (greater privacy than Facebook and Twitter) it's really hard for the organization to track what rumors are being spread on WhatsApp.

So there is very little evidence of how to combat misinformation in non-western countries. There has been some research done by scholars like [Sumitra Badrinathan](#) at Oxford who's talked about whether pedagogical interventions work in reducing misinformation and unfortunately the results don't seem promising for media training and its impact on people's ability to verify correct information. However there has been some promising research, again by her (as well as a few of her co-authors) showing that peers correcting each other on encrypted platforms can really help and they can be effective at reducing belief in false stories. And this is not limited by partisan beliefs, which I think is



really important in our currently polarized society. So these results do have some important implications for what WhatsApp or other social media platforms might be able to do with what actually yields results in these sorts of experiments.

### **Andrea**

So when we are talking about social media and misinformation that to me seems more like a tool, or part of the issue, but it is not really what is behind it. So what are the reasons why we are seeing this type of democratic backsliding or erosion? Do you have an understanding of *why* this is happening?

### **Suparna**

I want to focus on two big explanations for why we are seeing this backsliding happening: One which focuses more on the role of Political parties, and the second one which focuses more on what's happening on an international level and how these practices are diffusing across countries. In terms of the role of political parties, I would highly recommend the book [\*How Democracies Die\*](#) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt who argue that political parties are of ment to be gate keepers of democracy, and they're supposed to weed out extreme candidates from contesting elections, from running for elections. But many political parties nowadays have started discounting the fact that Non-Democratic leaders want to run for elections and these parties want to capitalize on short-term gains. And so they engage in what they term "ideological colusion" which is when the agenda of this non-Democratic leader sufficiently overlaps with that of the political parties, so the political party is willing to overlook their extremist comments and extremist agenda, in the hope that this person will make them win the next election. So a lot of parties are failing there, but this is not to say that parties around the world are consistently failing.

So in 2017, for instance, French conservatives called on their Partisons to vote for more center-left Emmanuel Macron over far right Marine Le Pen. And similar processes were seen in Austria's 2016 election as well. So in both these cases right-wing politicians endorsed ideological rivals and while they might have angered the party base, they re-directed a substantial number of the voters to keep these extremists out of power. But unfortunately this is more an exception rather than the rule.

And the second, is when we think about the international environment there is a lot of research done in terms of how leaders and governments around the world are learning from the authoritarian practices of other countries in their neighborhood. So for instance Russia's foreign agent law: a very similar version was passed in Kyrgyzstan and Hungry, similar Provisions (can't get money from abroad, can't be working on political issues (again where "political" is left vaguely defined)). Similarly in the case of India: India passed a similar



law (or *amended* a similar law like Russia) with no foreign funding for NGOs, groups can't engage in political activities and then Nepal and Pakistan also passed similar laws. So we are almost seeing these Regional clusters of learning and emulation of these authoritarian practices (or what I call "administrative crack down") and that in my opinion is a lot harder to control. And now we're seeing more worrying practices, like Russia and China's censorship and internet filtering practices, diffuse across countries as well.

### **Andrea**

It's really amazing to hear you talk about this because it is really hard not to have a U.S.-centric lens as you are speaking. And then you continue to share examples that are not U.S. based. Which is both interesting and encouraging, and probably what our audience wants to hear (we're a very global audience) but it's also a little bit disheartening, that this is so obviously not just an issue in the U.S. It almost would be better in some ways if it was unique to the U.S. ... but I'm not sure actually that's true either (laughs). So I guess my question is: is it fair to say that the international environment is really shifting away from democracy? Is that a take away from what you're sharing and what the research shows?

### **Suparna**

I definitely agree that the international environment is shifting away from democracy, and even the U.S. itself is not donating as many funds to democracy promotion as it used to. This is not to say democracy promotion is necessarily always a good strategy, it has had its critiques. But it is no longer the kind of priority that it once was. And similarly the rhetoric surrounding human rights is also no longer the sort of priority it once was. And many rulers, as I earlier mentioned, sort of point to the U.S. flaws to deflect attention from their own abuses. So after January 6th the spokesperson from Russia's foreign Ministry said that, "[The events in Washington show that the U.S. electoral process is archaic and does not meet modern standards and is prone to violations](#)". And similarly Zimbabwe's President also said that, "[The January 6th insurrection showed that the US has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding democracy.](#)" So this raises the question of: if there is a leadership vacuum, how are we going to promote democracy (in whatever sense you might define the term)?

### **Andrea**

Alright so this is getting pretty depressing for those listening, though it shouldn't be surprising given the topic of today's conversation. But! I am hoping that through the research and your experience, you might be able to offer some ways that have been successful in counteracting this backsliding. Are there strategies, are there positive cases



(like the ones you just gave in both France and Austria)? Are there strategies to counteract backsliding?

### **Suparna**

Yeah so typically there is a lot of focus on non-violent resistance and how non-violent resistance can work for democratic reform. And this is because when we think of non-violent resistance, it means that more people can participate in these movements, they are broad based, they tend to make opposition very costly, and so they end up being very resilient movements. And other than meeting their goals, even if it is local-level changes, these protests can often serve other purposes as well. They can often convey public opinion to the courts and other institutions, they can potentially sway judicial decisions. And they can also generate broader support for the movement. So there is a lot of hope in terms of what nonviolent protest movements can actually achieve.

### **Andrea**

I think that's, on one hand, encouraging. Obviously (I think a lot of our audience are following peaceful protests in the U.S. and globally) but it also feels like some of what you shared (these legal, administrative crackdowns) you aren't really seeing protests against those types of practices. So, do we need more protesting? Are there examples of protesting against this type of democratic backsliding, versus just singular issues?

### **Suparna**

Yeah unfortunately there are fewer examples of people protesting against these legal tactics for backsliding because changes in electoral laws, changing District boundaries, changing the composition of electoral commissions, often seems like this is not substantive enough to cause mobilization. It's bigger restrictions (like core packing or restrictions on the media) that are more likely to cause outrage. But this is where governments have the upper hand because they can often paint Civic organizations and journalists as foreign agents, or foreign-funded groups, because in many parts of the world they do receive money from abroad. So it's easier to erode their legitimacy and in general these sort of legal tactics of democratic backsliding means that it's hard to issue a call for action if people can't recognize that *yes something is going on*. Now maybe it means that the media should be covering it differently but I think when we think about how backsliding news combined with the pandemic news might also perhaps be decreasing people's capacity to process this much negative information.



### **Andrea**

Yeah, I was just thinking when you were talking: if there are so many little things happening and it isn't one acute moment, like you said in the intro, it seems a lot harder to figure out even what you are protesting against.

### **Suparna**

Right, it seems harder to figure out what you are protesting against, but also *who* is part of the social movement that is organizing these protests. Because it's not as if you can just protest for a day or two and hope something's going to change. There need to be organisations that have a plan on: What are the goals? What is the movement going to look like? What are the tactics going to look like? Because of covid alot of countries have unfortunately also passed some restrictions that they never took away. So for instance in March 2020 a number of countries imposed lock downs. Then when they lifted these lock downs, countries like Algeria or Hungary retained certain parts of these laws saying that mass gatherings aren't allowed. So these laws from like the first wave of lockdowns is also ensuring that it's harder to mount protests against his regimes.

### **Andrea**

As we are coming to, maybe, accept that the post-pandemic isn't our reality (or definitely isn't happening anytime soon), I imagine it is also going to be harder to organize as people are trying to figure out what their own new normal looks like.

### **Suparna**

Yes, I 100% agree with that.

### **Andrea**

So you spend a lot of time in some pretty heavy information and research, so I would love for you to share with our audience: how do you stay motivated? How do you stay passionate? What keeps you interested in maybe feeling hopeful and optimistic?

### **Suparna**

I am often inspired by many of the activists I've interviewed over the course of my research and just sharing about the challenges that they have faced (both from society as well as from the state) and how they've managed to persevere so much and I think that's really inspiring.



I think it also really helps to be teaching 18 to 22 years olds, because they are endlessly optimistic and there has been a lot of recent successes coming out of youth-led climate movements, and I think their enthusiasm definitely rubs off on me and makes me want to be more optimistic.

Stepping back it's also worth noting that while there has been a steep decline in democracy in the last 10 years, and now especially in 2020-2021 levels of democracy across the globe are the same as they were in 1990. It's still pretty far away from the authoritarian map that we had in the 1970's and 80's. So some of the activists that I have interviewed who have worked in latin america in the 70's and 80's still feel very optimistic about the world today. And I think that broader picture is important for anyone who is doing work in this field or any related field today.

### **Andrea**

That's really helpful alot of the organizations and our listeners as part of GlobalPDX would relate to that. Alot of us got started as some kind of activism, or energy following the 70's and 80's

Well Suparna, thank you so much for joining me today and for sharing so much good information about these trends in the world, and thank you for being a global changemaker.

### **Suparna**

Thanks for having me!

### **Andrea**

For our audience, GlobalPDX is dedicated to keeping you connected and engaged. For resources from this podcast and more, [check out our website](#). If you aren't already a member, please consider joining our community, and feel free to email [Communications@globalpdx.org](mailto:Communications@globalpdx.org) with any questions. Stay tuned for new episodes of our podcast and please share with your fellow changemakers.