



“Democracy is always a work in progress. Let’s keep the flame of democracy alive – for present and future generations.”

-Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, Third Summit for Democracy

Democratic Systems and Psychological Science: A Collective Statement and Call to Action

by the Global Psychology Alliance in support of psychology and psychologists in contexts of constrained social and political freedom¹

What is the Global Psychology Alliance?

The Global Psychology Alliance (GPA) is a network of more than 70 national, regional and international psychology organization leaders, psychologist researchers, and non-profit experts from every continent who actively collaborate with the objective of applying psychological science to shared global challenges.

What is an actualized democratic system?

Actualized democratic systems are characterized by full, informed, and equal participation of all citizens, inclusive of marginalized groups, in wide aspects of political, economic, and cultural decision-making that is independent of financial investment and resources. Democratic systems provide citizens the greatest freedom of choice and expression, including the freedom to question governmental leaders and policies. High accountability and government transparency, together with their corollary of low corruption, are enhanced in democratic systems because citizens benefit from the opportunity to regularly elect better leaders through fair elections. Moreover, actualized democratic systems enhance the rule of law, the judiciary’s independence, and citizens’ civil liberties and human rights (Moghaddam, 2016) while encouraging peaceful relations among groups, in contrast to authoritarian forms of government (Moghaddam, 2021). Importantly, democratic values ebb and flow over time, for which reason they must be continually renewed and re-avowed; democracy in action requires ongoing representative citizen participation.

¹ Democracy is rarely if ever actualized in a perfect form and should not be used as a pretext for international aggression. GPA does not seek to put any country or countries above others. Rather, as a global group, GPA seeks to advocate for the best-practice political governance principles based on their impacts on health.

What is the relationship between democratic systems and health?

A significant portion of physical and mental health can be attributed to social and political determinants (e.g., Dawes, 2024; World Health Organization, 2008) since governmental decisions have documented short- and long-term consequences on lived experience. Research consistently demonstrates that democratic systems support informed, more equal participation in political, economic, and cultural decision-making, ultimately contributing to better physical and mental health outcomes for communities. Democratic systems foster environments where human rights are upheld, transparency is prioritized, and corruption is minimized, all essential for promoting mental health and social cohesion. Although the research topic is complex, a positive relationship between democratic systems and health – including mental health – appears in the literature (e.g., Bollyky et al., 2019; Safaei, 2006; Wise & Sainsbury, 2007). For example, populations in electoral democratic systems demonstrate, on average, 11 years longer life expectancy and 62.5% lower infant mortality rates than populations with other systems of government, effects that remain (albeit reduced) after controlling for GDP and income inequality (Patterson & Veenstra, 2016). This difference can also be seen in transitions from authoritarian regimes to consolidated democratic systems (Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2022).

A stronger sense of agency may be observed in citizens residing in democratic societies. Research shows that an increased sense of control is associated with improved physical health outcomes, better psychological well-being, and lower psychological distress (Hong et al., 2021; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Conversely, a lower sense of self-control is associated with increased depressive and anxious symptoms (Keeton et al, 2008; Mirowsky & Ross, 1990).

How might oppression impact health?

Research shows that corruption, repression, and violent anti-democratic crackdowns harm both physical and mental health. The maltreatment suffered by protesters and detainees is likely to lead to severe distress and other psychological symptoms in survivors including the development of PTSD, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Johnson & Thompson, 2008; Willis, Chou, & Hunt, 2015). “Quiet” forms of repression such as surveillance, limiting freedom of speech, or prohibiting professional advancement have also been shown to harm mental and physical health (Marheinecke, Winter, Strauss, & Engert, 2024). Moreover, perceptions of governmental corruption can aggravate mental health conditions, including depression (Zhang, 2022).

Conclusion:

Democratic systems are well-placed to contribute to the highest achievable standards of well-being by providing of social engagement, economic benefits, and other measures (Winter et al., 2022).

CALL TO ACTION:

As global psychologists and psychology associations committed to the well-being of individuals and communities, the undersigned members of the Global Psychology Alliance (GPA) recognize the profound impact of social and political determinants on mental health. The GPA calls upon our fellow psychologists worldwide to advocate for the protection and promotion of democratic systems as a means to enhance health globally. Let us use our expertise to educate communities, policymakers, and leaders about the critical link between democratic systems and mental health and to stand against anti-democratic forces that threaten the well-being of individuals and their associations. By doing so, psychological science and applications embrace the aspiration of societies where all persons have the opportunity to thrive, free from the psychological distress caused by corruption, violence, and oppression. The Global Psychology Alliance is united to support actualized democratic systems as a political ideal and a fundamental pillar of mental health and human flourishing.

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