"An Urge For Recognizing Right To Food As Human Right" by Right to Food Bangladesh Network, October 2019

Mapping the Global Democracy Narrative Landscape

Research Findings and Applications

June 2025

Metropolitan Group
the power of voice

Introduction

Data and evidence from around the world make clear that authoritarian governments and their allies are dominating the information ecosystem. They are using orchestrated, well-resourced, and weaponized narratives to justify repression and delegitimize liberal democracy. These autocrats are watching and learning from each other, borrowing from a shared authoritarian playbook, and using narratives as a powerful tool to gain power, advance their authoritarian policies, and delegitimize liberal democracy. The impact is that democratic norms, institutions, and basic freedoms are under attack in nearly every part of the world.

Narratives are critical because they are an upstream element of the information ecosystem that impact mindsets, how people experience issues, and what people pay attention to and believe. The data and evidence outlined here is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected by Metropolitan Group (MG) and research partners (2022-2024) through a global research scan and in-depth case studies in 11 countries across Latin America; Central Europe; East, West, and North Africa; and East Asia. The work across multiple countries represents a $4 million investment into narrative scanning, identification, analysis, and testing. These slides include:

- An overview of narrative and values and why they are important for social change;
- Research findings, including salient and dominant narratives from global and country narrative scans;
- Evidence-based guidelines for more effective messaging; and
- Actionable recommendations, including a new recommended pro-democracy global narrative

The goal of this work is to advance an upstream pro-democracy narrative and supporting message frameworks that are evidence-based, effective, aligns with people's closely held values, and can both push back against highly weaponized authoritarian narratives and broaden support for the principles of liberal democracy.
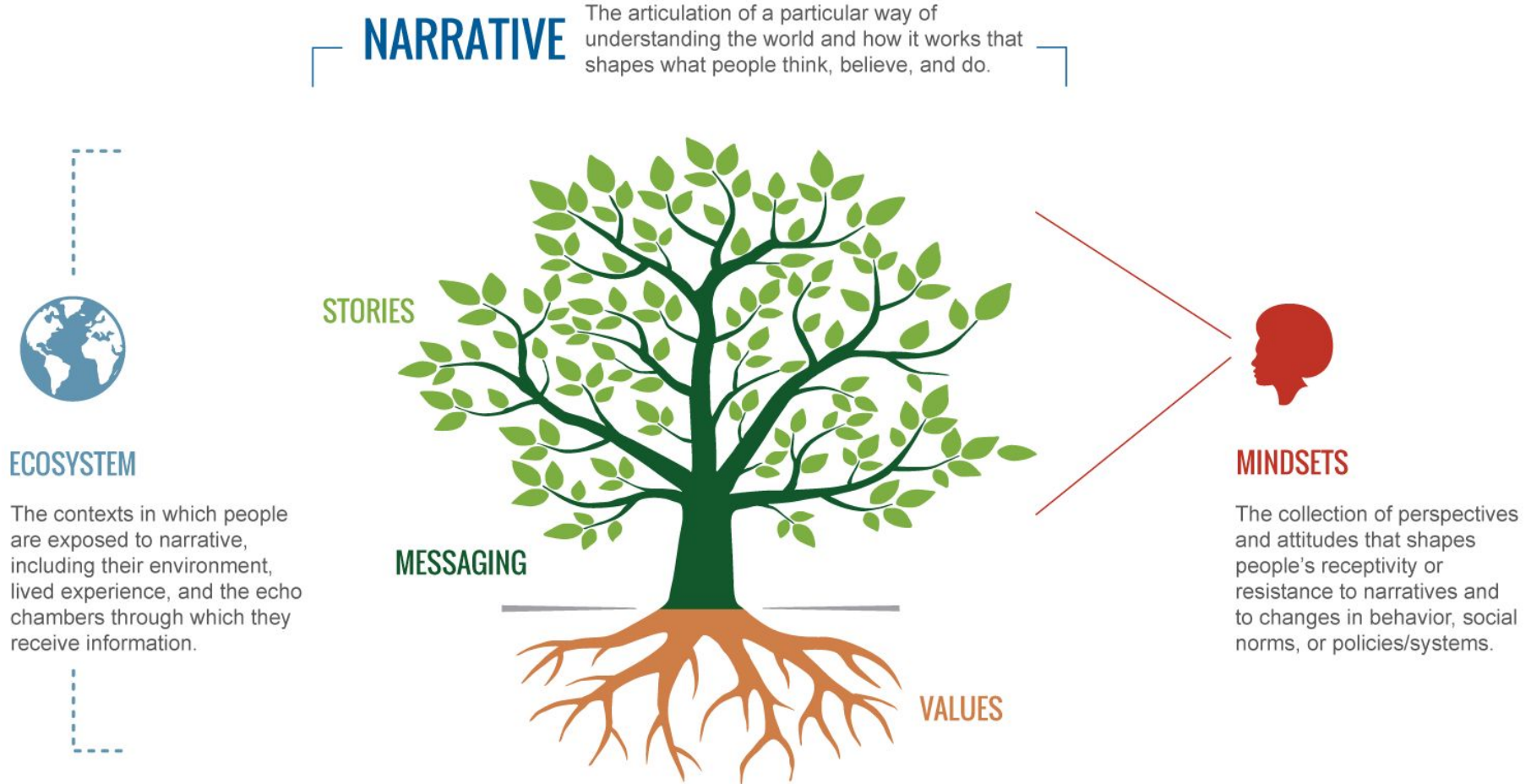
The evidence-based recommendations and new narrative provide a practical starting point for effective pro-democracy messaging that can be customized for any country, cultural context, or political environment.

NARRATIVES AND THE POWER THEY HOLD TO CHANGE THE WORLD

For those seeking to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world, narrative can be one of the most powerful tools. The narratives we accept—and the narratives we reject—reveal something about ourselves, the world we see, and the change we seek to create or the status quo we strive to protect. No narrative exists in a vacuum. It is deeply influenced by—and in turn can influence changes in—the social, cultural, environmental, and political ecosystems all around us. Similarly, while ecosystems and the mindsets people hold shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives, narratives can also influence changes in people's mindsets and ecosystems.

NARRATIVE The articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do.

ECOSYSTEM

The contexts in which people are exposed to narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and the echo chambers through which they receive information.

STORIES

MESSAGING

VALUES

MINDSETS

The collection of perspectives and attitudes that shapes people's receptivity or resistance to narratives and to changes in behavior, social norms, or policies/systems.

STORIES: What people experience over time both literally (e.g., through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (e.g., through policy, the built environment, etc.) that aggregates to create or reinforce a particular narrative.

MESSAGING: The core ideas that provide the foundational structure for the narrative.

VALUES: The deeply held beliefs that ground the narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action.

Narrative Scan Methodology

From April 2022 to December 2024, MG conducted a global research scan of pro-authoritarian and pro-democracy narratives, and in coordination with local research partners, conducted a narrative research scan and analysis across 11 case study countries (Ecuador, El Salvador, Indonesia, Kenya, the Kyrgyz Republic, Libya, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Serbia, and Uganda). The research focused on three main objectives: (1) identifying and mapping the existing salient (i.e., widely accepted and believed) and dominant (i.e., found across multiple methodologies with high prevalence and reach) narratives that either legitimize authoritarianism or promote democracy; (2) identifying and understanding the closely held values of salient and dominant narratives; and (3) testing a hypothesis that there are cross-cutting narratives that resonate globally in very different countries and contexts.

These scans used the following methodologies:

1. **Literature review:** Reviewed approximately 830 sources, including academic articles, books, and reports
2. **Key informant interviews:** Conducted approximately 150 interviews with a wide range of local experts, journalists, academics, activists, CSOs and NGOs, private-sector individuals, and former government officials
3. **Social media analysis:** Conducted a robust scan and analysis of over 1,000 search terms used on the most popular social media platforms in each country to scan and analyze over one million messages and posts

4. **Media analysis:** Reviewed approximately 5,000 articles and posts from more than 125 media outlets
5. **Indices:** Consulted over 40 national and international indices that track democratic institutions, rule of law, press freedom, and corruption
6. **Polling and survey analysis:** Reviewed approximately 45 national, regional, and international surveys on elections, democracy and democratic values, national issue priorities, social norms, and closely held values
7. **Political discourse analysis:** Analyzed speeches and social media posts from approximately 80 key figures, including politicians, government officials, and opposition leaders

Narrative Development and Testing Methodology

From December 2022 to December 2024, research teams in three countries with significantly different political, historical, and cultural contexts (El Salvador, Indonesia, and Serbia) conducted formative research to inform narrative and message hypotheses and conducted testing to develop a new evidence-based narrative. This phase included the following methodologies:

Formative Research:

1. **Focus Groups:** Research partners conducted a total of 15 focus groups in urban and rural areas.

2. **Surveys:** Research partners in one country conducted a survey with over 600 respondents.

3. **Key Informant Interviews:** Research partners conducted a total of 38 interviews with key stakeholder segments in geographically diverse regions.

4. **Indices, Surveys, & Literature Scan:** Partners reviewed relevant research, surveys, and polling, as well as academic, media, and social media coverage related to stakeholders and democratic issues.

Testing Research:

1. **Focus Groups:** Research partners conducted a total of 19 focus groups in urban and rural areas, with identified stakeholder segments.

2. **Surveys:** Research partners conducted national surveys with over 3,100 respondents across three countries.

3. **Key Informant Interviews:** Research partners conducted 18 interviews with key stakeholder segments in geographically diverse regions of their respective countries (in two countries).

4. **Indices, Surveys, and Literature Scan:** Partners reviewed relevant research, surveys, and polling, as well as academic, media, and social media coverage related to stakeholders and democratic issues.

"The people are diversity" by USAID's Honduras Local Governance Activity, DAI, San Pedro Sula, Cortés July 2022

Values Findings

The Role of Values in Narratives

Closely held values are a key element in narratives that impact mindsets, social norms, expectations, and actions; they determine which stories, data points, and "facts" people see and believe. Values help drive decisions, which makes triggering closely held values critical to advancing social change.

MG distinguishes between closely held values (e.g., security, community, family, tradition) and "democratic values," which are principles of liberal democracy (e.g., the rule of law, transparency, freedom of expression).

The most effective narratives, which precipitate action and spark decision-making, utilize closely held values.*

*MG's approach to values is shaped in part by S.H. Schwartz's Refined Theory of Basic Values (2017).

Evidence-Based Recommended Values

FREEDOM	**FAIRNESS**	**SAFETY/SECURITY**
REPRESENTATION	**TRADITION**	**PROSPERITY**	**HONESTY**
FAMILY/BELONGING	**RESPONSIBILITY**	**STRENGTH/FEARLESSNESS**
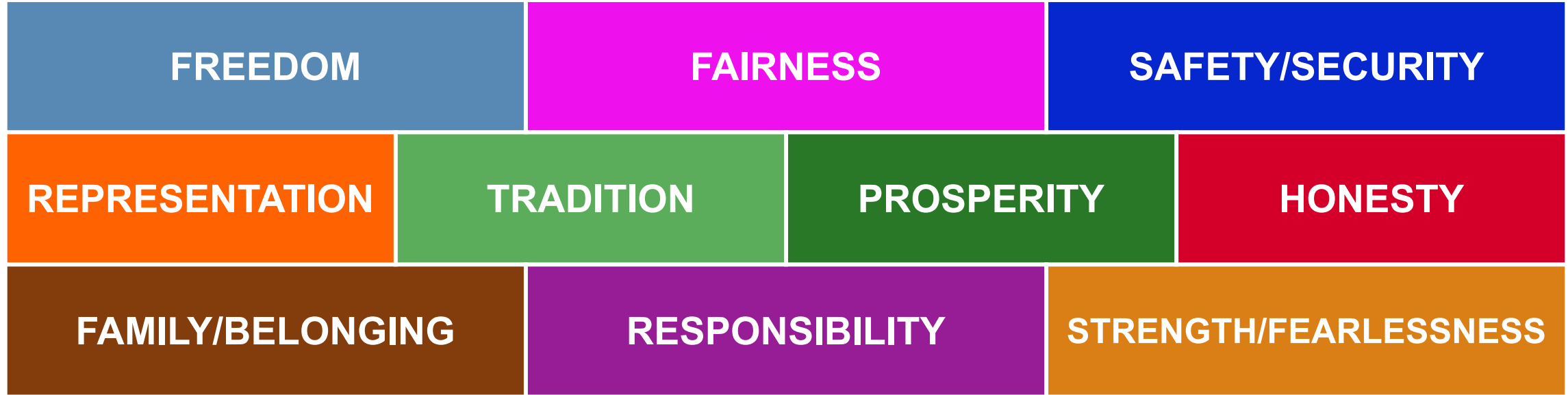
The ten evidence-based recommended **core values** shown above (of the many values identified in the research scan) reflect those identified in quantitative and qualitative research across both the narrative scan and testing phases of our work as being most important to evoke in pro-democratic narratives and messaging.

Core Value	Definition
Freedom	Connects with the broad range of democratic principles and freedoms including including freedom of expression and thought, freedom of religion, and to express views without fear of reprisal. Connects to core democratic principles, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, etc.
Fairness	Reflects the ideas of justice and equality, where everyone receives the same benefits or opportunities and is treated fairly under the law regardless of position, power, or identity.
Safety/ Security	Defined in a broad sense in terms of personal security and safety, economic security, and cultural/identity security. It is often associated with a threat, fear, or insecurity over losing something.
Honesty	Associated with truth, trust, trustworthiness, openness, and transparency, and often triggered in contrast to concerns about corruption, accountability, and disinformation.
Representation	Conveys a sense of inclusion (political and communal), having personal agency or a voice, and actively participating in their governance.
Prosperity	Captures both individual benefits (e.g., jobs, increased family income, and access to opportunity and services) and collective benefits (e.g., development, progress, and economic growth for a community or country).
Strength/ Fearlessness	Closely connected to stability, action, decisiveness, and effectiveness; this value also aligns with people's desire for stable and resilient communities and nations. This value can also be an effective counter to authoritarians frequent use of fear based framing.
Responsibility	Connects with the widely held belief that freedom is not just a right, but also comes with the responsibility to respect and help protect the freedom of others. Also reflects the importance of being civically active, people's sense of duty, and the responsibility of governments to their people.
Family/ Belonging	Connects people to their most important relationships, including family, kinship, and community; what they want for their children; and their sense of connection to, and responsibility for, each other.
Tradition	A multifaceted core value associated with family, culture, and heritage, as well as national, religious, and ethnic identity.

"Greater Transparency in the Extractive Sector" by Manuel Anthony Rojas Rodriguez, March 2023

Global Narrative Findings

Global Narrative Findings

1. **All narratives can be orchestrated and organic, and many of the most effective are both.** Orchestrated narratives are designed, coordinated, and instrumentalized for specific objectives. Organic narratives tend to grow out of cultural, historical, or other social experiences. Many of the most effective pro-authoritarian narratives are orchestrated narratives built on existing organic narratives. At the same time, not all pro-authoritarian narratives are orchestrated.

2. **Many narratives can be used to promote either authoritarianism or democracy.** Authoritarians in particular are skilled at appropriating democracy narratives because they recognize that democracy appeals to the majority of people. When developing pro-democracy narratives and messaging, it is important to consider how they may be appropriated or weaponized. For example, the narrative that democracy "is messy" or "a work in progress" is an honest acknowledgment that building democracy requires long-term investment and commitment. However, it can easily be twisted to argue that democracy creates instability and disorder, which contradicts core values of security and prosperity. "Democracy is in decline" is another narrative that has been used by pro-democracy proponents to raise alarms about democratic backsliding. But malign actors use the same narrative to delegitimize democracy as ineffective, outdated, and unable to meet people's needs.

Global Narrative Findings

3. **Narratives don't live in silos.** Narratives coexist in information ecosystems where they overlap and compete with other narratives, stories, sources of information, and information echo chambers, as well as lived experience. All of these factors shape a person's receptivity or resistance to narratives. When developing new narratives and message frameworks, it is important to have a deep understanding of these additional factors and take them into consideration. Since narratives do not live in a vacuum and will be countered and often appropriated, it is important to ensure that pro-democracy narratives are authentic, trigger priority values, and are bolstered by stories and messengers that resonate with stakeholders.

4. **Upstream narratives create receptivity or inoculation to dis/mis/malinformation (MDM), and influence what grabs attention, is believed, and is organically repeated.** Highly orchestrated narratives can create fertile ground for belief of disinformation and inspire organic amplification of these narratives. Orchestrated narratives establish a frame of reference and impact what people see and believe. This is the key function narratives play in advancing disinformation and can also be used to counter and inoculate against it. Once people believe a narrative, it impacts their mindset (the lens through which they see, filter, and analyze information), and this frames what they see and do not see; what "facts" they credit as true; which messengers they listen to, grant credibility to, and believe; and how resistant they are to any information that counters disinformation and aligns with the narrative they believe.

Global Narrative Findings

5. **Research teams struggled to find salient and dominant pro-democratic narratives.** The research concluded that there are currently few effective salient and dominant pro-democracy narratives being used by pro-democracy proponents. Research at the global level and country level identified a baseline of pro-democracy narratives advanced by the U.S. government and allies, as well as human rights and pro-democracy advocates, NGOs, independent media, and opposition politicians. But, few pro-democracy narratives found in the study countries met the criteria for "salient and dominant" as part of this study.

6. **People make choices based on tangible benefits and their values, not necessarily in favor of democracy or autocracy.** People's receptivity to narratives, or their attitudes and choices, in many cases are shaped by their assessment of tangible personal and communal benefits, such as economic factors, jobs, safety, etc., rather than a binary choice in favor of democracy or authoritarianism. Many people believe that democracy and democratic rights are important, but they may not believe they are a priority compared with other daily challenges; they can simultaneously hold beliefs about democracy and authoritarianism that may seem contradictory.

Global Narrative Findings

7. **The historical and cultural context and lived experience of most people have a significant impact on how they experience narratives and perceive messengers.** Historical and cultural context (including religion, tradition, customs, and gender roles) provides an important foundation for organic narratives that can be weaponized or orchestrated to advance pro-authoritarian narratives. A history of foreign intervention, civil war, economic crisis, shared history, or religion shapes people's receptivity to narratives and influences the messengers they believe. For example, country-specific research identified pro-authoritarian narratives that evoked nostalgia for the stability or prosperity of a time under dictatorship. Historical and cultural context should be a key factor in framing all pro-democratic narratives.

8. **Corruption is a dominant theme across all narrative categories.** While some narratives point out the challenges of corruption from a pro-democratic perspective, pro-authoritarian messengers are using anti-corruption narratives to erode trust in politics, government, and governing institutions.

9. **Security-related narratives reflect genuine concerns about safety, security, and violence.** Dominant and salient security-centered narratives were found across multiple countries. They are often instrumentalized for pro-authoritarian objectives and can bolster the pro-authoritarian "security justifies all" and "strong leader" narratives.

10. **Messengers are key to how narratives are used.** Many of the narrative themes are utilized by both pro-democracy actors and pro-authoritarian actors as a premise for their desired call to action–while their call to actions may differ, they may reference the same challenges in order to build their case. Messengers may reference themes or issues that have broad appeal or interest (such as corruption), but shift their message according to their specific objective or motivations.

11. **Enemies, outsiders, and others is a strong theme in pro-authoritarian narratives.** The notion that outsiders (including "outsiders" within the country) are threatening safety, security, prosperity, and national identity is found across all countries, either as a dominant narrative or as the driving theme in other dominant narratives. The narrative often uses dehumanizing language and enemy frames to justify anti-democratic actions.

12. **Neutral narratives are important to track as an authoritarian early warning.** Research identified neutral narratives that did not have an explicit pro-authoritarian or pro-democracy call to action. However, in most cases, the research found that neutral narratives are adapted and weaponized for authoritarian objectives and create a fertile environment for pro-authoritarian discourse. A key example is the neutral narrative "Security demands action," which often bolsters the authoritarian narrative "security justifies all."

"Democracy Respects the Rights of All" by Democracy International's Elections and Democracy Activity (EDA) Team, part of the USAID-funded EDA, Kolahun, Lofa County, Liberia on June 28, 2022

Existing Salient and Dominant Narratives

Salient and Dominant Global Narratives

Research, both in the global scan and through in-depth scans in 11 countries on 5 continents, identified a set of salient and dominant global narratives that occur across very different country contexts, political cultures, and social-historical experiences. These narrative connections suggest that, even in vastly different political contexts, people grapple with similar questions pertaining to governance and face similar challenges related to security, prosperity, corruption, and other endemic questions. They also demonstrate that narratives on governance do not stop at borders.

The research identified seven dominant pro-authoritarian narratives and five dominant pro-democracy narratives.

In each country case study, we identified a combination of unique country-specific narratives, as well as dominant narratives that correspond with the global dominant narratives. Even in cases where a country narrative aligned with a global dominant narrative, they were articulated and framed in country-specific ways. In some cases, a country narrative may not have matched a global narrative, but used the same narrative theme as a corresponding global narrative. In other cases, country narratives were unique and not connected to the global narratives.

Each global narrative slide provides an articulation of how the narrative appears globally, as well as examples of how the narrative is articulated in different country contexts.

The narratives are color-coded to correspond with specific values that are triggered by the narrative. This is intended to highlight which values appear in the dominant and salient narratives.

Salient and Dominant Global Narratives

As narratives are conveyed through messaging and stories by numerous stakeholders and across multiple mediums, the narratives presented in the following slides are not word-for-word articulations, but framing that has been aggregated from exemplar usage of each narrative identified through the research, particularly the media, social media, and political discourse analyses.

Each narrative was vetted by local partners, in key informant interviews, and through triangulating data sources across methodologies.

For the purposes of this analysis, MG developed a set of criteria for salience and dominance based on frequency, reach, relevance, impact, and prevalence. Dominant narratives are defined as those with the greatest prominence, the greatest reach, and the most frequency. They are often utilized or referenced in connection to policy, political power, and widespread information manipulation. Salient narratives are defined here as those that are shown to be widely believed as true; are accepted by significant population segments; and are engaged with by the public (based upon available public opinion research).

Criteria for Salient and Dominant Global Narratives

Criteria to Determine Dominant and Salient Narratives

To determine which narratives have significant traction and reach among the many narratives that exist, the research team used the following (largely) qualitative criteria:

- **Salience and Prevalence**
  - Are the narratives widely believed (in available public opinion research) and frequently referenced by multiple stakeholder segments?
  - To what extent do counternarratives to these dominant narratives exist?
  - Are the narratives recurring across multiple mediums?
  - To what extent are the narratives present among different regions and geographies beyond the capital; represented in different regional languages; and found among different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic communities?
- **Relevance and Impact**
  - Do the narratives address or undermine democracy, democratic values, or democratic institutions, or promote certain types of democratic or non-democratic leadership, values, and institutions?
  - Is the narrative frequently utilized or referenced in policy and public debates connected to policy, political power, or widespread dis/mis/malinformation?
- **Reach:**
  - Are the narratives present across a wide range of methodologies (literature scan, social media, media, discourse analysis, polling)?

Salient and Dominant Global Narratives

Pro-Authoritarian

1. Democracy Appropriation
2. Democracy Doesn't Deliver
3. Democratic Institutions Are Corrupt
4. Security Justifies All
5. Democracy Has Gone Too Far
6. Enemies, Others, and Outsiders
7. Strong Leadership

Pro-Democratic

1. Democracy Is in Decline
2. Authoritarianism Is Harmful
3. Democracy Delivers
4. Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness
5. Democracy Is a Work in Progress

Salient and Dominant Global Narratives

The following slides include:

- Charts that indicates which of the global narratives were identified across the 11 counties

- A summary slide of each global narrative, with examples of several country-specific articulations

A ✓ on the graph indicates that the global narrative was identified in the country; a * indicates that a strong narrative theme carried this same narrative was identified.

Pro-authoritarian narratives generally have an explicit call to action delegitimizing democracy, democratic institutions, and democratic values, and legitimizing authoritarian practices or agendas. Across the narrative landscape, authoritarian narratives triggered closely held values, used simple and emotive language, and were more salient and dominant.

Pro-democracy narratives generally include a call to action promoting democracy, democratic values, or democratic institutions. Across the narrative landscape, pro-democracy narratives were less salient and dominant; made assumptions about people's beliefs and inherent support for democracy; and often used technical language. Two of the most dominant narratives (Democracy is a work in progress and Democracy is in decline) are deficit-framed regarding democracy.

Pro-Authoritarian Global Narratives

Pro-Authoritarian Narratives	Ecuador	El Salvador	Indonesia	Kenya	Kyrgyz Republic	Libya	Nigeria	Peru	Philippines	Serbia	Uganda
Democracy Appropriation		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Democracy Doesn't Deliver	✓		✓			✓	✓				
Democratic Institutions Are Corrupt	✓	✓	✓	✓	*	✓	✓	✓	*		
Security Justifies All	✓	✓	✓			*			✓		✓
Democracy Has Gone Too Far			✓		*	✓		✓			
Enemies, Others, and Outsiders	✓			✓	*	✓	✓	✓	*	✓	✓
Strong Leadership	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Pro-Democracy Global Narratives

Pro-Democracy Narratives	Ecuador	El Salvador	Indonesia	Kenya	Kyrgyz Republic	Libya	Nigeria	Peru	Philippines	Serbia	Uganda
Democracy is in Decline					*					✓	
Authoritarianism is Harmful	✓	✓				✓			✓	✓	✓
Democracy Delivers				✓		✓					
Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness		✓			*		✓				
Democracy is a Work in Progress						✓	✓		✓		

Pro-Authoritarian Narratives Overview

1. Democracy Appropriation

2. Democracy Doesn't Deliver

3. Democratic Institutions Are Corrupt

4. Security Justifies All

5. Democracy Has Gone Too Far

6. Enemies, Others, and Outsiders

7. Strong Leadership

Democracy Appropriation

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***There has never been as much democracy as there is now. We have ensured that the voice of the people will be heard and acted upon to increase safety and prosperity.***
Serbia	Serbia is experiencing a golden age of democracy. We have a surplus of democracy in which all citizens enjoy full rights and have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life.
Kenya	We have rule of law, and a wonderful Constitution—the voice of the people is protected.
El Salvador	We have never had as much democracy as now because the voice of the people is being heard by the leader. For the first time in our history, Salvadorans are truly taking charge of our own destiny.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	**TRADITION** / **PROSPERITY**	**HONESTY**
FAMILY / BELONGING	**RESPONSIBILITY**	**STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS**

Democracy Doesn't Deliver
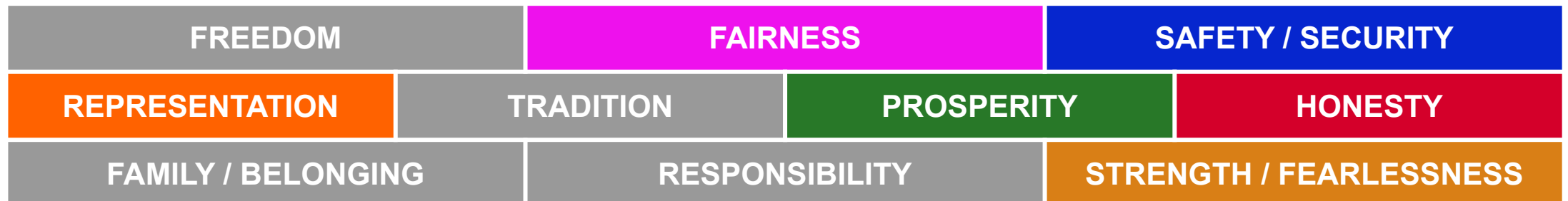
Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy has not and does not deliver the benefits it promised. It slows** economic development**, protects criminals**, chips away at** traditional values**, and** fosters chaos**. We are** losing jobs**, living in fear**, and plagued by** dishonest and corrupt elites**.***
Nigeria	The democratic Nigerian government has failed to provide the people with security, stability, or prosperity, leaving most to look elsewhere for protection and resources.
Ecuador	Our governments don't deliver on their promises, they have failed us, lied to us, and can't be trusted. Politicians don't have any ideas or a plan for how to solve our problems, fix our bankrupt economy, or keep us safe from violence. We are living with social, political, and economic instability that is caused by our governments, while all they care about is themselves.
Libya	Foreigners are promoting dangerous ideas and funding civil society organizations to corrupt our children, turn them away from Islam, and attack our traditions and culture.

FREEDOM		FAIRNESS		SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION	PROSPERITY		HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY		STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS	

Democratic Institutions Are Corrupt

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Corrupt elites** created systems and "democratic" institutions that are **corrupt** and benefit the few at the expense of **honest, hard-working people**. **Corruption** gets in the way of **progress**, **protects criminals and terrorists**, and **weakens our nation**. To solve our problems, we **must take action** without interference from **illegitimate** institutions.*
Indonesia	Anti-corruption efforts create political instability and hinder economic development (foreign investment) while being used by enemies of Indonesia.
Peru	Politics is inherently corrupt and we therefore do not need it in Peru.
Libya	Corruption is worse than ever before. Everyone connected to the government is stealing the wealth of Libya, enriching themselves while the people suffer.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION · PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

Security Justifies All

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Our security is under constant threat—from our borders and physical safety, to our economic stability and our traditions, culture, and values. Democratic institutions are not up to the task of keeping us safe.***
Ecuador	Our security is under constant threat and we must take action to protect our citizens from murder and violence. Criminals should not have better protection or more human rights than our citizens. We can show no mercy. We must do whatever is necessary and use our military and police to take back control of our country.
Philippines	Until we see the last pusher out of the street, until the last drug lord is killed, no one is safe in this country. The rampant use of illegal drugs, especially by criminals, is destroying our country. This is a fight to the death to protect our kids, their future, and the future of the country. Human rights workers are preoccupied with the health and life of the criminals, drug pushers, and drug lords, but the leader of this country has the duty to protect every man, woman, and child.
Peru	It is necessary that rulers have a "heavy hand" to solve the country's problems.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION	PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

Democracy Has Gone Too Far

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy and its supporters among the press, human rights advocates, and social media influencers are creating conflict, disunity, and instability in our country and must be stopped. Only stability and order can create jobs, provide security, and maintain unity for our people and our country.***
Libya	Foreigners are promoting dangerous ideas and funding civil society organizations to corrupt our children, turn them away from Islam, and attack our traditions and culture.
Indonesia	Democracy, specifically freedom of expression, has gone too far; democracy has created excessive freedom.
Kyrgyz Republic	NGOs are subverting and corrupting our society, spreading nonsense about gender and about LGBTQI+ and women's rights, and undermining our traditional values. They impose pseudo-values like feminism and monogamy, and they are corrupting our youth with LGBTQI+ propaganda. They threaten our common sense, our family values, and the cultural foundations of the Kyrgyz people. They promote Western values that are incompatible with the traditional Kyrgyz way of life.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION / PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

29

Enemies, Outsiders, and Others

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***The opposition and pro-democracy forces are enemies of the state who serve foreign interests and hate our country. They foster unrest and put our lives, families, livelihoods, values, and even national security in danger.***
Ecuador	There are powerful enemies, liars, and thieves working to destroy our country—so called journalists, false government officials, foreign powers, and economic elites. These traitors steal from us and put us all at risk. We must take Ecuador back.
Serbia	Serbia is under threat from unpatriotic mercenaries, killers, and traitors, supported by foreigners who wish to degrade our traditional values and undermine our country.
Nigeria	We are under threat from outsiders, agents of foreign interests, and separatists who want to exploit divisions to destabilize and attack our country.

FREEDOM		FAIRNESS		SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION	PROSPERITY		HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING		RESPONSIBILITY		STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

Strong Leadership

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Only strong leadership with the will to act can provide the stability and order the country needs to defend against threats and provide dignity, prosperity, and development.***
Philippines	Strong leaders don't hesitate to do what it takes to keep people safe, and are willing to die and kill for their country. Our country needs discipline and leaders who will not stop in the fight against corruption, crime, and illegal drugs. Only strong leaders can impose order on an unruly bureaucracy so it can get things done, provide security, and protect our people, children, and country.
El Salvador	A president with full power to do what the people want is better able to deliver results.
Libya	Since the revolution, we have been divided and weak. All of the governments that were created have failed to keep Libyans safe or unify our country. Only a strong leader, acting decisively, can lead Libya, unite our country, restore our dignity, and protect our security and wealth.

FREEDOM		FAIRNESS		SAFETY / SECURITY	
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION		PROSPERITY		HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING		RESPONSIBILITY		STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS	

Pro-Democracy Narratives Overview

1. Democracy is in Decline

2. Authoritarianism is Harmful

3. Democracy Delivers

4. Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness

5. Democracy is a Work in Progress

Democracy is in Decline

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy is under threat around the world. Democratic backsliding is being advanced by propaganda efforts from authoritarian actors, resulting in decreased and diminished freedoms, security, and opportunity for people everywhere.***
Serbia	Serbia's democracy is a façade that is being pushed by the government, despite not actually ensuring the protection of democratic institutions or values, such as freedom, equality, or shared prosperity.
Kyrgyz Republic	There is pressure on freedom of speech in our country, and the NGO law is tightening the screws. Bloggers and journalists are being slandered, detained, or expelled for providing the type of information that opens people's eyes. This threatens the purity of information in our country, the work of NGOs, and the rights of citizens to provide honest input on laws and social needs.
Uganda	Democracy in Uganda is only on paper and in political rhetoric. Uganda has a deteriorating human rights record. We need justice—an end to the repression and criminalization of minorities and violations of human rights. We need accountable institutions—we need everyone's voice to count in Uganda's democracy.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION	PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

Authoritarianism Is Harmful
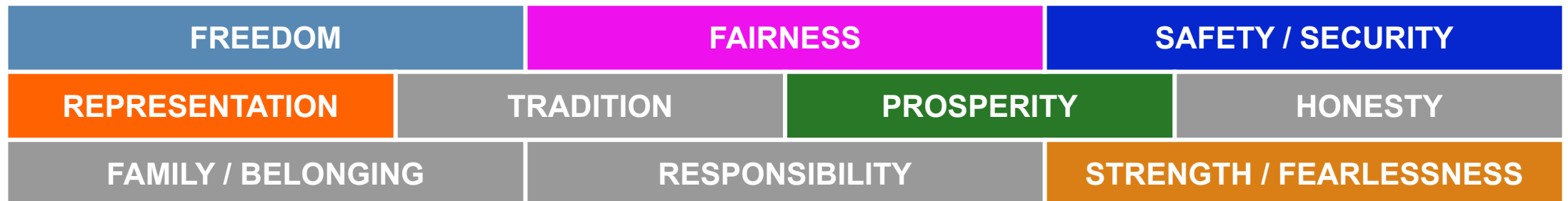
Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Authoritarian states are weaker, more unstable, and less able to deliver prosperity, security, or growth to their people than democratic states can.***
Philippines	Those in power have become dictators, disregarding the law and doing whatever they please, but this has not resulted in any improvements in the life of Filipinos. Their administrations have not only failed to deliver change, but have worsened the suffering of Filipinos—the poor have been killed, they have buried us deeply in debt, and they left us on our own during the pandemic. We must remind ourselves of the truth: when dictators are in power, ordinary Filipinos suffer. Hold firm to the truth of these painful chapters of our history and their legacy of corruption, incompetence, lies, robbery, and violence. Together, we can forge the determination to never again let our people fall into such despair. There is an end to the suffering.
Uganda	After 37 years of rule, the NRM and Museveni have not delivered the economic development, security, and transparent democratic processes promised to the Ugandan people. Instead of democracy, we have rampant corruption, violations of our freedoms, and persistent poverty.
El Salvador	Authoritarian actions are undermining democracy, diminishing our rights and freedoms, and making us less safe.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION	PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

34

Democracy Delivers

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy delivers*** *economic growth* **and stability,** *strength***, and** *security***, and the means for a** *prosperous and healthy society***.**
Kenya	Democracy has led to increased stability and socioeconomic growth, increases the opportunity for everyone to have a voice in governance, and can allow peaceful transfer of power.
Libya	Only free elections can unify our country and create an accountable government that builds strong institutions, provides services, and distributes our oil wealth fairly.
Kyrgyz Republic	NGOs deliver solutions to problems that the state will not deal with. They work successfully throughout Kyrgyzstan providing services in remote and rural areas, supporting and protecting the rights of girls, women, and vulnerable groups, and ensuring we get objective, reliable information in our news media and about our government. They protect the rights and interests of citizens, support active public participation in decisions that affect us all, and are key to building a strong democracy. They support infrastructure and economic development. Without this type of engagement, there will be no development—there will be catastrophic consequences.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION / PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS

Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy promotes equity and fair treatment. Democratic systems are more inclusive and provide greater security and benefits for the most vulnerable populations.***
Nigeria	Only democracy with equal application of the law can guarantee safety and justice and lay down a solid foundation for economic and political development.
El Salvador	Strong leaders have humility and respect for human rights. They support the rights of the opposition and critics to question and offer alternatives because they are committed to finding the best solutions and to ensuring El Salvador supports the rights and dignity of all people.
Kenya	Democracy reduces gender disparities and fosters women's leadership in Kenya's political and economic systems.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
REPRESENTATION	TRADITION / PROSPERITY	HONESTY
FAMILY / BELONGING	RESPONSIBILITY	STRENGTH / FEARLESSNESS
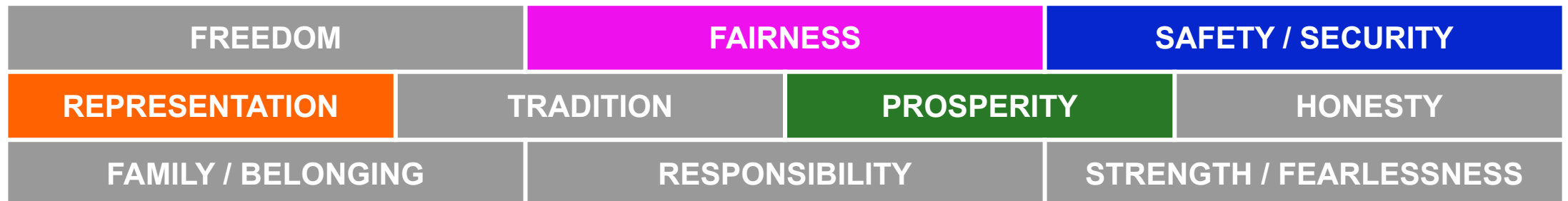
Democracy Is a Work in Progress

Narrative Articulation	
Global	***Democracy is a work in progress and an ongoing struggle toward building a better society. Democracies are not perfect and can be messy, but democratic systems are the most prosperous, stable, and best way to ensure freedom and opportunity for all citizens.***
Nigeria	Democracy building is a long-term project. While it may be messy and imperfect, the Nigerian state has made important progress on the road to being a true democracy, and citizens must be patient and be part of the process.
Libya	We suffered for four decades under the dictator, and it will take time to fix everything that he broke. The government is working hard to improve services, strengthen the economy, build trustworthy institutions, and increase security, but this takes time.
Philippines	We the people have the power to end the abuse of power and corruption in our government. In EDSA, we have shown that we are many and that our collective action can overcome even the most brutal dictator. We can make our voices heard in the decisions and policies of the government when those in power try to exclude us, and to hold power to account when they betray our trust. It is a long and difficult struggle, but we did it in the past and we can do it again.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	SAFETY / SECURITY
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Narrative Findings

When comparing pro-authoritarian and pro-democracy narratives, the pro-authoritarian narratives are overwhelmingly more dominant and salient. Pro-authoritarian messengers trigger closely held values more effectively and frequently and use simple and emotive language. Pro-authoritarian narratives frequently use fear and threat framing to advance their narratives, which, while effective in driving action, is also damaging to social cohesion and undermines norms of inclusion.

Pro-democracy narratives, by contrast, often take the principles and understanding of liberal democratic principles for granted and fail to make the case for why democracy is important to people's lives. The pro-democracy narratives tended to use more technical language and triggered values less frequently. Two of the five dominant pro-democratic narratives were deficit-framed. In some countries, research teams struggled to identify dominant pro-democracy narratives.

Narrative Findings

1. **Many pro-democracy narratives assume relevance, understanding, or support of democratic principles.** Many pro-democracy narratives use technical language and assume relevance and understanding of liberal democratic principles, while pro-authoritarian narratives center to a greater extent on triggering values and highlighting benefits.

2. **Some of the most dominant pro-democracy narratives have "deficit framing" (e.g., "Democracy is messy") that can bolster authoritarian narratives.** This can reinforce concerns for high-frequency values of stability and security that further advance authoritarian narratives. Some also directly contradict core values of stability and security that are seen in many dominant narratives.

3. **Many pro-democracy narratives are more technical and philosophical, while pro-authoritarian narratives trigger more values and highlight benefits.**

4. **The brand and word "democracy" is powerful and holds value, and as a result is vulnerable to being co-opted by authoritarians.** Research found general support for democracy. However, this support for democracy also allows authoritarians to appropriate language around elections to legitimize their actions and rule, framing them as "democratic" while undermining other democratic principles and institutions. In some cases, concepts of democracy are defined primarily through the lens of elections. Despite appropriation, the power of the concept and "brand" merits pro-democracy advocates utilizing the term and better defining it as connected with democratic principles, rather than limited to elections.

5. **The "Democracy promotes freedom" narrative has lost dominance in recent years.** Despite "freedom" being identified as the value most associated with democracy, the "Democracy promotes freedom" narrative has lost dominance in recent years and was not found among the current salient and dominant pro-democratic narratives. However, this narrative remains a powerful and motivating idea and value.

2023 DRG Photo Contest Top 10 Finalist, Kyiv Metro

Application of Learnings to Create a New and Effective Pro-Democracy Narrative

Developing an Evidence-Based New Narrative

Based upon research and analysis of the existing narrative landscape in 11 countries combined with two rounds of formative research (focus groups, online surveys, and key informant interviews), teams of narrative, strategic communication, and social behavior change experts developed hypothesis narratives in El Salvador, Indonesia, and Serbia in local languages and cultural contexts. The narratives were tested with quantitative and qualitative methodologies and refined based upon results. Based upon this extensive body of research, a recommended set of of actionable narrative and messaging tools were developed. These include:

1. Five evidence-based guidelines for more effective messaging that can be incorporated into existing and future messaging
2. A set of 10 recommended closely held values that are important to trigger in pro-democratic narratives and messaging
3. A new recommended narrative that was tested for relevance, credibility, and willingness to share; moved people from neutral or authoritarian leaning to democratic leaning or neutral; and increased intention to take civic action

Evidence-Based Guidelines

Narrative research identified five key evidence-based guidelines for more effective narrative and messaging application. Following these guidelines when creating talking points, speeches, and presentations, preparing for interviews, posting on social media, and writing pro-democracy communications generally, will help create more effective messaging.

VALUES-BASED: Center or highlight the recommended core values in all communications.

ASSET-FRAMED: Focus on opportunity and benefits (assets) instead of challenges and shortfalls (deficits).

RELATIONAL, NOT TRANSACTIONAL: Use language that focuses on what matters to people.

ACCESSIBLE: Use everyday, easy-to-understand language.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT: Use a cultural context lens when applying the narrative and messaging and in crafting stories.

Center or highlight core values in all communications

People make decisions about what to believe and what (if anything) to do based on the extent to which they connect what they're hearing (including facts and data) with their deeply held values and perceptions about how the world works. So, it's important that communication be designed to evoke core values that are widely held and authentic in terms of their connection to priority values for governance (e.g., security and prosperity), the idea and practice of democracy (e.g., freedom and fairness), and those that are important in people's personal lives (e.g., family).

TIPS: Recommended pro-democracy core values to evoke are:
Freedom, Fairness, Security, Honesty, Representation,
Prosperity, Strength, Responsibility, Family, Tradition

Asset-Framed

Focus on opportunity and benefits (assets) instead of challenges and shortfalls (deficits)

Deficit framing for broad audiences can reinforce pro-authoritarian narratives about democracy not meeting people's needs and can be demoralizing. At the same time, acknowledging the challenges confronting democracies maintains credibility, demonstrates awareness of current realities, and offers solutions that are only possible in democracies. People want and need to understand what democracy means in the context of their lives. For most audiences, communication should focus on filling that gap while also drawing a contrast between democracy and authoritarianism.

TIPS: Avoid using deficit-based language, like "Democracy is in decline." Instead, lead with the strengths of democracies. For example, "The combination of freedom, fairness, and fearlessness is why democracies can best solve our shared challenges and build strong communities and a safer world."

Relational, Not Transactional

Use language that focuses on what matters to people

Utilize language that is relational (focusing on what matters to people) and avoid language that is transactional (focusing either on broad language that can trigger unrelated or delegitimizing quantifiable comparisons, or immediate-term "What has democracy done for me lately" comparisons). For example, the broad narrative "Democracy delivers" implies outcomes or impacts on people's lives that might not have been fully manifested. It can also create open space for authoritarians to selectively compare economic growth rates, changes in security, and other ways in which they provide benefits that people expect or associate with democracy.

TIPS: Talk about the ways in which democracies create opportunities to make a difference in people's lives–for example, "When people are free to live and speak their minds without fear and are treated fairly, they can pursue an education, access health care, and provide for themselves and their families."

Accessible

Use everyday, easy-to-understand language

Use everyday, easy-to-understand language with tangible references that connect the idea and practice of democracy with what matters to people instead of relying on jargon or technical terminology that can easily be misunderstood and can be off-putting. Communication should describe what democracies look like in practice and how they help to manifest what people care about in order to bolster support for democracy.

TIPS: When possible, avoid using words or expressions that might be unclear or confusing, like "transparency" or "accountability." Instead, use words that are more clear, like "honest and open," "answers to the people," or "treats everyone fairly."

Use a cultural context lens when applying the narrative and messaging and in crafting stories

To be effective in reaching and engaging audiences, narrative and messaging must be tailored to specific communities or populations and grounded in cultural relevance, reflecting both the cultural heritage and the contemporary lived experience of your audiences. Messaging that fails to be grounded in cultural context or disregards current realities will raise concerns about credibility and is bound to be rejected.

TIPS: Incorporate localized, culturally rooted metaphors and imagery to connect with audiences and establish relevance. Determining when to use or not use metaphor is also an important part of respecting cultural context. When communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, know that some metaphors may not have relevance or could feel exclusionary.

Developing an Evidence-Based New Narrative

- The recommended pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework were developed by applying research findings, data, and the five evidence-based guidelines. They were refined based on testing in three countries (El Salvador, Indonesia, and Serbia) using qualitative and quantitative methods. The narrative and message framework evoke priority core values such as security and prosperity; are primarily asset-framed; prioritize relatable (non-technical) language; incorporate key message components including freedom and security; and are informed by cultural, historical, and political context.

- In the Narrative Development and Testing Phase, MG and partners created four narratives that were tested with focus groups and surveys. The recommended narrative tested the strongest among stakeholders, standing out with the highest levels of agreement, relevance, and willingness to share across all audience segments. Respondents' intention to take civic action increased after exposure to the narrative. Even authoritarian-leaning respondents showed high agreement with the narrative–reducing the potential for backlash. Based upon the findings from message testing, the messaging was refined to increase the prevalence of the highest-performing message components.

Developing an Evidence-Based New Narrative

- **Freedom and democracy live in all of us** tested strongly for agreement, relevance, and willingness to share, and increased intention to take civic actions across all three test countries. It also connects most directly to narrative scan learnings in the other countries and to the global scan. Due to its broad resonance across the population—including democratic supporters and even those with authoritarian preferences—and its demonstrated low risk for potential backlash, it is the recommended narrative.

- The specific message components that had the highest levels of support in testing included "We deserve both security and freedom" and "Freedom is both a right and responsibility."

- The narrative can be customized to address distinct issues (e.g., anti-corruption, free elections, minority rights, freedom of expression, etc.) in different countries, regions, and communities. When customizing or developing new messaging, consider applying the five evidence-based guidelines for more effective messaging.

Freedom and Democracy Live in All of Us

		CORE VALUES
Core Message *(summary)*	**All people** deserve to be both **free** and **secure**. True **security** is only possible when **we all** can **live and speak freely**, **honor our traditions**, and **provide for our families**. **Freedom** is both **our right** and a **responsibility** we share **to participate** and to **respect** the **freedom** of others. **Freedom** and democracy live in **all of us**. We expect and deserve an **honest and open government** that **answers to the people** and **treats everyone fairly**. When we **stand together** for **freedom** and democracy, we build **strong** communities and a **safer world**.	**Freedom**
		Fairness
Problem	Denying the **rights** and **freedom** of anyone puts at risk the **rights** and **freedom of everyone**. Too often, we are told that **security** is only possible if we sacrifice some of our **freedom** or that democracy undermines **traditional family values**. Both are untrue and are used to **deny our rights** and protect those in power, paving the way for **corruption** and **disinformation**. This limits our ability to **solve our collective challenges** and promote **shared prosperity** while also limiting people's access to **education, healthcare, and jobs** that make it possible to **support themselves** and their **families**.	**Safety/Security**
		Honesty
		Representation
Solution	To be a truly democratic society, **we must demand** a government that is **honest and open**, **treats people fairly**, and provides **opportunities** **for all people**. That is only possible if we **do our part** to **actively participate**, **defend freedom** for **ourselves and others**, and **hold our government accountable to the people**.	**Prosperity**
		Strength/Fearlessness
Benefits	When people are **free to live and speak their minds without fear** and are **treated fairly**, they can **provide for themselves** and their **families**, and **fully participate and contribute** to their **communities**. This combination of **freedom**, **fairness**, and **fearlessness** is also why democracies can best find innovative **solutions to our shared challenges** and build **strong** communities and a **safer world**.	**Responsibility**
		Family
Call to Action	**Freedom** and democracy live in **all of us**. To best ensure **strong communities** and a **safer world**, **we need to stand together** for **honest and open government**, **treat all people fairly**, and **protect** our **freedom**.	**Tradition**

Deploying an Effective Pro-Democracy Narrative

Narrative and Infrastructure Recommendations

Data and evidence from around the world make clear that authoritarians are dominating the information ecosystem. They are using orchestrated, well-resourced, and weaponized narratives to justify repression and delegitimize democracy. These autocrats are watching and learning from each other, cutting access to information, borrowing from a shared authoritarian playbook, and using narratives as a powerful complement to their repressive actions. The impact is that democratic norms, institutions, and basic freedoms are under attack in nearly every part of the world, including the United States. As a result, people, including young people, are less informed of democratic norms and how to participate in a democratic system, and are less engaged civically from local to national levels.

Recommendations

Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook and Infrastructure

To be effective in both the near and the long term, pro-democracy advocates must do two seemingly different but closely related things at once:

1. Work upstream to develop, test, and deploy evidence-based pro-democracy narratives and messaging that can push back against attacks on freedom and democracy.

2. Build the narrative infrastructure and deploy locally to support civil society organizations, activists, and cross-sector pro-democracy actors to advance a pro-democracy narrative.
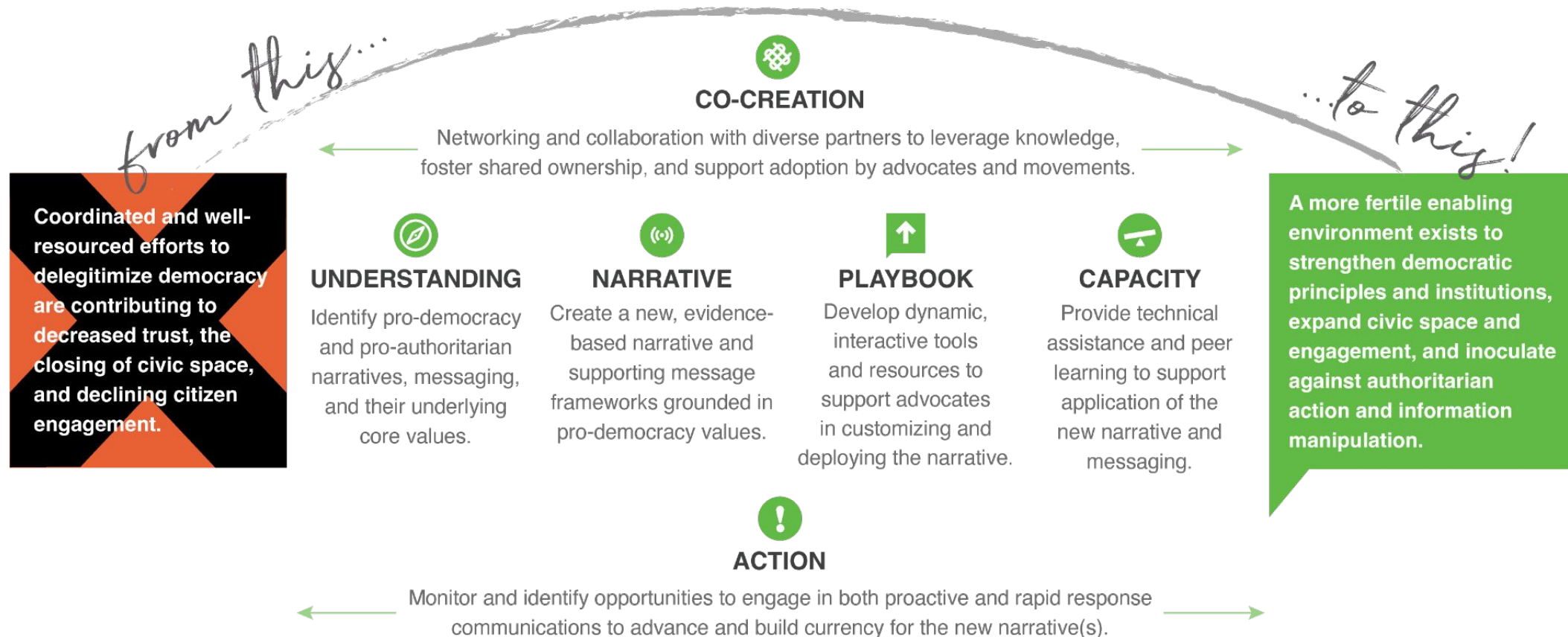
Theory of Change

THEORY OF CHANGE | *By advancing proactive evidence-based narrative and messaging—and by activating people through a connected and supported narrative infrastructure—we will build a more conducive upstream environment to promote and strengthen democracy, and to defend and expand civic space.[1]*

from this...   *...to this!*

CO-CREATION
Networking and collaboration with diverse partners to leverage knowledge, foster shared ownership, and support adoption by advocates and movements.

Coordinated and well-resourced efforts to delegitimize democracy are contributing to decreased trust, the closing of civic space, and declining citizen engagement.

A more fertile enabling environment exists to strengthen democratic principles and institutions, expand civic space and engagement, and inoculate against authoritarian action and information manipulation.

UNDERSTANDING
Identify pro-democracy and pro-authoritarian narratives, messaging, and their underlying core values.

NARRATIVE
Create a new, evidence-based narrative and supporting message frameworks grounded in pro-democracy values.

PLAYBOOK
Develop dynamic, interactive tools and resources to support advocates in customizing and deploying the narrative.

CAPACITY
Provide technical assistance and peer learning to support application of the new narrative and messaging.

ACTION
Monitor and identify opportunities to engage in both proactive and rapid response communications to advance and build currency for the new narrative(s).

[1] As defined by the United Nations, "civic space" refers to the opportunity for people to play a role in the political, economic, and social life of their society, including the policy-making that affects their lives.

Elements of Narrative Infrastructure

Core Integrated Activities

1. **Proactive technical assistance (TA) application and rapid response:** Direct, real-time message customization and application TA support to movement of movements across sector and issue consortia and networks

2. **Narrative Hub – centralized open access of resources:** Leverage evidence, data, analysis, and research; messaging application tools; support for cross-sector and cross-geography cooperation; leveraging arts, popular culture, and media

3. **Ongoing narrative and message framing refinement:** Ongoing field testing, monitoring, learning, and evaluation to refine the narrative and supporting message framework, update stakeholder mapping, and amplify improvements driven by the field

4. **Sector/issue/geography-specific dissemination pipelines:** Engage and support associations, networks, movements, and national affiliated organizations as dissemination partners

Join Us!

Download the full Pro-Democracy
Narratives Concept Note below:

Metropolitan Group

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