

Report on Foreign Press Center Japan's 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary International Webinar—  
Democracy at a Crossroads: The Challenge of Populism and Competition Over Values

April 9, 2021  
Foreign Press Center Japan

**1. Project Outline**

(1) On Tuesday, March 16, 2021, as the curtain raiser of Foreign Press Center Japan's (FPCJ) 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary project, the FPCJ held a symposium online as an international webinar for the first time. The topic for this webinar was "Democracy at a crossroads: The challenge of populism and competition over values." Journalists and experts from Japan, the US, UK, and Singapore were invited as panelists to discuss the current state of democracy and the issues it is facing, examining the situation in different countries and regions while discussing the desired roles to be played by the media and government.

(2) The topic was decided on due to the US and Europe facing antidemocratic challenges from populism and "America First" and similar philosophies, as well as the divide in the countries where the Arab Spring occurred between those where democracy advanced and those where there was a return to authoritarianism, and the rise of China as the world's second-largest economic power setting the stage for a systemic rivalry over the legitimacy of governance. In this situation, the world then faced a true global crisis in the COVID-19 pandemic, putting to the test whether the international community can overcome a challenge like this through international collaboration and cooperation.

(3) The webinar began with a keynote speech laying out the challenges and issues facing democracy from a global perspective, as well as asking what role Japan could play. During the following panel discussion, the four participating panelists described the situation of democracy in the US, Europe, and the rest of Asia, as well as discussing what roles should be played by the media and government.

(4) Through the keynote speech and panel discussion, a discussion was held on what difficulties and challenges were being faced by liberalism and democracy, long-term megatrends which have continued since the end of World War II; how these challenges can be overcome; and what role should be played by the media around the world. Thanks to the participation of Professor Yuchi Hosoya as the keynote speaker and journalists from media organizations in Japan and around the world as panelists, an extremely fruitful discussion was held.

(5) This symposium was held as a webinar, using an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it had a greater impact than could be hoped for from a face-to-face symposium when considering reaching an audience both in Japan and abroad. The audience included members of the media in Japan and overseas, as well as viewers from universities, local governments, government agencies, businesses (media, broadcasting, advertising, etc.) and other members of the public. The FPCJ's press release distribution system, homepage, and social media accounts were actively used to promote the webinar.

## 2. Program

Date and Time: 16:00–17:30, Tuesday, March 16, 2021

Venue: Online

(Panelists in Japan joined from the 10<sup>th</sup> Floor Hall of the Nippon Press Center (2-2-1, Uchisaiwaicho, Chiyoda-ku))

Host: Foreign Press Center Japan (FPCJ)

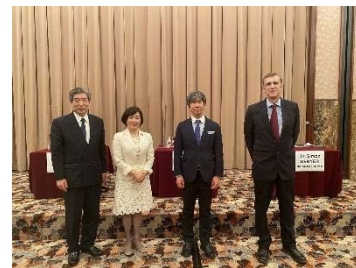
Supporters: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Keidanren, NHK

Participation Fee: Free

Language: English (with simultaneous Japanese interpretation)

Program:

16 : 00	<b>Opening Statement</b> <b>Mr. Kazuo Kodama</b> , Foreign Press Center Japan President
16 : 05~16 : 15	<b>Keynote Speech</b> <b>Dr. Yuichi Hosoya</b> (Keio University Professor)
16 : 15~17 : 15	<b>Panel Discussion</b> Current situation of democracy in the US, EU, and Indo-Pacific; the challenges facing democracy; and the role of the media <b>Panelists</b> <b>Dr. Yuichi Hosoya</b> <b>Ms. Aiko Doden</b> (NHK World, Senior Director) <b>Mr. Simon Denyer</b> (US, <i>The Washington Post</i> , Tokyo Bureau Chief) <b>Ms. Mary Dejevsky</b> (UK, <i>The Independent</i> , Columnist) <b>Mr. Ravi Velloor</b> (Singapore, <i>The Straits Times</i> , Associate Editor) <b>Moderator</b> <b>Mr. Kazuo Kodama</b> (Foreign Press Center Japan President)
17:15-17:30	<b>Question &amp; Answer Session, End</b>



## 3. Overview of Survey Responses by Webinar Viewers

(1) A total of 212 people registered for the webinar, with 137 viewing it live (64%). The audience included people from Japan, the US, Spain, Belgium, Israel, South Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

(2) According to the survey held after the webinar, over 85% of respondents said the webinar was “good” or “excellent,” so overall viewers were positive about it. The webinar can be recognized as an opportunity to promote a variety of views and opinions on the role of the media and government; the current situation of democracy and its issues in the US, EU, and Asia; and challenges being faced by democracy. The webinar was also used for an online lecture by the Catholic University of Korea, made possible due to its online format.

## 4. Summary of Keynote Speech (Dr. Yuichi Hosoya, Keio University Professor)

(1) According to a study by an American NGO, democracy has declined for the past 14 years in a row, and this year is at a crossroads for a potential revival. The leaders of the US and UK are calling for cooperation between democratic nations in an attempt to show the value of democracy, but the question is whether they will be able to convince the world that democracy is a sufficiently resilient ideology.

(2) With the global spread of COVID-19, the US and UK suffered from high infection numbers, while China used authoritarian measures to limit its spread and is now using its state media to proclaim its superiority and the drawbacks of liberal democracy.

(3) Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea democratized after having an authoritarian system, and could be said to have responded to COVID-19 by effectively combining the values of both systems.

(4) Unlike the US, the UK, and France, that have enjoyed democracy for years, Japan instead experienced an authoritarian system until World War II, then democracy after the war. This puts Japan in a position to understand and compare both systems. Japan may be able to demonstrate to Western democracies and the world that democracy leads to the development of a more prosperous society.

## **5. Overview of Panel Discussion**

### Summary of Comments by Each Panelist

**Mr. Simon Denyer** (US, *The Washington Post*, Tokyo Bureau Chief)

American democracy is in crisis. The January 2021 riot at the Capitol shocked not only the US, but the world. Although democracy had already overcome difficult challenges before the riot, it is necessary to examine these trends.

Overall, the media in the US are not helping to solve the problem, and are instead exacerbating the problem. Cable news has split the media into two competing teams and divided society, with citizens supporting one side or the other to the extreme, and arguing about what is actually reality in a post-truth age.

The media must question what their role is. The consensus-driven model of the Japanese media may appear more attractive than the US model, but we must ask whether Japanese journalism is asking the right questions of those in power and carrying out investigative journalism, which democracy depends upon.

**Ms. Mary Dejevsky** (UK, *The Independent*, Columnist)

The political state of the UK is in the most interesting state it has been in since the Second World War. Up until five years ago, the UK was united as one of the world's oldest and most stable democracies, as well as being part of the European Union and seeming like it would continue to be for the foreseeable future. With the 2016 Brexit vote, the UK not having the character to get along with the EU was demonstrated after nearly half a century.

Today (March 16), a policy paper on Global Britain was released, discussing how after leaving the EU the UK will build relations with the US and Asia, in particular China, and the definition of diplomacy will also be questioned.

The pandemic exposed two issues in the UK. One is that the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the world after the US, and the other is that our public health system is not particularly good when compared to other developed countries. At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK media conformed to government policy to an excessive degree, and only in the last three months has the media begun to be critical of the government again.

**Mr. Ravi Velloor** (Singapore, *The Straits Times*, Associate Editor)

The Asian region does not view democracy in the same way it is viewed in the West, as many Asian countries were led by nationalist, autocratic rulers in the past.

However, the urge towards democracy is irreversible. Protests against the coup d'état in Myanmar and the high voter turnout in India demonstrate this, and countries which used to be led by the military, such as Indonesia and Pakistan, are moving towards democratic systems.

However, as can be seen in Myanmar, democracy must be nurtured or else it will die. Democracy has regressed in Hong Kong and Malaysia, and despite being a member of the Quad, India has been removed from Freedom House's list of free countries. In the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood and Arab Spring have been brutally put down. Disruption from technological revolution and changes from globalization are occurring throughout the world.

The world is in a state of anomie and lacking leadership.

**Ms. Aiko Doden** (NHK World, Senior Director)

Democracy is not just at a crossroads; it is being tested. In places such as Myanmar and Hong Kong, journalists are putting their lives at risk in order to protect democracy.

In Japan, free elections and stable politics are taken for granted, and so voter turnout, especially among the youth, is low. Former Prime Minister Mori's sexist remarks exposed shortcomings in Japan's society. At the National Diet, there are scandals over wining and dining, and although trust between the government and the people is vital to responding to the pandemic, it is being eroded.

During the pandemic, how the media reports is also being tested. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy tends to be discussed in the context of free trade and freedom of navigation, and there is hope that the Biden administration will take up the issues of human rights and democracy which tend to be put on the backburner. At the Quad, although there are rising tensions due to China, there should also be a focus on "human security," a pillar of Japan's Official Development Assistance. The media is by nature reactive, but must report with speed, accuracy, and fairness.

#### Free Debate

**Question:** Why did people choose the old concept of democracy rather than the new version, which seems better suited to resolve the issues of the current world, including the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Mr. Kodama (Moderator):** Ms. Doden gave a convincing answer to this question. I do not think the term liberal democracy is an old-fashioned term for the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. I believe it covers concepts such as human security and the SDGs.

**Question:** Does economic development have anything to do with democracy? Are human rights and democracy only relevant once people are properly fed, clothed, and housed?

**Dr. Hosoya:** Countries in Asia and Africa are closely watching the example of China. After the failure of the Soviet Union, people did not think China would achieve the economic growth it has. The government must always be right in dealing with domestic issues such as an aging population, and that may not be possible. However, liberal democracies are also undergoing polarization, so both systems have problems.

**Mr. Denyer:** Justice and free speech do matter. I respect China's economic development, but it has issues such as inequality and a lack of freedom of speech. There is more to the soul of a nation than simply making money.

**Question:** What role can Japanese journalism play in the global debate around authoritarianism and democracy? Regarding Japan's journalism model based on consensus and how it lacks accountability, could you be more specific and provide examples?

**Mr. Denyer:** I have a lot of respect for Japanese democracy, but the press club system is used by the government to trade access to the media for favorable coverage (in some cases). There is a lack of good investigative journalism compared to other places. Japan does try to promote democratic values. The Japanese media can do more to carry out investigative journalism and critical analysis.

**Question:** Why did Brexit happen in the UK, one of the world's oldest and most stable democracies? Is democracy in the UK weaker than it was ten years ago, and what are the root causes?

**Ms. Dejevsky:** Being a member of the EU was seen as an elite project, and most people were not convinced it was in their interests. The British parliamentary system, similar to the US, has two main parties and no proportional system, so smaller parties are often not represented in parliament. A failure of British democracy was illustrated in how the EU was

seen as a symbol of social inequality. A project is currently underway to try and make different cities in the UK more equal.

**Question:** Why do people turn to strongman leaders instead of putting their faith in democracy? Including how the uneven benefits of globalization and disruption from technology lead to anomie.

**Mr. Velloor:** Many journalists do not seem to be able to account adequately for states' perspective of things. States have their own perspectives as well, and have to deal with a whole range of subjects at once. Misinformation must also be taken into account. Democracy is not a perfect thing, and it is not just the responsibility of the state: it is something everybody must contribute to and build together.

**Question:** Please discuss your reporting in Southeast Asia, and about what the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed in Japan?

**Ms. Doden:** When talking about democracy in Myanmar, too much stress is put on the political conflict when democracy is about people. There are people without access to basic necessities such as running water, electricity, or education. Journalists should focus not just on the power struggle, but on the people themselves. The pandemic exposed many shortcomings in Japan, not just health issues but also inequality and women's status in society, including the high rate of unemployment and suicides among women.

**Question:** Japan has not seen the same rise of populism as in the West, but do you believe democracy can be rebuilt even when inequality remains?

**Mr. Denyer:** I would like to say one thing about the gender gap in Japan. There is a fundamental question about whether Japanese democracy can deliver a better result for Japanese women. The journalists at the press conferences when Prime Minister Suga was taking office were almost uniformly male, and there was not a single question about the status of women in Japan. Democracy is a work in progress and the media must also contribute to it.

**Ms. Dejevsky:** Migration has contributed to inequality in the UK. Some people said that migrants entering not only from Asia, but also from the EU under the free movement policy, led to greater inequality. The UK has one of the highest proportions of women in paid work among developed countries, but with the encouragement of working from home, the burden of chores at home has fallen disproportionately on women. There is a risk that gender equality may go backwards.

## 6. Closing Summary

(1) The panelists commented on the development of democracy after World War II, today's challenges, and changes to society due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and through the Q&A session discussed the value of democracy and the role of the media. In the end, the conclusion was reached that everyone, including the media, should contribute to rebuilding democracy without underestimating the resilience of liberalism and democracy.

(2) This webinar was held with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Keidanren, and NHK. Journalists from Kyodo News, NHK, and the *Kobe Shimbun*, and correspondents in Japan from foreign media outlets such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (Germany), *Global Times* (China), and *Prothom Alo* (Bangladesh) participated in the webinar. When reporting based on this webinar is released, it may contribute to people gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation for the value of democracy, and have an impact on public opinion in Japan and abroad.