

IS DEMOCRACY THAT KILLS DEMOCRACY REALLY DEMOCRACY?

Yasmine Abtahi

yasmine.abtahi@usn.no

University of South-Eastern Norway

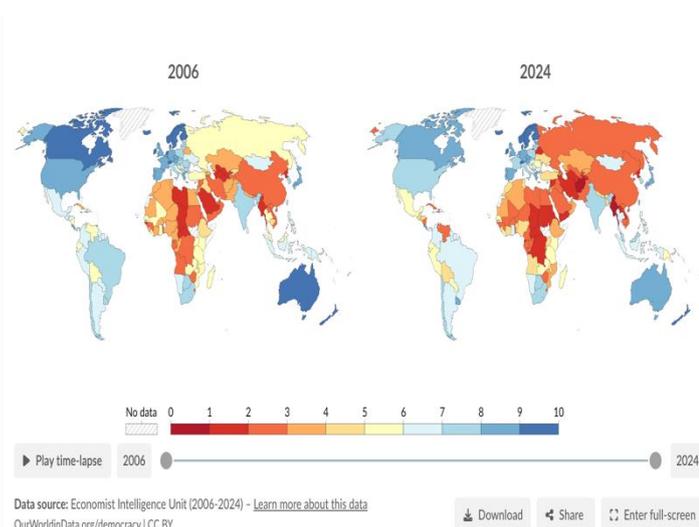
Dear Western mathematics education,

You owe us an explanation. Is democracy that kills democracy, really democracy?

After a long tradition of emphasizing cognitive and psychological perspectives on learning and teaching mathematics, the mid-1990s marked a significant shift toward incorporating social, cultural, and political dimensions. In the broader educational context, both in Canada and Norway, democracy, citizenship, and ethical awareness have been, and continue to be, central concerns. Within the mathematics education community, the work of Nils Malin Oslen and Ole Skovsmose laid the foundation for this transformation. Building on their contributions, an entire network of scholars established Critical Mathematics Education (CME) as a welcoming community of thinkers about democracy, as it applies to mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning. Mathematics has often been called upon to respond to issues of democracy in continuous social and ecological injustices. CME recognizes that mathematics is essential in describing, predicting, and communicating critical global issues (Barwell, 2018), and that it is crucial for citizens to have competencies in critiquing and reflecting on mathematics and its use in society (Skovsmose, 2023).

For Skovsmose (2023), democracy is characterized the key features of voting, fairness, equity, and deliberation. These elements are not merely procedural; they are foundational to the democratic ethos. Among them, the right to vote stands out as a cornerstone in the historical and ongoing struggle for democratic governance. It empowers individuals to participate in shaping their collective future and serves as a mechanism for accountability and representation. While democracies can be found in both affluent and impoverished nations, the viability of a truly functioning democracy becomes questionable in contexts where economic resources are distributed with extreme unfairness. Gross economic inequality undermines the principle of equal voice and access, distorting democratic processes and outcomes. A genuine democracy must reject discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, wealth, sexuality, poverty, caste, or any other social category. The principle of equity must be actively implemented, not just assumed, to ensure that all individuals are treated with equal dignity and afforded equal opportunities to participate in civic life. Decision-making in a democracy is not merely about voting outcomes; it must also encompass the processes that lead to those outcomes. Deliberation, open, inclusive, and reasoned, is essential to democratic decision-making. It fosters mutual understanding, refines collective judgment, and legitimizes decisions through shared reasoning. Democracy needs taken care of. Skovsmose (2023) cites the collapse of the Weimar Republic as a stark reminder of how democratic institutions can

falter under pressure. Addressing these challenges requires vigilance and innovative tools. Skovsmose, along with many others, explains that mathematics offers a powerful lens through which to examine and strengthen democracy. It can reveal undemocratic features embedded in voting systems, quantify economic disparities, and expose inequities in political representation. Mathematical models and analyses can help identify systemic flaws and guide reforms that enhance fairness and transparency.



The following graph takes a broad view of democracy, on a world map, in 2006 and in 2024. The dimensions used to compile this graph were electoral freedom (free and fair elections), liberality (civil rights and protection from the state), participation (citizens engage in elections), deliberation (citizens engage in civil society and public discourse), and effectiveness (governments can act on citizens' behalf).

Without the values of humanity, democracy cannot thrive, and with dictatorship the values of humanity cannot thrive. We believe in values of humanity, which is why *countries fight for democracy and for a democratic government*. Trying to convince myself of the goodness of democracy as it is formulated in the Western literature, and navigating its moral terrain, I am walking on thin ice. Engaging with Western literature on democracy and democratic participation, and with the literature in mathematics education research, kept creating tensions within me.

Democracy as I know it

Iran/Persia: Since the late 1800s, Iranians have fought to maintain their national independence in the face of growing colonial pressures. Iran never became a colony. In 1905 a dispute over sugar prices sparked the first public protests, leading to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11). By January 1906 the protestors demanded the formation of a house of justice and the formation of a parliament. The national assembly in Iran was formed in 1906, the first parliament was convened, and set about the task of writing a constitution. In 1908, the oil drilling of the Great Britain paid off, when just as the British navy was fully converting from steam to petroleum. In 1911, Russia and England gave Iran's parliament an ultimatum that would essentially nullify Iran's independence. The parliament refused. Troops entered Iran and killed the leading constitutionalists.

Though the parliament and the constitution were retained, the spirit of constitutionalism remained in Iranians.

So strategically important was Iranian oil that in June 1914, just before the outbreak of the First World War, the British Parliament took the unusual step of approving the government's investment of 2.2 million pounds to acquire 51 percent of the stock in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company for 60 years. Although some contract modifications were made in 1919, the oil company's one-sided contract remained in effect until the 1930s - it paid 16 percent of its

profits to Iran, had complete control over export prices, and kept its records secret (including the below-market prices the British navy paid for its oil).

Britain: At a time when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was paying more in British taxes than it was in royalties (16%), Clement Attlee became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Dickens, 2018). Attlee's Labour Party introduced a series of democratic reforms between 1946 and 1949 that fundamentally and democratically reshaped British democratic society (Hess, 2018), including free universal healthcare. The National Insurance Act of 1946, National Assistance Act 1948. The Attlee government also nationalised about 20% of the economy, including coal (1946), rail and road transport (1948), the Bank of England (1946), civil aviation, electricity and gas (1948) and iron and steel (1955) (Brookshire, 1955).

But Hess (2018) forgot to also note that this was at a time when the Oil of Iran was paying more in British taxes than it was in royalties to Iran

While democratic growth was happening in the UK, democratic growth was wanting to happen in Iran, leading to a series of ping-pong looking events:

Iran/Persia: The 1940s saw the second resurgence in parliamentarism in Iran. Mossadeq formed the National Front Party, with the aims of: a) upholding the 1906 Constitution and 2) nationalizing Iran's oil industry. On July 19, 1949, in a surprising display of legislative muscle, the Iranian Parliament refused to ratify a too-little, too-late supplemental British oil agreement. By the time the oil company belatedly agreed to a 50-50 split, opposition forces in Iran were fully committed to nationalization. In 1951, Mossadeq became Prime Minister and followed through on his plans to nationalize the oil industry, and the National Iranian Oil Company was formed (Etges, 2011). On March 15, 1951, the parliament approved a measure that required the government to take all necessary steps to regain Iran's rights to its own natural resources.

Britain: In Britain, meanwhile, Clement Attlee's Labour government vainly tried to reverse nationalization and sought unsuccessfully to install a pro-British politician as prime minister in Tehran (Ebrahimi, 2016). Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison informed the Iranian ambassador in London on May 2, 1951, that Britain refused to recognize the takeover of the oil company.

“We neither desire nor intend to question the exercise by Persia of any sovereign rights which she may legitimately exercise. We maintain, however, that the action which it seems the Persian Prime Minister is set on taking against the company is not a legitimate exercise of those rights. It is not nationalisation—it is dispossession.”¹

Iran/Persia: Mossadeq replied on May 8 that nationalization was

¹ [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1951-06-21/debates/7b9b13a0-2f98-44d4-a0c2-8f6ac4a49ed4/Persia\(Anglo-IranianOilCompany\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1951-06-21/debates/7b9b13a0-2f98-44d4-a0c2-8f6ac4a49ed4/Persia(Anglo-IranianOilCompany))

the sovereign right of Iran. In 1952 Mossadeq was named Time magazine's Man of the Year. For many Iranians, Mossadeq became a democratic leader. To Western leaders, his actions set an unwelcome precedent.

Britain: "If the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company were to be forced to leave Persia through lack of support from the British Government, what grounds would there be for resisting similar demands from all the other oil-producing countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia? We should very soon find that our position in this area upon which we and our allies depend so much for our essential strategic resources, would be seriously threatened."²

In 1953 the British MI6 and the CIA undertook Operation Ajax, which toppled Mossadeq from power in a coup. To many Iranians, Mossadeq became a symbol of yet another moment in history when foreign intervention played a pivotal role in thwarting a democratic movement in Iran (Ebrahimi, & Yusoff, 2015).

And 80 years later, (on Jan 11, 2026) the streets of Iran, is full of rage and blood, people demanding democracy.

For one democracy to live one democracy should go

As we can see above, Western democracy, as it developed in the 20th century, was not merely a domestic achievement. It was also a global project that often required killing democracy elsewhere to secure resources, ideological dominance, and geopolitical control. The rise of covert operations (CIA, MI6) created a system where regime change became a tool of foreign policy. These institutions operated with little public oversight, often contradicting democratic principles at home. Iran is the example I know most about, but it is certainly not the only one. Western interventions destabilized democracies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America through covert operations, economic pressure, and military support for authoritarian regimes, a conception of hemispheric solidarity which sought to unite the countries of the Western Hemisphere under US leadership (Getchell, 2015). The West-supported coup d'état has been (and still is) the single most important factor in to the downfall of democratic governments (Marinov & Goemans, 2014). Examples include the coup d'état against: Chile, 1973, Guatemala, 1954 and Cuba and Brazil in 1964, the Dominican Republic in 1965, (Ferreira, 2008) and Asia and Africa and more...

This means that Western democracies enjoyed civil liberties while their governments supported torture and repression elsewhere.

Dear Western mathematics education – here is my concern. Why, in three decades of highlighting and conceptualizing democracy, these contradictions were not central to understanding of democracy in mathematics education research today, given that vast majority of the world that is affected by West has initiated the killing of democracy?

Given that mathematics education is an international field, when we talk about democracy in mathematics classrooms, we also:

² [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1951-06-21/debates/7b9b13a0-2f98-44d4-a0c2-8f6ac4a49ed4/Persia\(Anglo-IranianOilCompany](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1951-06-21/debates/7b9b13a0-2f98-44d4-a0c2-8f6ac4a49ed4/Persia(Anglo-IranianOilCompany)

- 1) Ask ourselves if and how this democracy is built on someone's shoulders, bones and blood.
- 2) Be clear about which democracy we are talking about, the one that it is ours and we want to keep, or the one that is someone else's and we are willing to kill.

My invitation

Governments commit atrocities, in different ways. We can see how politically they choose to remain silence (in the case of Palestine), they choose to move their army around (in the case of Ukraine), they choose to reject dis-investing in arms that support Israel (in the case of Norway). Regardless of where we appear on the map, we are all people – 8 billion of us, not scattered across maps, but sharing one planet. With this short reflection, I invite anyone who is willing to think with me, to think: in our mathematics education research, how can we frame democracy with less emphasis on the structure of government and more as emerging from the unity of people? And if we cannot, perhaps we need to reduce our focus on “systems of government” and instead find new ways to highlight, strengthen, and nurture the power of people' unity.