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Thomas L. Friedman

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I was in Greece last week attending the Athens Democracy Forum — a gathering of democracy experts and activists from around the world — so I have been thinking a lot about the privilege and the responsibility that go with living in a democracy. Every morning I ate breakfast at my hotel’s rooftop restaurant, which had a view of the Parthenon — the iconic Greek temple built in the fifth century B.C.E., at the height of Athenian democracy. And every morning the waitress would ask me: “Do you have any allergies?”

Every morning I would bite my tongue to keep from saying: “Well, since you asked, I have two allergies — but they’re political, not biological. I have an allergy to lazy, performative online activism, like ‘Hey, I tweeted about that,’ or ‘Hey, I posted my favorite pop star’s denunciation of Israel on my Facebook page, so get off my back.’ But I also have an allergy to *no activism* when your own democracy is on the line,

like ‘Hey, my law firm does a lot of business with the federal government — we [had to cut a deal](#) with Trump.’”

What got me thinking hard about my political allergies was talking to two old friends from the Middle East. Both have taken huge personal risks to tell hard truths and fight for the right to vote in a free and fair election. So they are vexed that so many Americans would sit on their hands in the face of the greatest threat to our democracy in my lifetime — President Trump’s willingness to break rules to hold power.

One of these courageous democracy activists is [Tawakkol Karman](#), the first Yemeni and the first Arab woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize. She won it for her nonviolent leadership of Yemen’s Arab Spring protests demanding democracy, women’s rights and freedom of speech. Karman played a leading role in the peaceful uprising in 2011 that led to the ouster of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the strongman who ruled North Yemen from 1978 and a unified Yemen from 1990 until 2012.

Karman told me over coffee at the Democracy Forum (which is held in association with The New York Times) that she was shocked to see how easily American law firms, universities and even some media companies bent to Trump’s political demands without a fight.

“For me,” Karman said, “as someone who opposed dictatorship, who knows how dictatorship works and knows what we needed to free our country from the dictatorship, it all starts when the head of state controls the media, accuses the media of lies and discredits the media — and then does not play by the rule of law, and the institutions work only for the benefit of him and his family.”

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The trigger for the democratic revolution in Yemen was when President Saleh “put his son and his family in the most important institutions,” Karman added. “He attacked the judiciary and emptied it of its work. He escaped all accountability through immunity and interfered in the work of Parliament and the legitimate institutions. And now all of this I am seeing in the United States. What is that?”

The most dangerous thing in a democracy, she said, is when you start to ask yourself: “‘If I do this, what will happen to me? What will the leader do to me?’ Whether you are a journalist, a student or a teacher, you question yourself.” That is what the dictator wants — “to spread fear,” she said. “And when the lawyers don’t do their work, when the journalists don’t do their work, when the scholars don’t do their work, when they all watch themselves before doing or saying something, that is the dictator’s way to control the narrative.”

Karman hasn’t given up hope on America, though. “I gave a speech in North Dakota,” she told me. “There were a lot of conservative people there. They were so welcoming. I told them: ‘Don’t think you are divided because you have the soul of division. It is because someone wants to divide you through hate speech.’ People got very emotional.”

Karman and I first met in Sanaa, Yemen’s capital, in 2013, when I went [to observe](#) Yemen’s broad-based national dialogue. New parties, young people, women, Islamists, tribes, northerners and southerners all took part, with the aim of writing a new constitution and holding presidential elections. The process fell apart when the Houthi movement seized the city in September 2014. The Houthis, a Shiite group based in the north of Yemen, were backed by Iran and allied with forces loyal to Saleh. The Houthi takeover plunged Yemen into a catastrophic civil war from which it still has not escaped.

Karman travels the world now promoting democracy through her foundation, while working every day with followers in Yemen to try to win its democracy back from the long arm of Iran.

“What we need from the world is to stand with the Yemeni people and confront Iran’s project to control Bab al-Mandab through the Houthi militia,” she said, referring to the strait at the mouth of the Red Sea. “If Iran, through its Houthi proxy, succeeds in controlling Bab al-Mandab in addition to its leverage over

the Strait of Hormuz, the consequences for global security could be even more dangerous than Iran possessing a nuclear bomb. This is Yemen's battle for freedom, democracy and sovereignty, but it is also the world's battle for peace, security and the freedom of global trade."

While I was in Athens, a Palestinian democracy activist from East Jerusalem, Samer Sinijlawi, reached out to me with a similar alarm bell. Sinijlawi leads Masar Jadid (New Path), one of the many new parties seeking seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections — the first such elections since January 2006.

Yes, folks, there are three big elections coming up that will shape the Middle East: Israel's on Oct. 27, America's on Nov. 3 and the Palestinian Authority's first legislative elections in two decades, scheduled for Nov. 28. Unfortunately, there are forces around the authority's leadership pressing to have these elections postponed again. Sinijlawi urged me to tell the world: "Do not let that happen." (At least seven parties have submitted candidate lists for the council's 132 seats.)

It is such a breath of fresh air to talk to someone like Sinijlawi. He understands that no matter how many European or American rallies there are to "Free Palestine," the only thing that will do so is a freely elected, legitimate Palestinian government and legislature ready and able to be a partner for a two-state solution.

The repeated postponement of Palestinian legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem "reinforced Hamas's argument that change could never be achieved through democratic or peaceful means," Sinijlawi wrote in a Sept. 18 [essay](#) in The Jerusalem Post urging President Trump to support the Palestinian elections. "When ballot boxes are closed, extremists offer other boxes — filled with weapons, funerals and false promises. We must not repeat that mistake."

His party, he said, is drawing the support of registered Palestinian voters — women and students, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs and people entering political life for the first time, even young Gazans living in tents.

"We support a demilitarized Palestinian state, regional economic integration and a negotiated two-state solution that provides Palestinians with freedom and dignity while ensuring security for Israelis," Sinijlawi wrote.

An East Jerusalem Palestinian, Sinijlawi speaks both Arabic and Hebrew. He learned his Hebrew largely during five years in Israeli prison after being arrested as a teenager in the First Intifada. He told me: "I believe 70 percent to 80 percent of Israelis, if convinced they can live in security next to a Palestinian state, will prefer a smaller democratic and Jewish Israel over a greater Israel that will not be Jewish and not be democratic — and lives in permanent insecurity."

There is no way to pressure the Israelis, Sinijlawi explained; "the only way is to persuade them."

"We Palestinians continue denying the historical links of Jews to this land," he continued. "Instead, we must move from a question of who belongs and who does not belong to this land to the question of how we both belong to this land."

This is a point Sinijlawi and I have long had in common: There are seven million-plus Jews and seven million-plus Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea — and neither are leaving. The only solution is two states — no matter how long that takes.

And the person who understands the power of that logic best is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Why do you think he made it a top priority for most of his premiership to [strengthen](#) Hamas in Gaza? He wanted to keep it divided from moderate Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem who accepted the Oslo peace accords. Netanyahu knows what would happen if a noncorrupt, legitimate, unified Palestinian leadership came together — one that had learned from past mistakes. The whole world would insist that Israel negotiate with it on a two-state solution. It is not going to happen tomorrow, but I will

continue to elevate every voice advocating it. The alternative is forever war.

What I admire about Tawakkol Karman and Samer Siniylawi is that they know how to get off Facebook and into somebody's face — to actually fight for democracy, not just pop off with slogans, which are a substitute for both thought and action. That used to be us in America. We used to model that for the world.

If there was ever a time to get back to that spirit, it's now. It starts with voting on Nov. 3 in our election and getting others out to vote too — for any candidate who puts loyalty to our democratic institutions over loyalty to any single person.

Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Opinion columnist. He joined the paper in 1981 and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including "From Beirut to Jerusalem," which won the National Book Award. [@tomfriedman](#) • [Facebook](#)

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