



Elif Shafak  
Novelist

Journalist and former Bloomberg and ITV broadcaster, Andrea Catherwood, meets British-Turkish novelist Elif Shafak to discuss the future of democracy and how recent political events have brought liberal democracy to the edge.

Shafak is the most widely read female author in Turkey. She is also a political scientist and an advocate for women's rights and for freedom of speech. Here she considers how populism affects mainstream politics, the role of social media and what we can do to restore our faith in democracy.

# The future of democracy

When I've looked back at history, it shows that from the moment populism starts to affect the language of mainstream politics, things change. When a demagogue comes to power, they start to change the judiciary, the electoral system, the constitution, and society becomes polarised. Trump once said "The important thing for us is to unite the people". So, as for the 'other people', they don't matter and that's what populism does. It divides society into 'real people' and 'other people' who don't matter as much, which is very dangerous.

These are worrying times for anyone who's interested in truth. I find it very dangerous that extremists in one country encourage extremists elsewhere; just like that, populists in one part of the world embolden populists elsewhere. Then the demagogue feels emboldened and they know that they can get away with a lot.

People's faith in democracy is fading and democracy itself is far more fragile than we can assume. It's a delicate ecosystem and needs to be nurtured, protected and regenerated. There isn't a single country that is completely immune to anti-democratic tendencies. When people are not content with the system, they begin to swing to the extremes and politics becomes more tribalistic. When countries are so divided, the only people that benefit are the populists at the top.

Whenever nationalism is on the rise, we also see a rise in things like sexism, misogyny and homophobia as people find it easier to express intolerance. We need to go beyond our own echo chambers to encourage and empower each other. It's a very narcissistic

existence if I am only surrounded by people who think like me and vote like me; I'm only surrounded by the echoes of my own voice. So, how do we reach out to people who come from very different backgrounds and still find a common language? That is one of the biggest challenges we face.

## On social media

Propaganda is as old as humanity. Yet at the same time, there is something very new happening now. 2016 was the first US election in which over 60% of Americans received their information from social media instead of mainstream media. We need to distinguish between information, knowledge and wisdom. When we are bombarded with too much information, our knowledge starts to diminish.

Social media is like the moon. It has a bright side but it also has a dark side. Although in some ways it has made us more connected in a more egalitarian way, it has also divided us into tribes, where we seek people that think like us. That kind of tribalism is very dangerous.

## Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the heart

There is a saying I like by Gramsci about 'the pessimism of the intellect, but the optimism of the heart'. I think we need to be a bit more pessimistic. Liberal, pluralistic democracy is more fragile than we thought and we need pessimism to be alert and engage citizens. But we also need the optimism of the heart and that will come when we engage people, especially young people and people with very different backgrounds.

The rise of populism cannot be reduced to a single cause, but certainly, economic inequality is a big part of it. After every financial crisis, the political landscape favours the rise of the far-right and nationalism. But, economic inequality isn't the only reason. We need to talk about emotion too and populists are doing a much better job of connecting with people's emotions than many rational liberals and democrats are.

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To solve this, we need to bring more diverse voices into the open. We can be bold and brave in the private space but unless that moves into the public space, things aren't going to change. We need to be able to have conversations with people who think very differently to us.

### Loss of faith

Being young doesn't necessarily mean being progressive or being aware of the importance of democracy. This is something that I observe in a wider sense every time I travel to the Middle East. Unfortunately, I hear well educated or well-meaning people saying 'democracy is not our thing,

it doesn't suit our national character, it's a western concept'. That loss of faith in liberal pluralistic democracy should concern all of us, so the question is, how do we restore that faith?

We need to talk about the many inequalities we have been suffering too long. Liberal pluralistic democracy is the best system that we can come up with and rather than abandoning what we have, we need to reform it. To see where we fail and improve it, doing so in an earnest and candid way. Every time we read about history, we know what a dark tunnel we enter into when nationalism is on the rise.

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