



## What Is Democracy?

Democracy comes from the Greek word, “demos,” meaning people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over legislator and government.

Although nuances apply to the world’s various democracies, certain principles and practices distinguish democratic government from other forms of government.

➤ Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives.

➤ Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom.

➤ Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups.

➤ Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.

➤ Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.

➤ Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people.

➤ Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system.

➤ Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation’s unique political, social, and cultural life. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.

➤ Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.

➤ Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.”