Editorial: Peace and democracy: views from the Global South

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Peace and democracy: views from the Global South

The latest *Global Peace Index Report* (IEP, 2025) revealed that global peace has deteriorated for 6 consecutive years, with 59 active state-based conflicts—the most since World War II. Successful conflict resolution is at its lowest in 50 years, as wars grow more internationalized and harder to contain. While homicides have decreased, political instability, protests, and displacement continue to rise. Mirroring this trend, the *Democracy Index Report* (EIU, 2025), tellingly titled *What's wrong with representative democracy?*, showed that democracy is under pressure. Currently only 25 countries qualify as full democracies, while 60 are authoritarian regimes. Declining trust, inequality, corruption, populism, and civic disengagement are fuelling democratic erosion, as populist leaders exploit frustration, weaken institutions, and promote divisive agendas.

Notably, the most peaceful countries, such as Iceland, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, and New Zealand, are also the strongest democracies. However, the once-promised world of "democratic peace" appears fragile. Rising wars, repression, and authoritarianism remind us that peace and democracy are neither universal nor guaranteed.

The relationship between peace and democracy has long been a central concern in political science and peace research. Perhaps the most widely discussed framework is the democratic peace theory, which links democratic governance to a greater likelihood of peace (Doyle, 1983; Russett, 1993; Reiter, 2017). Explanations generally focus on political institutions that enable peaceful conflict resolution or on democratic norms that foster compromise and shared identity among democratic states. While democracies rarely go to war with each other, debate continues over whether democracies are generally more peaceful or if a democratic international system fosters peace (Maoz and Russett, 1993; Gartzke, 2007). Moreover, there is no consensus regarding the direction of causality between peace and democracy (Mansfield and Snyder, 2002; Oneal et al., 2003; Reiter, 2017).

Within states, this relationship is even less consensual. Democracies can reduce political grievances and provide conflict-resolution mechanisms, but autocracies may maintain order through coercion and thus prevent armed conflict (Bartusevičius and Skaaning, 2018; Mross, 2019). Moreover, even established democracies with strong institutions can experience high levels of lethal violence, as demonstrated by countries such as Brazil.

Despite these nuances, international policy after the Cold War embraced the assumption that democracy fosters peace. UN documents such as *An Agenda for Democratization* framed democracy as essential to peace, justice, and development. However, experiences from the Global South, including countries at the receiving end of international peacebuilding, reveal the limits of this assumption. Several studies have problematised this nexus, discussing, for instance, topics of timing and sequencing of reforms (Paris, 2004; Sisk, 2013), the role of the elites (Zürcher et al., 2013), critical junctures (Mross, 2019) and dynamics of governance (Maschietto, 2016; Menocal, 2017), along with the trade-offs involved in post-war democratization (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008; Watts, 2023).

These debates highlight not only the complexity of linking peace and democracy, but also the need to question what kind of democracy and peace are pursued. While elections are important, they are often overemphasized at the expense of social inclusion and minority rights. Focusing on procedural democracy and stability can obscure other forms of violence that coexist alongside seemingly functional institutions. Thus, it is crucial to examine which forms of violence these debates make visible or invisible, particularly in the Global South, where histories of colonialism, postcolonial struggles, and structural violence shape this region's unique configurations of democracy and violence (Rodríguez-Pinzón and Rodrigues, 2020; Ferreira and Maschietto, 2024).

This Research Topic features six articles that explore peace and democracy in the Global South. Two of the contributions focused on Brazil, a democracy with high levels of violence but no "armed conflict." In *Milícias in Rio de Janeiro: deconstructing the myth of a violent everyday peace through a feminist perspective*, Gouveia Junior revealed how militias, often defended as guarantors of community security, fabricate "peace" through coercion, extortion, and strict territorial control. Using feminist approaches, the author argued that while militias may reduce armed clashes, they consolidate a violent social order in which public calm masks hidden private violence, including gender-based abuse.

Complementing this, Buer and Villenave in *Interrogating peace in a violent democracy: a global south critique* examined how colonial legacies racialised and criminalized favelas, legitimizing violent state interventions. They identified various types of peace in Rio de Janeiro, including a "tourist peace" (enforced by police-military operations before the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics), a "peace as order" imposed by criminal groups and a community-led "favela peace formation," showing how residents seek alternatives despite constraints.

In *Peace ontologies, narratives, and epistemes among indigenous communities of Nigeria and Bolivia*, Adegoke and Alvarez critiqued universalist assumptions of peace and called for a pluralistic understanding. Through cross-cultural research, the authors highlighted the Yoruba view of peace as equilibrium mediated by spiritual forces, and the Aymara concept of *suma qamaña*— living well in harmony with Pachamama. Both concepts emphasize collective wellbeing, ecology, and resilience, underscoring that peace is culturally relative.

Two other articles focused on democracy in post-conflict contexts. In *Rigging by the state apparatus: Systemic electoral fraud in Mozambique jeopardizes the credibility of democracy and creates room for political violence*, Nhamirre examined how systemic electoral fraud has undermined Mozambique's democracy since the 1992 peace agreement. Although multiparty elections began in 1994, manipulation by the ruling FRELIMO party has persisted, evolving from ballot stuffing to sophisticated control of state institutions such as the judiciary, police, and electoral commissions. These practices foster authoritarian tendencies and show that elections alone cannot consolidate democracy, but risk becoming mechanisms of regime continuity that threaten peace.

In contrast, in *The path to peace and democracy: the case of Timor-Leste*, Guterres and Maschietto presented Timor-Leste as a rare positive example of democratization in peacebuilding. Revisiting the country's history and the extensive international intervention that shaped state building, the authors highlighted important milestones such as free elections, constitutional safeguards, and an active civil society. They note that further progress depends on better integrating formal and informal governance structures, reducing political patronage, and strengthening mechanisms for social and economic inclusion.

The final contribution, *The concept of most responsible in international criminal law and its problematic reception in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace in Colombia*, by Díaz-Soto and Borbón, examined Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace. The study revealed how vague legal categories such as "most responsible" risk undermining transitional justice by blurring distinctions of culpability , overextending prosecutions, and weakening legitimacy.

Together, these studies reveal that peace and democracy are not universal templates but rather contested, context-dependent processes. Only by embracing this complexity and plurality can we hope to develop more effective and equitable approaches to building peaceful and democratic societies in our increasingly interconnected yet fractured world.

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