

TORONTO DEMOCRACY FORUM 2025





Executive Summary

The Toronto Democracy Forum 2025, held on November 16–17, brought together scholars, civil society leaders, researchers, human rights advocates, and journalists to examine civil resistance against authoritarianism and religious radicalism. Organized by the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN) in partnership with Atlas Network, the Institute for Liberal Studies, Students For Liberty, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Ladies of Liberty Alliance, Secure Canada, and the Afghan Association of the University of Toronto, the forum encouraged cooperation, dialogue, and practical engagement to defend democratic values, freedom, and human dignity in an increasingly contested global environment.





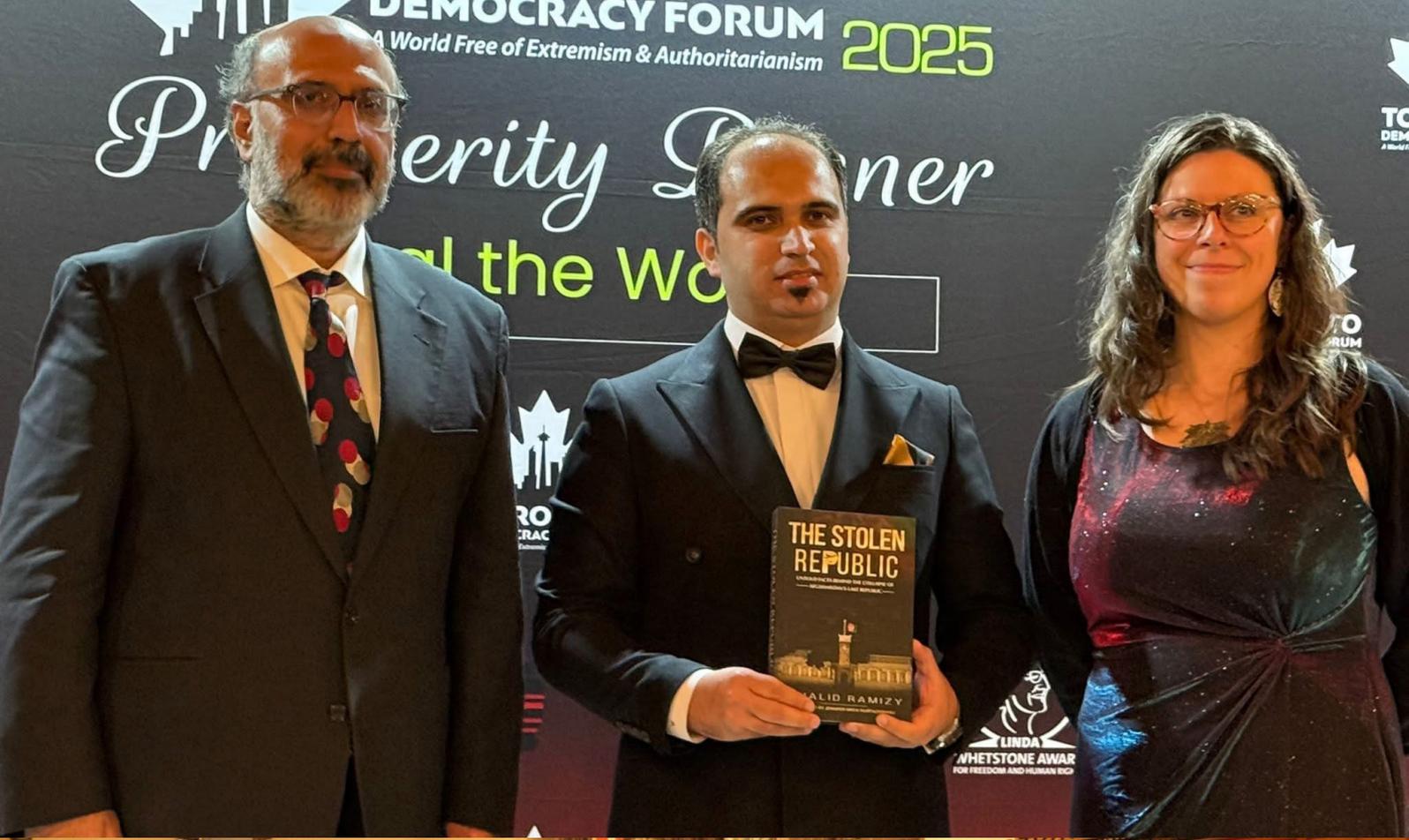
Day 1: Prosperity Dinner

The forum opened with the Prosperity Dinner, which emphasized the importance of collaboration, solidarity, and shared responsibility in resisting authoritarianism and extremism. Li Schoolland, Chair of the Board at WAEN, opened the evening by reflecting on her personal experience of growing up without freedom and highlighting the enduring relationship between liberty and prosperity, setting the tone for the discussions that followed. She stressed that poverty and repression stem from oppressive systems, not personal failure, and that freedom enables dignity, opportunity, and societal prosperity even in adversity.

The evening featured a keynote address by Brad Lips, Chief Executive Officer of Atlas Network, who spoke about the state of freedom and human rights in 2025. He examined the growing pressure on democratic institutions worldwide and discussed the importance of civil society, institutional reform, and economic freedom in countering extremism and authoritarian influence. His remarks echoed the evening's broader focus on the role of strong institutions and active civic engagement in sustaining peace and prosperity.

During the dinner, Khalid Ramizy, Chief Executive Officer of WAEN, delivered an In Memoriam tribute honoring individuals who had dedicated their lives to the defense of freedom and human rights. The Linda Whetstone Award for Freedom and Human Rights was presented to Brad Lips in recognition of his leadership in strengthening civil society organizations and advancing liberty globally, reinforcing the evening's emphasis on honoring those who have advanced democratic values.





Day 2: Keynotes, Lectures and Panels

The second day of the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 at the University of Toronto featured keynote speeches, lectures, panel discussions, research presentations, and group discussions examining civil resistance to authoritarianism and religious extremism. Sessions focused on democratic backsliding, foreign interference, polarization, and the role of civic action, education, and institutional resilience.

The day opened with remarks by Prof. Ahrar Ramizpoor, President of the World Anti-Extremism Network, who highlighted the accelerating global decline of democracy and the need to move from analysis to coordinated action. He emphasized cross-border cooperation and sustained partnerships as essential to confronting extremism and authoritarian rule. From here, the conference consisted of keynote addresses, lectures and panel discussions, and research presentations with group discussions.

A. Keynote Addresses

Three keynote addresses examined pressures facing liberal democracies in 2025. Shikha Dalmia, President of the Institute for the Study of Modern Authoritarianism, warned that modern authoritarianism increasingly emerges from within democratic systems and stressed the importance of pluralism and civic engagement. Brian Lee Crowley, Founder and Managing Director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, focused on foreign interference and transnational authoritarian influence in Canada, calling for a whole-of-democracy response grounded in institutional strength. Finally, Sheryl Saperia, Chief Executive Officer of Secure Canada, addressed rising extremism and polarization in Canada and emphasized civic literacy and consistent enforcement of democratic norms. Khalid Ramizy, Chief Executive Officer of WAEN, presented an overview of the organization's initiatives and achievements in 2025, highlighting WAEN's global expansion in research, education, advocacy, and youth leadership. He underscored the importance of survivor-led approaches and sustained international collaboration in resisting extremism and authoritarianism.

B. Lectures and Panels

Lectures and panel discussion examined practical approaches to countering authoritarianism and religious extremism, including legal accountability, religious moderation, economic freedom, and civic resilience. Dr. Merkley addressed affective polarization in Canada and its impact on democratic norms. Prof. Ken Schoolland discussed the role of economic freedom in reducing vulnerability to authoritarian control, and Dr. Hassan Abbas explored Islamic theological traditions as resources for countering extremism.

A panel discussion moderated by Hunter Rauch explored how religious extremism, authoritarian regimes, and criminal networks reinforce one another across borders, while highlighting practical legal, civic, and institutional strategies to counter these threats and strengthen democratic resilience.

C. Research Presentations and Group Discussions

The Forum also featured presentations of original research developed under WAEN's Call for Abstracts on civil resistance. Conference participants were divided into two groups, and in each group a set of scholars presented research on transnational repression, youth-led movements, religious moderation, and democratic resilience. Structured discussions followed in each group, allowing participants to engage with the research and identify practical implications. These discussions focused on strengthening liberal democracy in the face of global authoritarianism and emerging challenges, including artificial intelligence, as well as identifying practical strategies and forms of civil resistance to counter religious radicalism and authoritarian rule. Group representatives summarized key insights and shared conclusions during the final plenary session.









Takeaways and Final Thoughts

The Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 underscored the importance of civic education, freedom of expression, and institutional integrity in resisting authoritarianism and religious extremism. Across keynote addresses, lectures, research presentations, and group discussions, participants emphasized that democratic resilience depends on informed citizens, active civil society, and sustained cooperation across borders.

The Forum concluded with closing remarks by **Jonathan Berkshire Miller** and Li Schoolland, who emphasized the shared responsibility to defend freedom and human dignity. They encouraged participants to remain engaged beyond the Forum and to continue working collaboratively to strengthen democratic values and counter authoritarian and extremist threats globally.



Introduction

The Toronto Democracy Forum 2025, held at the University of Toronto over two days, November 16–17, brought together scholars, researchers, policymakers, journalists, human rights advocates, and members of civil society to examine civil resistance against authoritarianism and religious radicalism. Organized by the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN) in partnership with Atlas Network, the Institute for Liberal Studies, Students For Liberty, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Ladies of Liberty Alliance, Secure Canada, and the Afghan Association of the University of Toronto, the Forum provided a platform for dialogue, exchange, and coordinated reflection on the challenges facing democratic societies.

This report documents the discussions, key themes, and insights that emerged from the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025. It captures the perspectives shared during keynote addresses, lectures, panels, research presentations, and group discussions on defending democracy, countering extremism, and strengthening civil society. The report is intended to inform policymakers, civil society organizations, and the broader public about the risks confronting democratic institutions and the importance of sustained civic engagement.

The report includes highlights from the Prosperity Dinner, keynote speeches, expert panels, academic research presentations, and breakout sessions. Its focus is on the central issues raised throughout the Forum, including democratic resilience, civic education, freedom of expression, institutional accountability, and international cooperation in response to authoritarian and extremist threats.

Key Themes

Several key themes emerged from discussions across the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025:

1. Democratic Vulnerability and Institutional Pressure

Discussions highlighted how democratic systems are increasingly strained from within, including through polarization, disinformation, and foreign interference, underscoring the need to safeguard institutional credibility and public trust.

2. Religious Radicalism and Authoritarian Alignment

Discussions highlighted the ways religious extremism and authoritarian rule can reinforce each other through repression, ideological control, and transnational coordination.

3. Civic Education and Citizen Engagement

The Forum stressed the role of education, critical thinking, and civic participation in building democratic resilience and countering polarization and radicalization.

4. International Cooperation and Civil Society Networks

International collaboration was identified as essential for responding to transnational authoritarianism and extremism, with particular emphasis on strengthening civil society organizations and cross-border partnerships.

The Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 highlighted both the challenges and responsibilities facing democratic societies today. As authoritarianism and extremism continue to evolve, the discussions and insights shared during the Forum underscore the importance of sustained engagement, institutional integrity, and collective action to defend freedom, human dignity, and democratic values globally.







WORLD ANTI EXTREMISM NETWORK

BUILDING A FREE WORLD

First Day: Prosperity Dinner

Welcome Remarks

Day 1 of the Toronto Democracy Forum opened with welcoming remarks from Aiman Ramizy, Communications Assistant at the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN), who served as emcee for the Prosperity Dinner. She welcomed participants to Toronto and emphasized the importance of unity, collaboration, and shared responsibility in confronting extremism and authoritarianism. She also acknowledged WAEN's partners and highlighted the Prosperity Dinner as the organization's annual flagship event, bringing together global voices committed to freedom, resilience, and prosperity.

To set the tone for the evening, Aiman shared a translated poem by Saadi Shirazi, underscoring humanity's shared essence and the moral duty of empathy:

*Human beings are members of a whole, In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain, Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you cannot retain.*

Land Acknowledgement

The opening continued with a land acknowledgement delivered by Maria Alejandra Guardado, Senior Fellow at WAEN. She recognized that the forum was held on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee peoples, within the Dish With One Spoon Treaty territory. Maria emphasized that reconciliation requires more than acknowledgement, calling for truth, responsibility, and meaningful action as participants engaged in discussions on democracy, justice, and collective responsibility.

Opening Remarks:

Li Schoolland, Chairperson and Member of the Board of Directors at the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN), opened the Prosperity Dinner and welcomed participants from more than 20 countries to the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 and reflected on the meaning of prosperity through the lens of her personal experience.

Recalling her upbringing in China, Schoolland spoke about living under extreme poverty and rejected the idea that poverty results from a lack of intelligence, effort, or resources. Instead, she attributed it to authoritarian governance that suppresses individual freedom. Referring to China's economic transformation, she challenged the common narrative that credits the Communist Party for the country's prosperity: *"People say China had a miracle and became prosperous, but that's not true. More than one billion people walked out of poverty with their own feet when they were given freedom—economic freedom, not political freedom. Ordinary people, when given freedom, can do extraordinary things."* She connected this experience to WAEN's mission, emphasizing that poverty around the world persists not because of individual failure but because governments restrict or strip away liberty. Schoolland stressed that this reality underpins the organization's work in countering extremism and authoritarianism: *"There are still a lot of people living in poverty—not because they are lazy or stupid, and not because their countries lack resources. It's because their governments limit people's freedom or strip away individual freedom."* Despite pervasive authoritarianism, Schoolland conveyed resolve and optimism, emphasizing that individuals retain the power to think, create, and act, and urging participants to use their freedoms and work together toward a freer, more prosperous future. Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/BXlxjbSRely?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



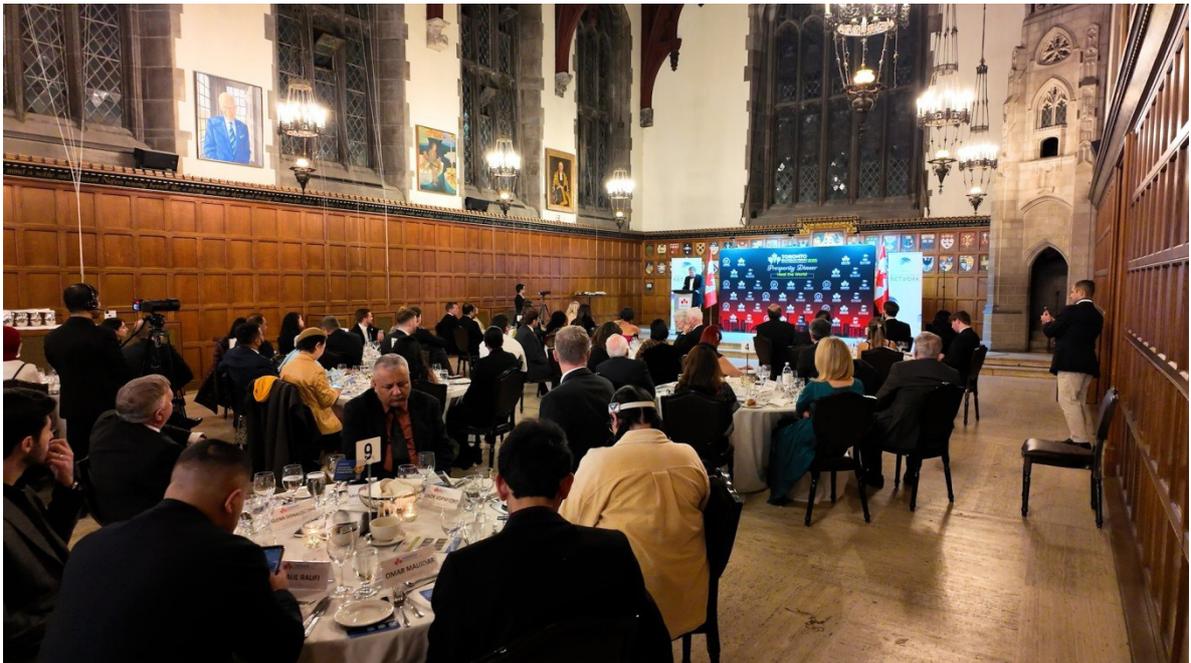
Keynote Address:

Brad Lips: “Human Rights and Freedom in 2025: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path to Healing the World.”

Brad Lips delivered the keynote address titled “Human Rights and Freedom in 2025: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path to Healing the World.” He examined the global state of freedom in 2025, emphasizing that the most dangerous forms of extremism today are not rooted in strong beliefs, but in movements that reject pluralism and suppress dissent. He underscored that those gathered shared a foundational commitment to human dignity, grounded in freedom of conscience and the protection of individual rights. Lips warned that although societies are more connected and capable than ever, confidence in liberal democracy is eroding, allowing illiberal regimes to present themselves as solutions while weakening institutional safeguards. He stressed that democratic legitimacy cannot be restored through rhetoric or short-term victories, saying that *“there’s no shortcut to building trust. It can only be rebuilt by doing the right thing over and over.”*



While condemning injustice remains essential, Lips argued that it must be paired with constructive institution-building. Drawing on nearly three decades at Atlas Network, he emphasized his belief that peace and prosperity emerge most reliably in free societies, and that expanding opportunity depends on improving the rules and institutional frameworks under which societies operate. He highlighted civil society, particularly independent think tanks as the most durable drivers of reform, often more effective than electoral strategies alone. He illustrated this through examples from India, Brazil, and Burundi, where regulatory reform, legal recognition, and simplified trade processes expanded opportunity, reduced corruption, and restored dignity, especially for women and small entrepreneurs.



Lips concluded by underscoring the link between powerlessness and radicalization, stating, *“Extremism thrives when people feel powerless. When people instead can start a business, speak their minds, and know how to hold officials accountable, they no longer seek salvation from opportunistic politicians at the expense of liberty”*. Ultimately, he reaffirmed that prosperity is not a luxury reserved for stable societies, but a direct outcome of freedom—and a foundation for healing divided societies.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/5siB9zRK1AA?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o

Key Highlights:

The Prosperity Dinner featured insightful discussions and strong messages from various voices, stressing unity, courage, and resilience. Key highlights included:

In Memoriam Tribute & Linda Whetstone Award for Freedom and Human Rights

Khalid Ramizy, CEO of WAEN, delivered an In Memoriam tribute honoring freedom activists who lost their lives resisting extremism and authoritarianism across Ukraine, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Africa, and beyond. He emphasized that the fight for liberty is lived daily by individuals who risk everything so others may live in dignity, stating that *“the struggle for freedom is not an abstract idea but a daily reality, defended by real people.”*



Mr. Ramizy paid special tribute to Linda Whetstone, whose lifelong commitment to advancing the values of a free society continues to inspire the global freedom movement. Reflecting on the enduring impact of those who have passed, he noted that although fallen activists are no longer physically present, *“their voices continue to echo through the movements they inspired, the lives they touched, and the hope they ignited in others.”* A moment of silence was observed in honor of Linda Whetstone and all freedom activists who lost their lives over the past year.

Ramizy presented the Linda Whetstone Award for Freedom and Human Rights, noting that 28 nominations from more than 10 countries were received in 2025. The award was bestowed upon Brad Lips, CEO of Atlas Network, in recognition of his leadership in supporting over 500 think tanks and civil society organizations across more than 100 countries.



Official Award Presentation

Khalid Ramizy invited Brad Lips to the stage to formally receive the Linda Whetstone Award for Freedom and Human Rights, presented by WAEN President Professor Ahrar Ramizpoor and WAEN Board Member Jonathan Berkshire Miller.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/XIWnOhGr-m4?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



Panel Discussion: Building Resilient Societies for a Freer World: Freedom, Democracy & Countering Oppression





The panel opened with framing remarks from the moderator, Jonathan Berkshire Miller, Principal of Pendulum Geopolitical Advisory, who identified three guiding themes for the discussion: resilience in the face of growing global and domestic pressure; individual agency and responsibility in defending freedom; and the search for lessons and sources of hope amid democratic backsliding worldwide. Panelists reflected on how authoritarianism, extremism, and institutional erosion manifest differently across regions, yet increasingly reinforce one another across borders.

Patrick Mardini:



President of the Lebanese Institute for Market Studies, spoke from his experience growing up in Lebanon, a country marked by sectarian divisions, weak institutions, and armed groups. He argued that economic freedom is a critical yet often overlooked tool for reducing extremism and conflict. Mardini emphasized that when people can own property, move freely, and participate in open markets, they gain a stake in stability, reducing the appeal of violence and radicalization. Turning to the Middle East, he highlighted how youth unemployment, government corruption, and state monopolies fuel despair and extremism. He pointed to recent geopolitical shifts following October 7, including the weakening of Iran’s regional proxies and new openings for political reform in Lebanon and Syria. Looking ahead, he stressed that reconstruction efforts must avoid empowering corrupt elites, calling instead for privatization, competition, transparency, and regional economic cooperation—particularly in energy, transportation, and telecommunications—to foster long-term peace and prosperity.

Andrea Prasow:



Executive Director of Freedom Now, traced her path from early human rights activism in Toronto to representing detainees at Guantanamo Bay and political prisoners worldwide. She described Freedom Now’s work defending prisoners of conscience—journalists, activists, and dissidents—across Eurasia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Prasow said that political imprisonment has ripple effects far beyond the individual, devastating families and communities and enabling transnational repression, as authoritarian states increasingly intimidate dissidents abroad. She warned that authoritarian regimes are actively sharing **“worst practices,”** including intelligence cooperation and surveillance technologies. While acknowledging the scale of repression, tens of thousands of political prisoners globally, she emphasized that meaningful change often begins with grassroots actors and civil society, supported by international advocacy. Prasow also raised alarm about shrinking funding for human rights organizations, noting that growing geopolitical realism has sidelined human rights concerns, even as global need continues to expand.

Joanna Baron:

Executive Director of the Canadian Constitution Foundation, focused on democratic backsliding at home. She argued that Canada has experienced a normalization of “soft authoritarianism” over the past five years, accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Baron cited sweeping public health measures, widespread judicial deference, and, most significantly, the 2022 invocation of the Emergencies Act, which froze bank accounts without warrants and restricted peaceful protest. She warned that such actions sent a powerful signal internationally, demonstrating how even established democracies can adopt authoritarian tools. Baron also expressed concern about recent legislative efforts affecting free expression, including proposed hate speech and online harms laws. At the same time, she defended the renewed use of the notwithstanding clause as a democratic corrective, arguing that it restores legislative accountability and prevents excessive judicial overreach. Despite rising polarization, she noted encouraging signs: increased public engagement, growing support for civil liberties organizations, and a more alert citizenry unwilling to accept emergency-style governance as normal.



Book Launch: The Stolen Republic: Untold Facts Behind the Collapse of Afghanistan's Last Republic and Book Signing



The Prosperity Dinner concluded with the official launch of *The Stolen Republic: Untold Facts Behind the Collapse of Afghanistan's Last Republic*, a new book by Khalid Ramizy, CEO of the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN). The discussion featured Dr. Hassan Abbas, Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the National Defense University; Janet Bufton, Co-Founder of the Institute for Liberal Studies and editor of the English edition; and the author himself.



Dr. Hassan Abbas framed the book as a rare and credible account of Afghanistan’s collapse, emphasizing its balance of personal narrative and scholarly rigor. He highlighted that the book refuses one-sided explanations, noting that Ramizy “condemns the Taliban’s brutality while also confronting corruption and abuse of power within the former Republic,” a balance Abbas underscored as essential to intellectual honesty and credibility.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/hLDN6A6N_bc?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvD28g_o



Building on this analytical foundation, Janet Bufton reflected on the book from her direct involvement as editor of the English edition. She described *The Stolen Republic* as a work shaped by both loss and discipline; one that explains not only how Afghanistan’s democracy collapsed, but why it failed despite public support. Emphasizing the book’s relevance beyond Afghanistan, she remarked that “*those of us who live in established democracies need people like Khalid on our side,*” highlighting its warning against complacency and its call for vigilance in defending liberal democracy.

Khalid Ramizy described the launch of *The Stolen Republic* as a deeply emotional moment, noting that the book represents a wound still carried by millions of Afghans. He began writing it after being forced into exile following the Taliban’s return in August 2021. He explained that the book was written out of responsibility to preserve truth at a moment when history risked being rewritten. *The Stolen Republic* combines Ramizy’s personal journey as a freedom activist with media analysis, interviews with regional and international scholars, and perspectives from Afghan citizens collected through questionnaires, offering a comparative analysis of the Republic’s collapse and concluding with lessons and recommendations for Afghans and the international community. Ramizy acknowledged that writing the book was both painful and healing, reaffirming that “*although the Republic was stolen, the spirit of the Afghan people was not.*” He emphasized that the book preserves the voices of those who resisted extremism and authoritarianism, whose sacrifices must not be forgotten. He expressed gratitude to the World Anti-Extremism Network for publishing the book in English, Farsi, and Pashto, the National Endowment for Democracy for its support, and those who contributed to the research,

translation, and editing, including Professor Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, Janet Bufton, and his team. Concluding his remarks, Ramizy said that launching the book at the Toronto Democracy Forum, alongside advocates from more than 20 countries, renewed his hope that Afghanistan is not forgotten and that the struggle for freedom continues.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/qOe9dA2jA4?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



Book Signing with Author of The Stolen Republic & Closing of the Evening

Before concluding Day 1 of the Toronto Democracy Forum, the evening ended with a book signing by the author, Mr. Ramizy, offering participants a final opportunity to engage in conversation, ask questions, and take home a signed copy of The Stolen Republic.

The session fostered meaningful one-on-one exchanges, allowing attendees to reflect more deeply on the themes discussed throughout the day.

Author Khalid Ramizy
This book is my contribution to truth.

It is my tribute to every Afghan who suffered.



DAY 2: Toronto Democracy Forum

The second day of the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 opened with remarks by Prof. Ahrar Ramizpoor, President of the World Anti-Extremism Network (WAEN), who framed the Forum as a space for turning analysis into collective action. Ramizpoor highlighted WAEN's work in research, advocacy, and education, while warning that democratic decline is accelerating worldwide: over 70 percent of the global population now lives under autocratic rule, liberal democracies are shrinking, and 2025 marks the 19th consecutive year of democratic backsliding. He underscored the human cost behind these trends—*“a silenced journalist, a dismissed judge, a beaten protester, a classroom emptied of girls.”* Ramizpoor observed that today's authoritarianism relies less on open force than on manipulated laws, politicized courts, censored media, and digital tools, including AI. He concluded by urging deeper understanding, cross-border cooperation, and partnerships, calling on participants to *“build the alliances necessary to confront the challenges of our time.”*

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/uHb3MHnesc?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



Keynote Speeches

Shikha Dalmia: *“Defending Democracy by Resisting the New Threats of Global Authoritarianism”*



In her keynote address, Shikha Dalmia, President of the Institute for the Study of Modern Authoritarianism (ISMA), examined the accelerating global crisis of liberal democracy, placing today's democratic backsliding within a longer historical arc. She highlighted liberal democracy's achievements over the past 250 years, arguing that its commitments to reason, pluralism, individual liberty, free markets, and rule-based governance have delivered unprecedented peace, prosperity, and moral progress. Drawing on India's experience, she noted how liberal democratic reforms lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, allowing liberal democracy to outperform socialism and communism in the twentieth century.

Despite these successes, Dalmia warned that the world has entered a prolonged period of democratic decline. Citing scholars such as Francis Fukuyama and Larry Diamond, she noted that since around 2008 the global system has been in a "democratic slump." She traced this erosion from the stalled Arab Spring and Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power in Russia, to persistent autocracy in Latin America, China's reversal of political liberalization, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's democratic institutions. Most concerning, she stressed, is that democratic backsliding now affects long-established democracies once thought institutionally secure.



Dalmia argued that today's authoritarianism increasingly emerges from within democratic systems. She pointed to Hindu nationalism in India, white religious nationalism and post-liberal movements in the United States, and similar trends in Hungary, Israel, Brazil, and the Philippines, where leaders claim to represent a singular "real people" against internal enemies and cultural elites. Unlike twentieth-century authoritarian movements, she noted, today's leaders claim to embody a truer form of democracy, recasting pluralism and tolerance as weaknesses. She explained that modern authoritarians often rise through elections, then entrench power by capturing institutions and manipulating laws and media, preserving elections only for legitimacy. Yet she also highlighted civic pushback in the United States, where grassroots organizing and state-level leadership show how peaceful resistance can reclaim moral authority.

Addressing Canada, Dalmia cautioned that no democracy is immune. While Canada has not yet faced severe strain, she warned that rising populism and anti-immigrant rhetoric must be confronted early. She concluded by calling for a broad, cross-ideological coalition to defend liberal democracy, stressing that institutions endure only with sustained civic engagement and cultural commitment. As she concluded: *"Liberal democracy is not self-executing. It survives because citizens choose to defend it, because they insist on living in a society where differences are resolved through persuasion, not coercion, where no group claims a monopoly on the nation, where freedom is understood not as domination, but as non-interference."*

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/KhxwFRFE8cM?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o

Brian Lee Crowley: “Can Nice Canada Make It in a Nasty World? Surviving Great Power Jockeying, Foreign Interference and Unscrupulous Authoritarians”



Brian Lee Crowley, Founder and Managing Director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, argued that Canada is already enmeshed in **“Cold War Mark II”**—a renewed confrontation between liberal democracies and authoritarian powers led by China and Russia, alongside radical Islamist networks. He stressed that foreign interference in Canada is systemic, aimed at weakening Western societies by eroding confidence in democratic institutions, shared history, and moral legitimacy. As he warned, *“Their object is nothing less than to cause us to lose faith in ourselves and in the society we have built.”*

Crowley recalled that the original Cold War effectively began in Ottawa in 1945 with Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko, whose revelations exposed extensive espionage networks and showed how unprepared **“nice Canadians”** were to recognize hidden hostility. Today, Crowley argued, authoritarians exploit democratic openness not through overt force, but through disinformation, covert influence, transnational repression, and economic coercion. He cited Russia’s AI-amplified propaganda campaigns, detailed in the FBI’s 2024 Doppelganger affidavit, which documented the use of more than 3,000 influencers to inflame polarizing issues tied to Russian interests.

He then turned to China’s interference operations, describing intimidation of diaspora communities, media infiltration, and manipulation of democratic processes. Crowley cited threats against MP Michael Chong’s family, the detention of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, and the presence of “overseas police service centres” in Toronto—documented by Safeguard Defenders—which he characterized as direct violations of Canadian sovereignty.

Crowley warned that universities and research institutions are especially vulnerable targets, referencing cases involving the National Microbiology Laboratory and partnerships with Chinese state-controlled laboratories that risk the transfer of sensitive research. He emphasized that such collaborations differ fundamentally from academic partnerships in democracies, cautioning that *“our adversaries understand that Western undeniable military superiority is meaningless if we lack the political resolve to use it—if we believe there is no moral difference between free democracies and authoritarian despotisms.”*



Crowley also warned of the threat posed by radical Islam and Muslim Brotherhood–aligned networks, arguing that Islamist **“entryism”** into Canadian institutions long predates October 7. He pointed to CRA terror-financing investigations, public eulogies for Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Canadian mosques, Islamist indoctrination in Quebec and Ontario schools, and a publicly funded Toronto Metropolitan University paper questioning Canada’s terrorist designations of Hamas, Hezbollah, and ISIS. Together, he argued, these reflect a strategy to **“use democracy to destroy democracy”** through lawfare, electoral pressure, and bureaucratic capture.

Crowley argued that persistent foreign interference demands an urgent, whole-of-democracy response, including a foreign agents registry with real enforcement powers and stricter limits on foreign-linked payments to officials. He emphasized strengthening intelligence and law-enforcement capacity to counter disinformation and covert influence, while coordinating deterrence measures with democratic allies. He concluded by urging Canada to recommit firmly to the Western alliance—particularly Five Eyes, NATO, and its partnership with the United States—warning that economic engagement with authoritarian regimes cannot substitute for security.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/mdXfl2NkRjA?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o

Sheryl Saperia: *Mobilizing the Middle: Empowering Canadians to Counter Extremism*



In her keynote address, Sheryl Saperia warned that Canada's reputation as a safe, tolerant, and orderly society is increasingly strained by complacency in the face of rising extremism. She argued that polarization, intimidation, and the normalization of radical narratives are weakening the civic norms that sustain liberal democracy, stressing that Canada is not immune to religious radicalism, imported sectarianism, conspiracy driven movements, or ideological extremes. Saperia identified the resurgence of antisemitism as a critical stress test for democratic values, noting that when harassment and intimidation are tolerated under the banner of activism, the equal protection at the heart of democracy begins to erode. As she said: *"Canada likes to see itself as safe, tolerant and polite. That reputation is not undeserved. But tolerance without conviction can slide into complacency, and complacency is fertile ground for extremists who are louder, more disciplined and far more willing to sacrifice."* Saperia emphasized that today's threats to democracy rarely appear as open violence, but unfold through intimidation, imported ideologies, and the normalization of grievance politics in schools, public spaces, and online life. She pointed to masked intimidation outside schools and synagogues, harassment near hospitals, and doxing campaigns as behaviors that often already breach Canadian law, yet persist due to inconsistent enforcement. She also warned against the misuse of moral language, citing the inflation of terms such as genocide, fascist, and Nazi in ways that collapse moral boundaries and escalate conflict rather than clarify it.

A central theme of Saperia's remarks was the need to mobilize the middle; ordinary Canadians who value decency, civility, and freedom but too often remain silent. She called for stronger civic literacy, urging Canadians to understand democracy versus authoritarianism, how institutions

protect rights, and why liberty, pluralism, and minority protections matter. She warned that focusing education only on past failures, without recognizing democratic achievements, can foster cynicism instead of active citizenship. Saperia urged governments to support democratic resilience, not divisive actors, stressing that Canada's civil resistance relies on civic courage, moral clarity, and defending democratic norms without confrontation.



Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/JLz1O8EqgNc?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o

A comprehensive overview of WAEN's initiatives and achievements in 2025, presented by Khalid Ramizy, CEO of WAEN

Khalid Ramizy, CEO of WAEN, provided an overview of the organization's initiatives and achievements in countering extremism and authoritarianism in 2025. He underscored that WAEN's work is shaped by the lived experiences of those who have survived extremism and authoritarian rule, noting that, *"As survivors of extremism and authoritarianism, we understand exactly how to confront these threats."* Reflecting on WAEN's rapid growth, Ramizy noted that over the past two years the organization has reached more than 1.2 million individuals worldwide through its educational, research, and advocacy initiatives. He highlighted the expansion of the Toronto Democracy Forum into an annual global platform, bringing together more than 120 scholars and activists from over 20 countries in 2025. Ramizy also pointed to the continued impact of WAEN's International Human Rights Certificate for Young Leaders, which has empowered over 600 young people from more than 20 countries, as well as the growing reach of Uncensored Watch, now read by over 50,000 people monthly. He further pointed out the expansion of WAEN's global ambassador network to 73 ambassadors across 36 countries, and reaffirmed the organization's commitment to strengthening democratic values, supporting grassroots leaders, and building sustained international collaboration to resist extremism and authoritarianism.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/kShEbyGXgz8?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



Panel Discussion: Healing the World from Religious Extremism and Dictatorships — Practical Strategies for Action

The panel opened with framing remarks from the moderator, Hunter Rauch, Associate Director of Network Outreach at the Atlas Network, who emphasized the need to move beyond diagnosis toward practical solutions and outcomes. He framed the discussion around identifying the most urgent threats to democratic resilience, particularly religious extremism, authoritarianism, and criminal networks, and challenged panelists to translate analysis into actionable legal, civic, and institutional responses. Panelists examined how these threats manifest differently across regions, yet increasingly reinforce one another across borders.



Nathan Mech:

Nathan Mech, Founding Director of the Collins Center for Abrahamic Heritage, addressed the challenge of defining and responding to religious extremism without eroding freedom of belief or human dignity. He identified three recurring harms produced by religious extremism: intolerance, coercion, and inequality—and warned that aggressive secularism can generate the same outcomes by marginalizing moderate religious expression. Drawing on the ethical teachings of the Torah, New Testament, and Qur'an, Mech argued that religious moderation offers a principled middle ground that preserves human dignity while retaining religion's positive social functions, including community formation, moral responsibility, charity, and virtue. He emphasized that democratic societies must resist both religious extremism and anti-religious prejudice to avoid deepening social division.

Peter Copeland:

Peter Copeland, Deputy Director of Domestic Policy at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, examined pressures on democratic resilience in Western liberal democracies, with particular reference to Canada and Brazil. He argued, contrary to many global threat narratives, that the most urgent danger in these societies comes from within: an overemphasis on radical openness, procedural neutrality, and hyper-individualism, which has weakened social cohesion and opened space for destabilizing forms of populism. Copeland critiqued the reliance on technocratic indicators such as GDP and living standards as sole measures of success, pointing instead to findings from the Global Flourishing Study, which link well-being to stable relationships, family life, religious belief, and shared moral frameworks. He warned that neglecting these deeper foundations contributes to demographic decline, social fragmentation, and long-term democratic vulnerability, and cautioned that multiculturalism without integration—where diversity is emphasized without shared norms, fails to produce social unity.

Sarah Teich:

Sarah Teich, President of the Human Rights Action Group, identified three interrelated challenges confronting democracies: the lack of conceptual clarity around authoritarianism and extremism, the growing coordination among authoritarian regimes and non-state actors, and the rise of transnational repression. She cited the absence of peaceful transitions of power as a key indicator of authoritarian rule, noting that regimes such as Russia, Iran, and China often maintain the appearance of legality through elections or trials. Teich highlighted enforcement gaps created by authoritarian cooperation, referencing cases involving Russia Today broadcasts via Cuban state media—and stressed that foreign interference increasingly targets individuals, particularly refugees and diaspora communities. She emphasized the need to use domestic and international legal tools, including targeted sanctions, civil litigation, criminal prosecutions, and universal jurisdiction, in a consistent and principled manner.

Alessa Polga:

Alessa Polga, **Toronto Chapter Director of the Ladies of Liberty Alliance (LOLA)**, drew on Venezuela's experience under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro to illustrate how authoritarian regimes dismantle democracy incrementally. She described constitutional manipulation, widespread media closures, and judicial intimidation—most notably the imprisonment of Judge María Lourdes Afiuni for enforcing the law—as well as the systematic erosion of free expression and separation of powers. Polga argued that contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly operate as adaptive transnational criminal enterprises, exploiting immigration systems and international humanitarian frameworks to expand influence. She warned that the Venezuelan state has issued Venezuelan passports to Iranian, Hezbollah, and other foreign operatives, enabling them to conceal identities and exploit asylum processes, and stressed that inadequate background screening and enforcement expose democratic countries to long-term security risks.

Stefano Frontini

Stefano Frontini, **President of The Institute for the Formation of Leaders IFL Toronto**, addressed democratic vulnerability through the lens of a growing cultural crisis, drawing on developments in Brazil. He argued that many societies no longer have a clear understanding of their cultural values and principles, weakening their ability to defend democratic norms. Frontini emphasized that in an environment of overwhelming information, populations face two compounding challenges: a lack of emotional intelligence and a weakened ability to communicate, leaving citizens more fragile and susceptible to influence. He pointed to concrete warning signs in Brazil, including the blocking of hundreds of social media influencer accounts ahead of the 2022 elections, the temporary shutdown of the X (formerly Twitter) platform, and the expanding power exercised by a small number of unelected Supreme Court justices over public discourse. He warned that when cultural grounding and communication breakdown, citizens increasingly self-censor and disengage, creating conditions that authoritarian actors can exploit.

Practical Actions suggested by the Panelists:

Consistent Enforcement of Existing Laws

Domestic and international laws should be applied uniformly, regardless of which country is responsible for abuses. Targeted sanctions, criminal prosecutions, civil litigation, and universal jurisdiction mechanisms should be used where available. Legal tools should be applied in a victim-centered manner, with the purpose of protection rather than retaliation.

Cross-Sector Cooperation Against Authoritarian and Extremist Networks

Active cooperation should be built across civil society organizations, religious communities, advocacy groups, and political lines. Coordinated responses are necessary to counter authoritarian and extremist actors that already operate transnationally and collaboratively.

Clear Identification of Authoritarian and Extremist Threats

Authoritarian regimes, criminal networks, and extremist actors should be explicitly identified and named. Response strategies should be developed only after the nature of the threat has been clearly defined.

Strengthening Immigration and Asylum Security Screening

Ms. Polga said background checks should be conducted for individuals entering through immigration and asylum systems. Humanitarian pathways should be protected from exploitation by foreign operatives using falsified or state-issued passports.

Promotion of Religious Moderation

Moderate religious interpretations should be actively supported within faith traditions. Both religious extremism and aggressive secularism that promote intolerance, exclusion, or inequality should be countered. The social benefits of religion should be preserved while rejecting coercive or extremist expressions.

Reintroducing Moral and Philosophical Discourse into Public Life

Mr. Copeland said that democratic politics should move beyond procedural neutrality to allow substantive moral, philosophical, and religious discussion. Questions of the common good should be openly addressed as part of democratic decision-making.

Reforming Civic and Values-Based Education

Education systems should be strengthened to teach democratic values, principles, and freedoms. Civic education should begin within families and be reinforced through formal education. Exposure to democratic values should occur earlier in life rather than being delayed until adulthood.



Lecture Series: Countering Extremism and Authoritarianism

A. Dr. Eric Merkley:

Dr. Eric Merkley, Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto delivered a lecture titled ***“Bridging Divides: Countering Polarization to Strengthen Democracy and Civil Resistance”*** emphasizing that polarization is a multidimensional phenomenon and should not be treated as a single or uniform condition. He explained that his primary concern is affective polarization, defined as growing emotional hostility toward political opponents alongside increased warmth toward one’s own party. Drawing on longitudinal public opinion data measured through a feeling thermometer scale from 0 to 100, Dr. Merkley showed that since 1988, Canadians have experienced a 13-point increase in warmth toward their own political parties, alongside a much sharper decline in warmth toward political opponents. Taken together, he noted that affective

polarization in Canada has increased by nearly 130 percent since 1988, placing Canada roughly where the United States stood between 2012 and 2014. He stressed why this form of polarization matters for democracy, stating: *“Most simply, it is a state where society is increasingly divided into politically competing camps. And we start to think of ourselves in terms of us and them.”* Dr. Merkley explained that affective polarization reshapes how citizens process information and relate to one another. Polarized individuals are more likely to



engage in motivated reasoning, seek out information that reinforces existing beliefs, and reject inconvenient facts without deliberation. He also described the rise of political homophily, where citizens increasingly form social networks only with like-minded individuals, reinforcing stereotypes and exaggerations about political opponents. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study, he illustrated the real-world consequences of polarization, showing that partisan identity shaped attitudes toward masking, vaccination, and government restrictions. He explained that individuals who entered the pandemic with higher partisan hostility were more likely to adopt polarized behaviors, weakening collective responses to public health challenges.

Dr. Merkley further warned that polarization increases tolerance for anti-democratic behavior. Citing Canadian survey data, he noted that 42 percent of respondents would accept a prime minister from their own party refusing to resign after an election defeat, compared to 18 percent if the same behavior were committed by an opposing party. Among highly polarized individuals, this figure rose to 64 percent. Turning to solutions, Dr. Merkley discussed evidence-based strategies to reduce hostility, including correcting exaggerated perceptions of polarization, encouraging carefully structured cross-partisan discussions, and promoting perspective-taking to humanize political opponents. He emphasized, however, that polarization is structural, shaped by institutional incentives, elite behavior, campaign finance dynamics, and a media environment increasingly driven by sensationalism following the decline of local news.

Merkley concluded by cautioning that not all polarization is inherently harmful. Clear ideological choices can mobilize participation and strengthen democratic accountability. The challenge, he argued, is to limit forms of polarization that erode democratic norms while reinforcing citizens' ability to recognize and resist anti-democratic behavior, particularly in periods of democratic stress and backsliding.



Question and Answer Session with Dr. Merkle

Media and Polarization

One participant asked whether Dr. Merkle's discussion of the media environment implied that independent media were being equated with extremism. He clarified that this was not the case, emphasizing that independent media should not be conflated with extremist content. Rather, his concern centered on the expanded choice enabled by digital platforms, which allows citizens to gravitate toward partisan and ideological outlets that reinforce existing beliefs, intensifying polarization.



Democratic Norm Violations and Civic Education:

Another participant Arif Nizami from Bangladesh asked whether certain groups are more likely to tolerate democratic norm violations and how such tendencies can be addressed. Dr. Merkle responded that tolerance closely correlates with polarization, noting that older, highly politically engaged, and strongly partisan individuals are more likely to excuse such violations. He explained that addressing this challenge is difficult because many citizens struggle to recognize norm violations, reflecting gaps in civic education and early democratic socialization that leave institutions vulnerable to exploitation.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/Prbj3wUEe0?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



B. Prof. Ken Schoolland



Prof. Ken Schoolland, Associate Professor of Economics at Hawaii Pacific University and Member of WAEN’s Advisory Council, presented his lecture on **“The Hidden Weapon of Freedom: How Economic Empowerment & Freedom Defeats Extremism & Authoritarianism.”** He argued that economic freedom is one of the most effective and underestimated tools for resisting extremism and authoritarianism. Grounding his analysis in the Fraser Institute’s Economic Freedom of the World Index, he highlighted key pillars such as secure property rights, fiscal responsibility, sound money, openness to trade, and limits on excessive regulation. He emphasized that in much of the developing world, the absence of legal title and contract security leaves people vulnerable to coercion, corruption, and state abuse—conditions that authoritarian systems routinely exploit. He said, *“The importance of property rights is something that we maybe take for granted, mostly in developed economies, but for most of the third world, there is no such thing as title to the property.”* To illustrate this dynamic, Prof. Schoolland presented a case study from Gujarat, India, where tribal communities living within a national park were displaced under colonial-era land laws and denied the right to build homes, farm, or raise cattle, and were sometimes subjected to forced labor. With the support of lawyer Judy Maida and engineer Andre Shimada, villagers used GPS devices and Google Maps to document generations of land use, enabling them to secure legal title under state law. This shift transformed not only livelihoods but social standing, allowing communities to plan collectively, access markets, educate their children, and engage authorities as equal citizens rather than subjects.



Prof. Schoolland then situated economic freedom within a broader historical and moral context, citing postwar West Germany under Ludwig Erhard as a pivotal example of how market liberalization helped rebuild prosperity and democratic legitimacy after totalitarian collapse. He pointed to similar patterns in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Chile, where varying degrees of economic reform weakened authoritarian control by reducing dependency and expanding citizen choice. While acknowledging that economic growth can be manipulated by authoritarian regimes, he emphasized that sustained resistance to extremism ultimately depends on economic empowerment that restores dignity, agency, and the capacity of individuals to participate as equals in democratic life.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/bCtIzApv5SY?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwwhvyD28g_o

C. Dr. Hassan Abbas



Dr. Hassan Abbas, Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the National Defense University and WAEN Board Member, concluded the lecture series with a presentation titled ***“Faith, Freedom, and Justice: Islamic Approaches to Countering Extremism and Authoritarianism.”*** He challenged the assumption that extremism and authoritarianism can only be addressed through secular frameworks, arguing instead for the strategic use of Islamic theological, historical, and political traditions as credible internal resources for resistance. Drawing on Islamic theology, Dr. Abbas emphasized the Quranic principle that *“there is no compulsion in religion”* as a foundational rejection of authoritarianism within Islam. He reinforced this argument through specific historical examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad, including cases in which verbal provocation and dissent were met with restraint rather than punishment, illustrating traditions of tolerance and non-coercion. These examples, he argued, stand in direct contradiction to contemporary practices such as blasphemy laws and religious coercion employed by extremist and authoritarian actors.



Situating these principles in a contemporary context, Dr. Abbas highlighted Muslim-led, consensus-based initiatives including the Amman Message (2004), the Marrakesh Declaration, and the Tashkent Declaration, presenting these as practical, faith-grounded responses developed by scholars across Islamic traditions rather than externally imposed frameworks. He noted that these initiatives brought together Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and other schools of thought, affirming pluralism, restricting the misuse of religious edicts, rejecting takfir, and emphasizing equal rights rather than mere tolerance for religious minorities. Dr. Abbas stressed that such efforts demonstrate how internally rooted religious authority and historical legitimacy can be mobilized to counter extremist and authoritarian narratives more effectively than single-dimension approaches. Turning to policy and practice, he emphasized empowerment over externally engineered counter-extremism models, stating: *“You don’t have to choreograph and create new people. You have to make an extra effort to find people who are on the ground making and challenging extremists and empower them.”* He further highlighted the importance of investing in education, protecting intellectual freedom, supporting independent scholarship,

and engaging, even with hardline actors—as practical tools for challenging extremist narratives and building sustainable, internally rooted resistance to authoritarianism.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/2XqiH3HULMk?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvYD28g_o

Research Paper Presentations

A signature feature of Day 2 and the core highlight of the 2025 Toronto Democracy Forum was the presentation of original research papers developed under WAEN's Call for Abstracts on "Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism." This year's Forum introduced a distinctive research model, bringing together scholars and practitioners from diverse regions, including South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Uyghur diaspora, to share cutting-edge research grounded in lived experience and fieldwork.

Participants were divided into two groups of six and five researchers each, allowing for focused presentation sessions followed by in-depth discussion. This format distinguished the 2025 Forum from previous editions by prioritizing direct scholarly exchange and collaborative reflection.

Group A : research presentations featured papers examining authoritarianism, civil resistance, and democratic challenges across global contexts, including the Uyghur struggle, digital dissent in Pakistan, transnational repression, and theoretical debates on civil obedience and democratic resilience.

- **Dolkun Isa**—President, Uyghur Center for Democracy and Human Rights (Germany) "The Global Challenge of Authoritarianism (China) and the Plight of the Uyghurs: An Urgent Call for International Solidarity"
- **Owen Lippert** — Executive Director, Opposition international (Canada) "The Return of the Opposition: Civil Resistance Against Authoritarianism in the 21st Century"
- **Mehmet Tohti**—Executive Director, Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project (Canada) "Transnational Repression and Uyghur Advocacy: Nonviolent Resistance Against Authoritarian Narratives"
- **Dr. Waqasia Naeem** — Associate Professor, Minhaj University Lahore (Pakistan) "Symbolic Dissent in the Digital Age: Multimodal Resistance to Authoritarianism in Pakistan"
- **Clyde Ray** — Assistant Professor, Holy Cross College in Notre Dame (USA) "Daniel Berrigan and the Problem of Civil Obedience"
- **Dr. Fereydoon Rahmani** — Associate Professor, Department of Equity Studies, York University (Iran, Canada) "Despotic Robustness and Social Movement Incapacitation in the Middle East"



Group B : research presentations explored themes such as youth-led democratic renewal, nonviolent religious resistance, civil courage, pedagogical responses to radicalization, and national strategies for countering violent extremism.

- **Arif Nezami** — Preneur Lab Youth & Innovation Trust (Bangladesh) “Youth-Led Democratic Renewal in Post-Uprising Bangladesh”
- **Prof. Mustapha Radji** — University of Mostaganem (Algeria) “Sufi Waqf as Non-Violent Structure of Resistance and Peacebuilding: The Case of Sufi Communities in Algeria”
- **Muhammad Anwar** —CEO, Freedom Gate Prosperity (Pakistan) “Civil Courage in Pakistan: Nonviolent Resistance to Authoritarian and Religious Power”
- **Dr. Mohamed Baderine Tachouche**—Lecturer, Anglo-American University Prague (Czech Republic) & Dr. Vaclava Tlili — Lecturer, University of West Bohemia (Czech Republic) “Traditional Islam Facing Radical Islam: Pedagogical and Ethical Practices in Souss Fiqh Madrasas”
- **Dr. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi** — Professor, University of Peshawar (Pakistan) “Pakistan’s National Action Plan to Counter Violent Extremism: Incorporating Community Resilience”





Concurrent Breakout Sessions: Group Working Discussions

Following the research presentations, participants transitioned into two concurrent breakout sessions, designed to deepen engagement with the research findings and translate scholarly insights into focused discussion and collective reflection. Participants were invited to engage directly with the authors, examine the papers in detail, and collaboratively explore practical policy ideas, proposed solutions, and actionable recommendations emerging from the research.

Participants were divided into **two groups**, and assigned to separate rooms with designated moderators.



Group A: Facilitated by **Janet Bufton**, convened under the theme “Defending Liberal Democracy: Canada and the World.” The discussion centered on the guiding question: *What key principles and actions are needed to strengthen and defend liberal democracy amid growing global challenges and the rise of artificial intelligence?*

Group B: Moderated by **Maria Alejandra Guardado**, focused on theme “Countering Religious Radicalism and Authoritarianism.” The group addressed the question:

What practical strategies and forms of civil resistance can help societies counter extremism and authoritarianism and build a more peaceful and free world?

Tyler Raymond and Liz Galvin were selected as the representatives for Groups A and B, respectively. They were tasked with consolidating their groups’ discussions, synthesizing key insights, proposed solutions, and action priorities, and presenting their findings during the final wrap-up plenary session.

Group A: Key Findings and Recommendations

Question: *What key principles and actions are needed to strengthen and defend liberal democracy amid growing global challenges and the rise of artificial intelligence?*

During the working session, Group A’s discussion and recommendations were synthesized by **Tyler Raymond** around three core pillars identified as essential to defending liberal democracy in an era of artificial intelligence and global democratic erosion: diligence, education, and authenticity.



1. Diligence — Sustaining Democratic Vigilance

- Artificial intelligence does not introduce entirely new democratic threats; rather, it accelerates and amplifies existing challenges, including misinformation, polarization, and state overreach.
- Democratic erosion often occurs gradually, making constant civic vigilance essential in an era of rapid technological change.
- Governments frequently lag behind technological innovation, creating risks of reactive, opaque, or overly restrictive regulation once harms are already entrenched.
- Participants emphasized the responsibility of citizens, civil society, and democratic institutions to remain informed, skeptical, and engaged, rather than relying on technological or institutional safeguards alone.
- In authoritarian contexts, AI can intensify censorship and surveillance, reinforcing the need for open access, innovation, and transnational cooperation to stay ahead of repression.

2. Education — Building Democratic and AI Literacy

- AI literacy should be treated as a core democratic competency, not merely a technical skill.
- Participants stressed that AI must be used as a tool to support critical thinking, not replace it; uncritical reliance weakens individual agency and judgment.
- Educational efforts should focus on:
 - Understanding different types of AI and their limitations,
 - Verifying sources and recognizing AI-generated misinformation, and
 - Treating AI outputs as provisional and subject to human review.
- Fear-based approaches, bans, or blanket prohibitions were seen as ineffective; instead, integration with clear ethical guidance is necessary.
- Education must extend across generations, addressing both digitally native users and older populations who may be more vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation.

3. Authenticity — Preserving Human Judgment and Democratic Trust

- Democratic legitimacy depends on human accountability, which cannot be delegated to opaque or unaccountable AI systems.
- Participants expressed concern about the erosion of trust when citizens cannot distinguish between authentic human communication and AI-generated content.
- AI should not replace deliberation, debate, or moral responsibility in political or civic decision-making.
- Transparency around data sources, training models, and content generation was identified as essential to maintaining public trust.
- At the same time, participants recognized that responsibly used AI can strengthen democratic resilience, particularly for journalists, researchers, activists, and civil society actors working under authoritarian regimes.
- Authenticity requires reaffirming the central role of human judgment, ethical reasoning, and lived experience in democratic life.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/5yMV5qEahZs?list=PL9CCExGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o





Group B: Key Findings and Recommendations

Question: What practical strategies and forms of civil resistance can help societies counter extremism and authoritarianism and build a more peaceful and free world?

During the working session, Group B's recommendations were presented by Liz Galvin and focused on practical strategies to counter extremism and authoritarianism through security, prosperity, education, and core democratic freedoms.



1. Law & Order

To re-establish the State's fundamental job, which is to ensure personal safety for all residents and to keep communities crime-free. This includes developing clear digital strategies to counter online radicalization, recruitment, and training by extremist groups, recognizing that many extremist networks now operate primarily through digital platforms.

2. Economic Prosperity

To encourage business development and growth to ensure economic stability for all citizens, especially for young people, so that they don't become despondent and become radicalized or turn to crime.

3. Freedom of the Press

The fundamental job of journalists is to hold elected officials to account by scrutinizing their work and actions. News reports by journalists should be unbiased and fact-based.

4. Freedom of Speech

The state must ensure that citizens are free to voice their opinions, including criticism of the government, without fear of repercussions. At the same time, speech that is particularly hateful or that incites violence cannot be tolerated in a civil society. Protecting free speech was seen as essential to preventing extremism, as suppressing lawful expression can drive grievances underground and intensify radicalization.

5. Education

a) Core Academic Foundations and Inclusive Access

The state must provide the best possible education for all young people up to age 18, in the most cost-efficient manner possible. Elementary education must include a focus on the basics i.e. reading, writing and math, science, geography, history, languages and also include art, music, sports and basic health education. Programs must be made available for diverse or special needs learners, so that all children can find their skills and talents and strive to be the best they can be.

b) Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving, and Teamwork

Education should develop young people's critical-thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, and encourage students to strive for excellence.

c) Debate, Dialogue, and Civil Disagreement

The art of the debate, and also public speaking, should be part of the curriculum every year so that young people learn to have civil dialogue, listen to other voices and develop confidence. Participants stressed the importance of structured debates and cooperative problem-solving activities that intentionally mix students beyond their usual social circles, helping them learn respectful disagreement and collaboration.

d) Arts, Sports, and Protection Against Radicalization

Access to sports, arts, and music was highlighted as particularly important in reducing idle time that can leave young people vulnerable to online radicalization, while also fostering teamwork, discipline, and creative expression.

e) Equality of Opportunity and Educational Neutrality

Equality of opportunity must be available to all young people, without discrimination, and teaching should not include political ideologies that divide, confuse, or encourage anti-social behavior.

f) Talent Development and Social Contribution

Education must help young people find their unique skills and talents so that they can be responsible adults who will contribute positively to a thriving society.

g) Shared Responsibility Beyond the State

Parents cannot depend solely on the state to educate their children and must take responsibility to teach their children all that they can, to ensure their children are well equipped to face the challenges of the world.

6. Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Assembly

With these freedoms also comes responsibility—the responsibility not to infringe on others' right to peace and safety in their community.

Community-level initiatives that bring people together across differences—such as local problem-solving activities, civic events, and cultural exchanges—were identified as practical ways to strengthen social cohesion and reduce polarization.

7. Define National Values

And teach those values and culture to all newcomers so that they assimilate into their new home, to create a harmonious, respectful and tolerant society.

Participants emphasized the importance of clearly articulating shared national values, focusing on commonalities rather than differences, and ensuring newcomers are meaningfully introduced to the culture, history, and civic traditions of their new country. Public awareness campaigns and civic education initiatives were suggested as accessible ways to reinforce these values across society.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/m7dYjw7k6lo?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



These recommendations reflect the views and perspectives expressed by participants within the respective working group discussions. They do not necessarily represent the institutional positions, policies, or endorsements of WAEN. The recommendations are presented to capture the diversity of viewpoints shared during the forum and to inform broader reflection and dialogue.

Conclusion:

At the end of the Forum, **Li Schoolland**, Chair of the Board at WAEN, delivered closing remarks, expressing gratitude to participants for investing their time in the Forum. Drawing on her experience as a survivor of communist China, she reflected on the meaning and fragility of freedom and emphasized the importance of individual liberty, freedom of speech, and personal responsibility. She urged participants to focus not only on what they oppose, but on actively practicing and defending freedom in their own lives, rejecting fear and victimhood, and empowering themselves and others to act as agents of change.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/Kx_yyWVv7vw?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



Jonathan Berkshire Miller, Principal at Pendulum Geopolitical Advisory, Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and WAEN Board Member, reinforced these reflections by emphasizing that the Forum represents an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. He highlighted the importance of resilience, individual agency, and hope in confronting authoritarianism and extremism, and encouraged participants to remain engaged with WAEN as part of a broader community committed to sustained collaboration and democratic renewal.

Watch the full speech video by clicking the below link:

https://youtu.be/TvRONJ4VfAs?list=PL9CCEXGnoMPNiwamp_v4H8wwhvyD28g_o



The Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 brought together a diverse community to reflect on the growing challenges of authoritarianism, religious radicalism, and democratic erosion in today's world. Over two days, the Forum welcomed more than 120 participants from over 20 countries, creating a space for meaningful dialogue among scholars, researchers, journalists, and civil society actors committed to defending freedom and human dignity.

Throughout the Forum, speakers and participants emphasized the shared responsibility to resist oppression and strengthen democratic values. Discussions highlighted the importance of individual liberty, freedom of expression, education, and civic engagement as essential tools for countering extremism and authoritarianism. Across lectures, research presentations, and working sessions, participants explored both the risks facing democratic societies and the practical ways individuals and communities can respond.

Panel discussions and breakout sessions encouraged open exchange and collaboration, reinforcing the role of civil discourse, independent media, and grassroots action in sustaining democratic resilience. Participants reflected on the need for unity, empathy, and cross-border cooperation in confronting global challenges that increasingly transcend national boundaries.

Ultimately, the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025 reaffirmed that the defense of freedom is a collective and ongoing effort. The conversations and connections formed during the Forum underscored a shared commitment to continue working together to uphold democracy, counter extremism, and build a more just and free world for future generations.



For media coverages click on below links:

<https://www.visiontimes.com/2025/11/19/freedom-leaders-unite-in-toronto-to-counter-communist-china-and-authoritarianism.html>

<https://www.secretchina.com/news/gb/2025/11/19/1090894.html>

<https://www.ntdtv.com/b5/2025/11/19/a104039707.html>



All speeches from the Forum are available on our official YouTube channel:

<https://beepurl.com/kFJAn>



All photos from the Forum can be accessed through our Google Drive folder:

<https://beepurl.com/mowLa>



The complete agenda of the Forum (PDF) is available in the below link:

<https://beepurl.com/QXWeQ>



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