Netherlands Institute for
Multiparty Democracy

My Democracy

AND ITS MANY SHADES



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Introduction

4 At a glance

5 Online reactions

6 Liberia

6 Bangladesh

9 Uganda

10 Guatemala

11 Myanmar

14 Kenya

15 Honduras

15 The Netherlands

16 Somalia

INTRODUCTION

In Myanmar today, the word democracy can lead to retribution. The people featured in this campaign were brave enough to stand up and share what democracy actually means to them. Their answers, and those of people across the world, remind us that democracy looks different depending on where you stand. At the same time, we see a number of universal democratic values that were shared across all the countries where the campaign took place.

Democracy is not only a system of institutions. It is also a set of everyday actions, carried out by citizens and institutions alike. That's why it matters to understand what democracy means to different people, so we can stand up for democracy in all its diversity.

We are often presented with a one-size-fits-all version of democracy, but the key is looking at what democracy means to different people and operating from there, from the ground up. It starts with what people want, translated into a democracy that works for them.

This campaign is part of NIMD's ongoing work on democracy narratives, through our involvement in the Democracy Narratives Alliance, to understand what makes democracy meaningful to people everywhere. Find out more about the Alliance's work here.

That understanding starts with listening. That is why, for the 2026 International Day of Democracy, NIMD asked people around the world: what is democracy for you?

135 PARTICIPANTS

Sharing what democracy is for them

9 countries

1 governance system with many voices

15 languages and dialects

What did the words tell us?

"Freedom" appeared 27 times. "People" appeared 22 times, more than any institutional term such as elections or parliament.

Across every country in this campaign, participants defined democracy primarily through personal liberty and collective ownership, not through formal structures. This matches research showing that rights-based understandings of democracy are the most widely shared.

VOICE AND RIGHTS

"Voice", "rights" and "right" collectively appeared over 45 times, closely tied to recurring phrases such as "freedom of expression" and "freedom of speech".

RULE OF LAW

"Rule of law" was the most common institutional phrase, appearing most frequently in entries from Liberia, Uganda, Myanmar and Kenya.

PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

"Decision-making" and "participation" recurred most strongly in entries from Guatemala and Uganda, tied closely to youth and women's inclusion.

DIGNITY AND PEACE

"Dignity" and "peace" or "peaceful" were predominantly clustered in entries from Myanmar and Somalia. This is distinct from the participation-focused language found elsewhere.

ONLINE REACTIONS

The conversation didn't stop with the people we interviewed. As #MyDemocracy spread across our network's social media, people around the world, both inside and outside the NIMD network, added their voices in comments, replies and posts of their own. A selection is shared below.

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

"Inclusive democracy built every day, through space for more voices, not only through institutions or elections"
Ines Lourdes, Country Director, NIMD Guatemala

"Democracy thriving when women and youth own the table, not just sit at it."
Transleyeen, NIMD Youth Ambassador, Uganda

INSTITUTIONS VERSUS EVERYDAY LIFE

"Liberia's peaceful transitions of power as a regional example, alongside the point that rule of law, not elections alone, determines whether democracy holds."
Darren Domah, Liberia

"An extended metaphor of democracy as an ecosystem, where inclusion, education and justice are the roots that keep the institutions standing."
Bemba, comment on a post by the NIMD Mali Country Director

"Democracy as something translated into everyday life, not just declarations"
Celia D'Almeida, Country Director, NIMD Mali

VOICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

"Having a voice and having that voice respected, for every person regardless of gender, status, background or political affiliation."
Fatu, comment on NIMD Liberia's Facebook post

"Democracy as your voice mattering even when those in power don't like what you're saying."
Ndyamuhaki, comment on NIMD Uganda's post

"People enjoying rights and freedom under the rule of law."
Abdisa, comment on a post by Sultan, NIMD Youth Ambassador, Ethiopia

"My Democracy is #IsautiYanje" (My Voice, translated from Swahili).
Ryanjack, comment on NIMD's X post

A DIFFERENT TAKE

"It is right to celebrate Democracy Day in a country where there is no democracy."
Nuti Sanyii Kuushi, comment on Sultan's post

Liberia

8 voices



My Democracy is peace and justice for all men.



Tolerance of difference.



The table where everyone gets a seat.



Giving young people a role in decision-making.



Inclusive participation and shared decision-making.



Adherence to the rule of law.



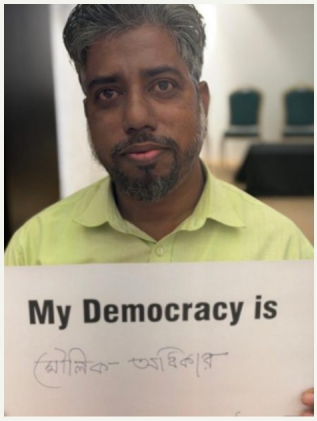
Freedom and participation.



Respecting my choice.

Bangladesh

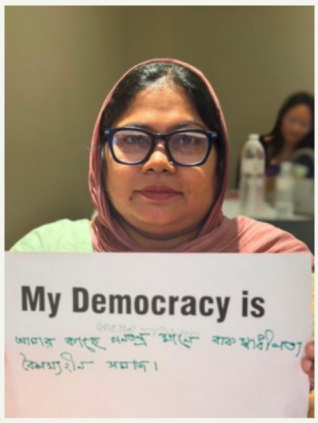
36 voices



Fundamental needs.



Voice of the people.



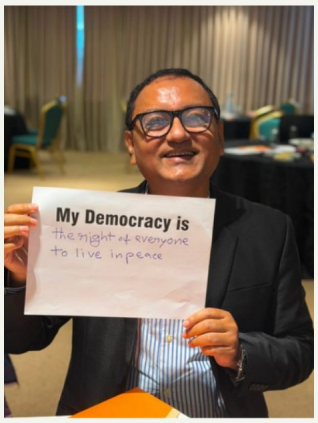
A society without discrimination.



Freedom of speech.



Equal rights, freedom of speech and selecting one's own representative.



The right of everyone to live in peace.



Freedom, equal voting rights for citizens, and equal rights.



Rule of law.



I want a discrimination-free Bangladesh.



Not forced to compromise on my rights.



Ensuring the rights and justice of the common people.



Tolerance for others.



Establishing equal rights and justice.



Citizens' ability to express opinions, criticism and dissent.



Ensuring the road to equal rights for all.



Asking questions without fear.



The people are the owners of the state.



People choose their own leaders.



Rule of the people.



I will vote for the candidate of my choosing.



Humanitarian government.



Inclusion for all.



Right to express opinions without fear.



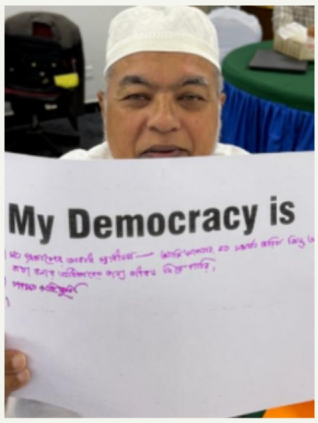
My vote is my right, your vote is yours.



Humanity, freedom of speech, and the right to religious freedom.



The ballot is stronger than the bullet.



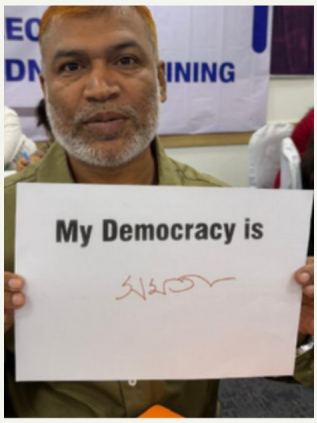
Protecting and ensuring individual liberty by upholding the public's right to freedom of expression.



Fundamental needs.



Participation of people.



The balance.



Self-discipline.



Making every sector safe in the country.



Express my opinion freely.



Gaining freedom and rights.



Where all people will have the right to speak and state power will belong to the people.



Democracy is a system of governance where the people are the source of the supreme power of the state.

Uganda

6 voices



Freedom, equality, and a voice for every citizen.



Leadership with empowerment of the people.



A healthy exchange of ideas.



Participating in elections, serving well when elected and peaceful competition during campaigns.



My Democracy is the freedom to speak the truth and to listen to the voice of every person.



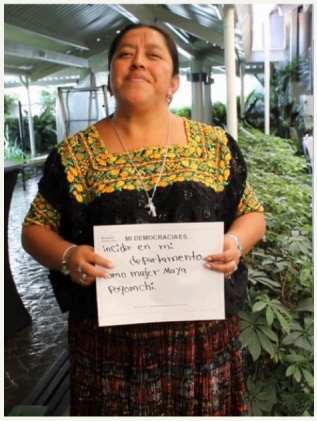
Governance that abides by the rule of law.

Guatemala

12 voices



Youth participation in decision-making.



To make a difference in my department as a Poqomchi' Maya woman.



That we may all have a say.



Encouraging women to take part in decision-making.



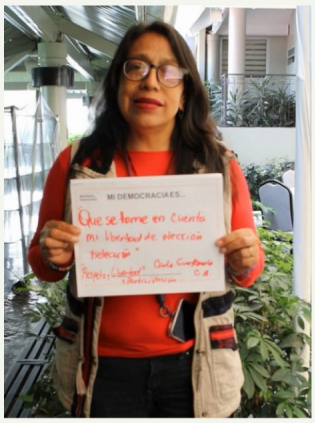
Participatory and youth-led.



Participation and advocacy with substantive equality.



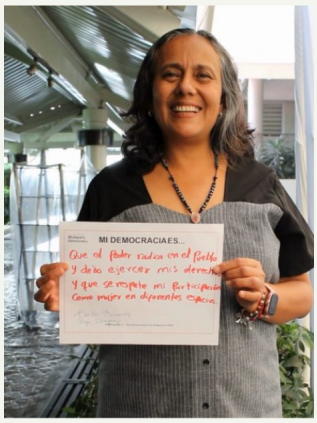
Freedom of expression. Equality of rights before the law.



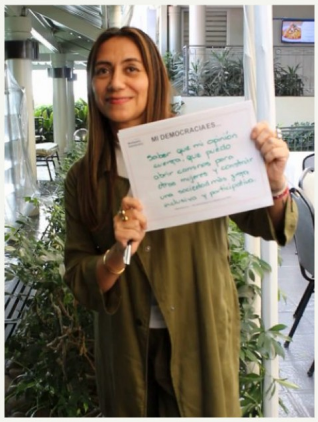
That my freedom of choice and selection is taken into account. Respect, freedom and participation.



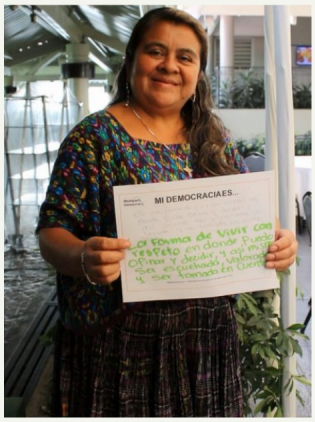
The right to live free from stereotypes.



That power lies with the people, and I am able to exercise my rights and have my participation as a woman recognised in various spheres.



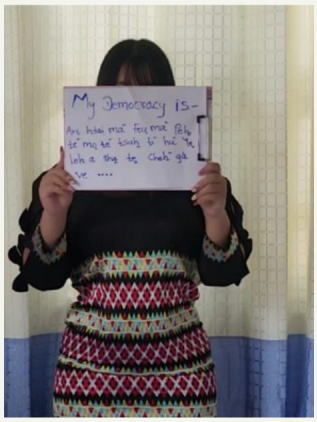
Knowing that my opinion matters, that I can pave the way for other women and help build a fairer, more inclusive and participatory society.



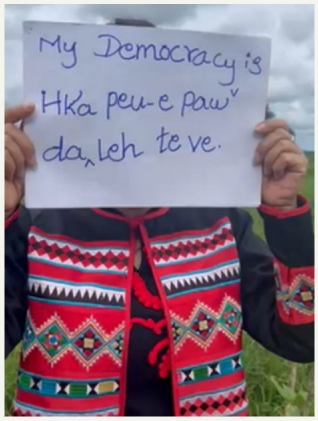
A way of life based on respect, where I can express my views and make decisions, whilst also being listened to, valued and taken into account.

Myanmar

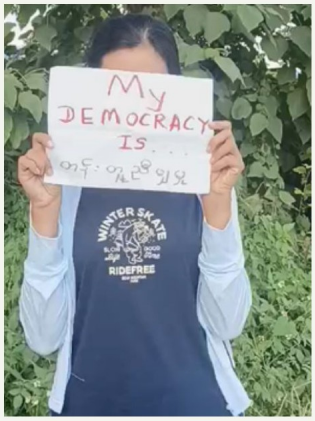
31 voices



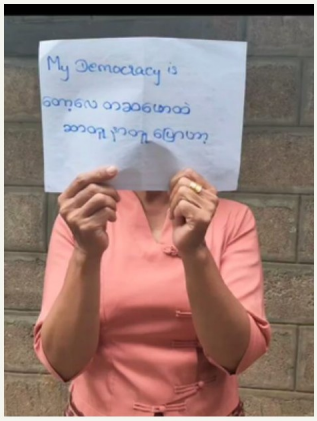
Fundamentally, we are equal and we can live together harmoniously.



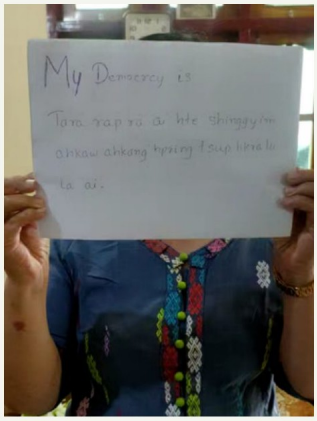
Inclusive participation.



Equality.



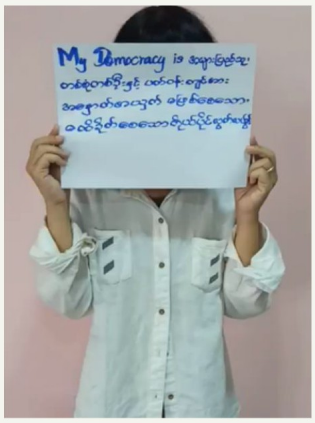
We share the same stance, and we value equality.



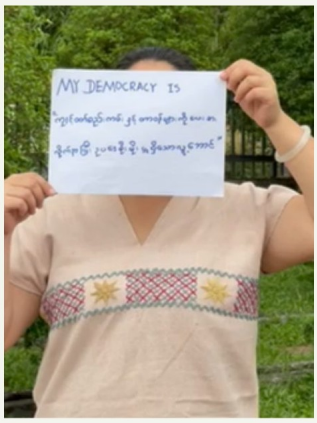
Full access to justice and human rights.



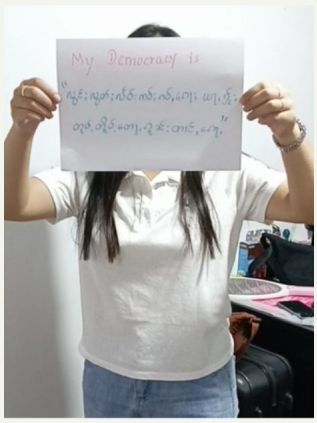
Freedom to choose.



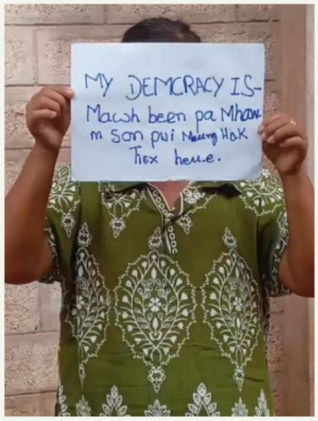
Individual freedom, which must not harm or disturb the public, other individuals or the environment.



A society that respects and upholds ethics, rules, and responsibilities, and where the rule of law prevails.



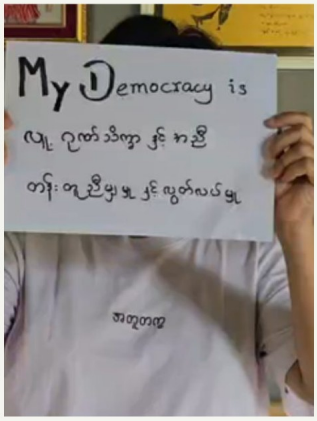
One's liberty must not harm or affect others.



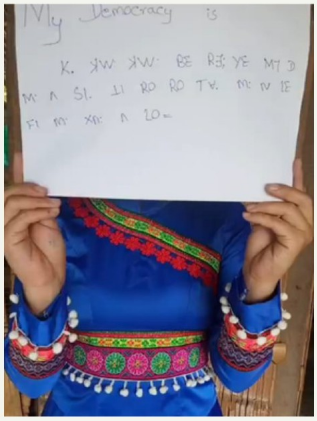
A system that benefits every citizen.



One has the right to act independently and the right to refuse.



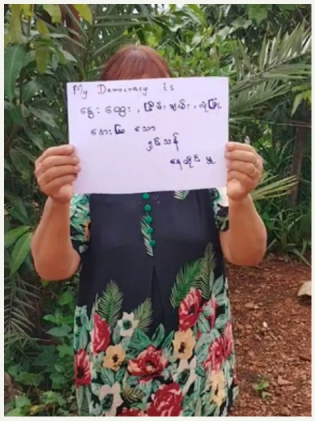
Equality and freedom in accordance with human dignity.



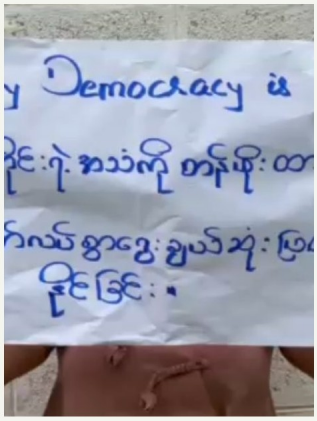
My Democracy is freedom without harming others.



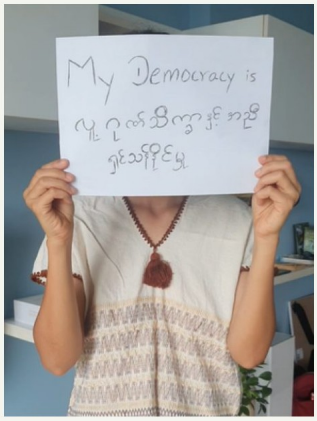
Equality and freedom of expression.



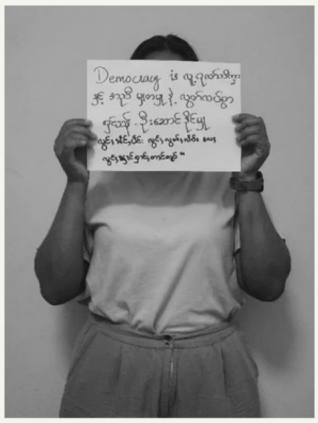
A warm, peaceful, secure, and tranquil life.



Valuing everyone's voice and the freedom to choose and decide.



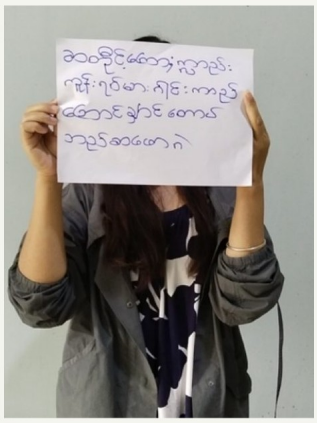
To be able to live with human dignity.



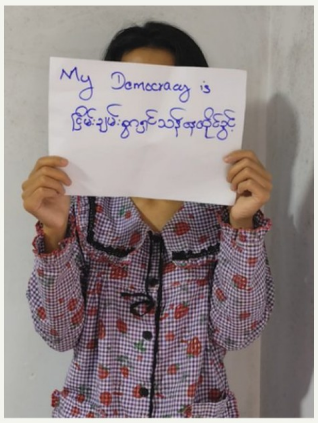
The right to thrive and lead freely, with justice and human dignity.



Let us begin practising from within the family.



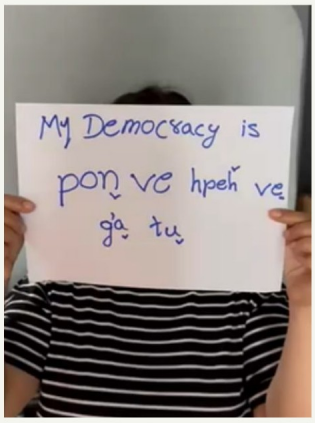
Listening to the people's voices and ruling according to the people's wishes.



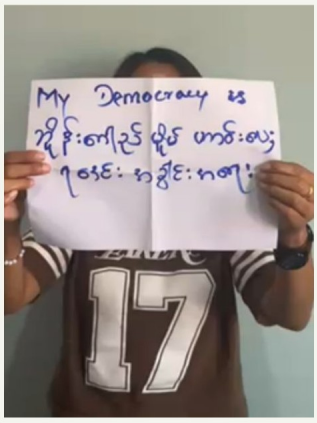
Right to live peacefully.



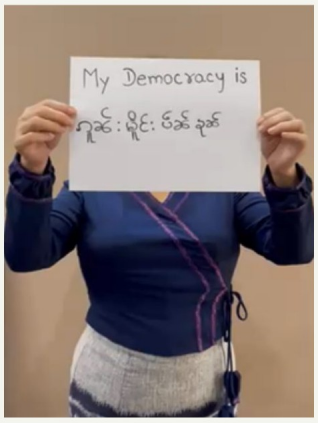
A society governed by proper order and discipline.



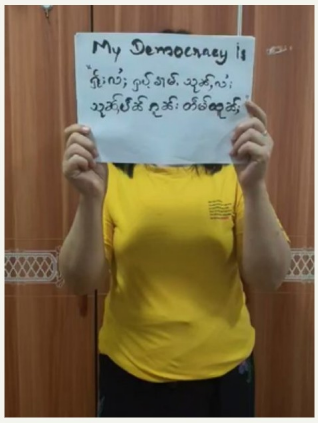
Freedom.



Free movement and the right to live wherever one chooses.



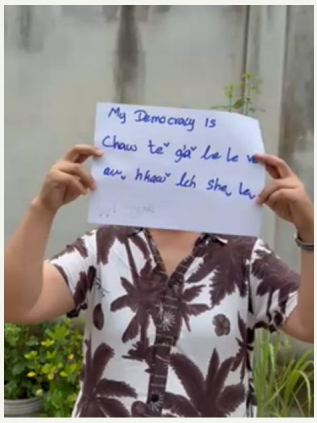
The people are the sovereign.



Everyone must be able to fully exercise their human rights.



The voice of the people.



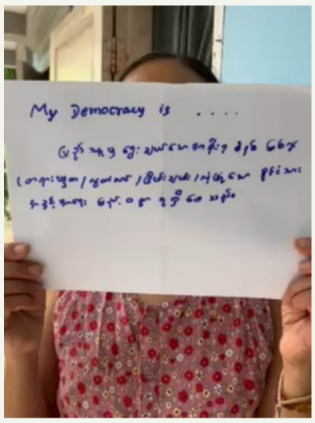
Everyone's voice and dignity.



Being heard, having your dignity respected, and having the right to shape your own future together.



My Democracy is defending freedom today so tomorrow inherits justice, not fear.



A system of government chosen by the people, guaranteeing justice, freedom, peace, and security, with full rights for all citizens.

Kenya

14 voices



My opinion, voice, and my freedom to make a choice.



Equality.



Freedom of expression.



Inclusive.



Built on dialogue.



Your voice, your power.



My voice.



Where young people are not only voters but active in decision-making and nation-building.



Championing good governance and upholding the rule of law.



Holding leaders accountable.



Is nothing minus ME, just a word.



For the people, to the people, by the people. No to abduction.



Your voice, your power.



Dignity.

Honduras

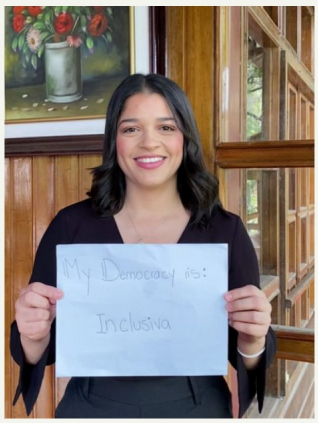
4 voices



Participating in and transforming communities.



Turning differences into dialogue.



Inclusive.



With equality for all.

The Netherlands

4 voices



Dialogue, accountability, equal distribution of power.

Somalia

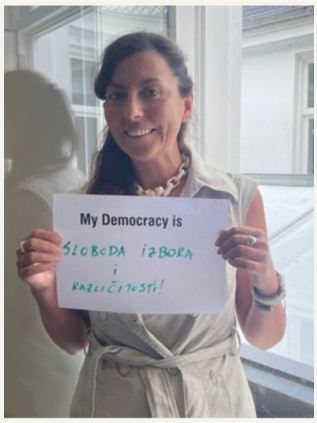
20 voices



Equal opportunity to let your voice be heard.



Voice, inclusion and accountability.



Freedom of choice and freedom of difference (inclusion).



Free and fair elections.



Consultation.



Access to justice.



Government by the people.



Youth leadership.



Society should participate equally in political decisions.



Equity.



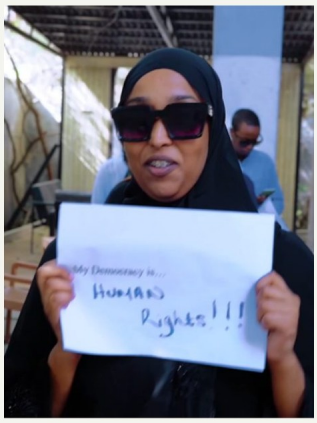
A system of government in which the people hold the power.



Freedom and diversity and the right to have a voice.



Human rights.



Human rights.



Peace and inclusivity.



Voice of the voiceless.



Diversity, responsibility of society.



Respect for the diverse voices of the population.



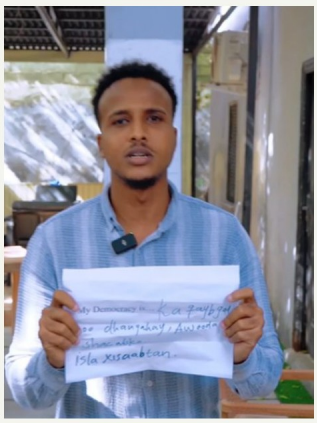
Peace.



Transparent and accountable government.



Public interest.



Inclusivity and power of the people and accountability.



Peaceful political participation.

What is democracy for you?

Share your answer on social media using #MyDemocracy.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share what democracy means to them, and to the NIMD country offices who made this possible.

The views in this publication are those of the individual participants and do not represent the position of NIMD. All entries were shared with consent, and some participants' faces are not shown for their safety.

About NIMD

NIMD is a global democracy support network, with over 25 years of experience of standing for democracy around the world. We aim to collectively build inclusive, just and peaceful democracies.

Follow our work on LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook.

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