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|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Item Type     | Book chapter                                                                                        |
| Authors       | Werner, Dietrich                                                                                    |
| Rights        | The Lutheran World Federation                                                                       |
| Download date | 2026-09-07 20:35:26                                                                                 |
| Link to Item  | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/3863476">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/3863476</a> |

# STANDING UP AGAINST RIGHT-WING POPULIST MOVEMENTS. COMMON ECUMENICAL TASKS IN THE CONTEXT OF SHRINKING CIVIL SPACE AND THE GLOBAL CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

*Dietrich Werner*

From its early inception in 1959 in Berlin—almost 60 years ago—Bread for the World, the national development organization of Protestant churches in Germany, raised its voice for the support of the marginalized and those excluded from freely determining the fate and quality of their lives. Bread for the World believes in the crucial role of civil society organizations, of churches, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) to enhance work for the alleviation of poverty, human rights and ecological transformation throughout the world. This is particularly important today as states get weaker or cannot function properly, and as the number of such fragile states is multiplying. Strengthening civil society actors has been one of the primary objectives of Bread for the World over the past few years, while supporting partner organizations in more than 90 countries worldwide. But this work—despite ambitious political goals and common agreements like the United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDf)—has not become easier in recent years. On the contrary, partners of Bread for the World are increasingly sharing stories about restrictions they face in operating in public space. Rigid forms of state surveillance, complex registration procedures, direct discriminatory practices, including sanctions against foreign money transfer or explicit legal means of suppression against civil society organizations, are

on the increase. Such measures threaten the very survival of certain partners in countries where the voices of human rights activists are most needed. There are alarming trends for what we would call a “global crisis in democracy”. Let me illustrate this by reviewing data from recent reports.

Bread for the World showed in its recently published “Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft”<sup>1</sup>, which is based on the CIVICUS Monitor<sup>2</sup> Reports, that only two percent of people worldwide live in countries where public space for civic activism is truly open. Seven of eight states worldwide narrow, repress or close the space of actors such as human rights defenders, journalists or NGOs (or 173 states in total). As Bread for the World is a development actor, the report also examined the correlation of development and freedom. Looking at the Human Development Index and the CIVICUS data, we can see that the more open a society is, the more likely it is to achieve human, social and economic development.

Similar trends of shrinking space were recently outlined in the “Freedom in the World Report 2018”, which argues that democracy has encountered its biggest crisis in 2017, as the respect for basic democratic rights and civil freedom principles has decreased once again. Seventy-one out of 195 countries respect political citizen rights less than before, while only thirty-five countries have made progress around freedom rights, and only forty-nine countries can be regarded as totally unfree, with fifty-eight counted as partly free.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018, which provides a ranking of countries according to civil democracy and social economy, has come to the conclusion that out of 129 countries assessed, only two had improved, while in thirteen countries the situation had deteriorated, and more than 3.3 billion people now live in autocratic regimes.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the so-called Democracy-Index of the journal *The Economist*<sup>5</sup>, which has measured the level of democratization in 169 countries since 2006, concluded that in 2017, only nineteen countries in the world fully

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<sup>1</sup> Brot für die Welt (Christian Jakob, Maren Leifker, Christine Meissler), *Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft* (Berlin: Brot für die Welt, 2017), online: <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/themen/atlas-der-zivilgesellschaft/> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *CIVICUS Monitor* (Johannesburg/New York/Geneva: CIVICUS, 2017), online: <https://monitor.civicus.org/> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Democracy in Crisis* (Washington, D.C./New York: Freedom House, 2018), online: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018), online: <https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index* (London: The Economist, 2018), online: <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex/> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

realized and granted democratic principles. Thus, it describes the current situation as a “recession of democracy”.

Reasons for this global crisis of democracy can be many and complex: increased trends to authoritarian regimes, hypertrophic nationalist ideologies, rigid concepts of exclusivism as protective means against globalization, and trends towards radicalization of political and religious language reinforce each other. From our partners in several contexts, we know that nationalist populism—while not being the only reason for the global crisis in democracy and the shrinking space of civil society—helps aggravate and accelerate political polarization, enmity and self-closure, which offers political justification for further restrictions.

“Nationalist populism” claims that the true and authentic will of the people is not represented by its properly elected political leaders and democratic institutions. It argues that such a nation needs special and truly patriotic or national “leaders”, to express the authentic voice of the masses of the people. Legitimate criticism against those new and autocratic leaders is then portrayed as anti-national or as harming the national interest. In this same rhetoric, many of Bread for the World’s partners in countries such as Kenya, India or Russia are defamed as “evil or uncivil society”, “foreign agents”, “fifth columns”, “traitors” or “terrorists”. Populism and defamation are important elements, which shrink the space of civil society and lead to repression. In some cases, media additionally enforces stigmatization through targeted campaigns and incitement to violence. Frequently, bloggers and journalists are severely threatened and hampered in their work, and therefore they cannot defend themselves against established media and their campaigns against civil society. All this significantly influences economic, social and cultural human rights and development as well. Defenders of these rights are often the ones most severely affected by persecution and intimidation.

Populism is gaining influence and power both in the United States of America and in European countries, where it is becoming an issue of deep concern. President Donald Trump has illustrated this form of ideological battle rhetoric in a frightening manner. Having just been elected with a small margin of votes (without a numerical majority of votes!), he claimed to be the only right and proper leader of the American nation which would be “transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People”<sup>6</sup>—as if the American nation, one of the oldest democracies in the world, for decades did not live in a functioning democracy. Similarly, right-wing populist movements in Europe argue that the European political and democratic system is corrupt and that only a small elitist circle within the established parties is the secret sovereign in their countries (as stated, for example, in Article 8 of the party

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump, *The Inaugural Address* (January 20, 2017), online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> (last accessed September 2, 2018).

program of the German right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland*). They claim that it is only the right-wing parties who rightfully represent the silent majority of the true people, which now needs to change the course of history. What we see at work here is a perverse combination of strategies which are inherently opposed and in conflict with one another. We see a propagandistic devaluation and decrying of existing democratic procedures used by those who, at the same time, are benefitting from them; in addition, we have these parties demonizing mainstream political leaders, while at the same time refusing to enter into serious political dialogue about current issues; and there is an excessive use of state funds and privileges for further spreading of right-wing ideologies and fake news, again, while at the same time slurring state authorities. These contradictory trends are tied in with strategies which gradually intend to undermine the confidence and active political participation of people in democratic processes. In the German context, this is not the first time in history that populism like this has shown its face. The churches in Germany are on high alert with regard to the unfolding political scenario.

Bread for the World and its founding figures were rooted in the understandings and theological presuppositions of the Confessing Church, which stood up against a fascist populist movement in Germany which later brought horrible suffering and destruction to several European countries and beyond. In the context of National Socialism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer developed a theological response against *nationalism, anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism and populism that is a valuable resource for today's challenges*. Bonhoeffer argued in favor of an attitude of Christian resilience over against the temptations of nationalism, exclusionism and adaptation to populist trends. He pointed to the inherently critical nature of Christian belief:

“Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear [...] Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now.”<sup>7</sup>

Developing meaningful responses to the challenges of right-wing populism and nationalist movements greatly profits from inter-contextual ecumenical exchange. The key question in this regard is: how can churches remain steadfast and strong in their witness and service to those in need of God's love and compassion beyond all cultural, national and ethnic boundaries?

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Evening Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9 (London 1934),” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* 13, Hans Goedeke, Martin Heimbucher and Hans-Walter Schleicher (eds) (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1994), 411 (Bonhoeffer's English).