



Interview with Yordanos Eyoel (Keseb)

Lissa Harris

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Lissa Harris: Let's start with you introducing yourself and your organization and talking a little bit broadly about the problem that you're trying to solve and how you're trying to solve it.

Yordanos Eyoel: Absolutely. I'm Yordanos Eyoel, I am the founder and CEO of Keseb, which is a relatively new, to be precise - 19 month old - pro-democracy organization that is building a cross country ecosystem for learning, collaboration, and innovation to advance inclusive and resilient democracies. The reason that we exist, and the reason I founded Keseb is because I believe there are two major threats facing democracy at this moment. One is the rise of authoritarianism globally, and the second is the need to reimagine democracy. As demographics shift and as more and more countries become more diverse due to immigration or generational shifts, we need to think about not only defending the institutions and the principles that have gotten us to where we are, but also really opening up the imaginative space to see what the futuristic possibilities could look like for democracy in the 21st century. I think we need to be able to do those simultaneously.

That's the overarching mission of Keseb. The reason these two challenges or opportunities, depending on how you see them, are important for us to address in this moment in our history is because one, I think all of the data would show that after the Cold War, there was kind of this end of history, democracy won, communism had lost, and there wasn't really a real contestation of democracy as the system of government. But increasingly, we're seeing bad democracies on the decline. In fact, particularly young people are more open to other forms of governance, particularly those that offer the promise of security. All of the data around the world would show that democracy has been in crisis for over two decades. This isn't just a phenomenon that is happening in perhaps less developed economies or democracies, this is also happening in some of the most, arguably the oldest and most established democracies, like the United States and across Western Europe.

We have to interrogate to see what is actually happening to democracy. Not only is democracy in decline, there is an emergence of an alternative model in the form of ethno-nationalist authoritarianism that squarely challenges the core principles of democracy around equality, liberty, free, and fair elections. It's also increasingly, as I said, ethno-nationalist in nature and very



much disputes this idea of building a diverse society. Looking at that and the trends around it, what's become really obvious is that while every country is unique and has its own very different historical contexts and sets of challenges and nuances, a lot of these movements have been able to learn from each other and build a sort of global solidarity and what has come to be called the authoritarian playbook. Even though the MAGA movement in the US looks very different from the Bolsonaro movement in Brazil, there are lots of similarities. You see Trump and Bolsonaro are supporting each other, the US conservative movement is learning from what's happening in Hungary, Netanyahu's governments really referencing what's happened in Hungary, particularly around judicial reform. So you do see this kind of cross-border learning collaboration and solidarity building.

On the pro-democracy side, what we have observed is that it tends to be incredibly siloed. It's like the assumption is that every context is so unique that we're not actually learning from each other and transferring knowledge in meaningful ways. Strategizing so that we not just remain on the defensive side, but actually can be on the offensive side, making the case for democracy, galvanizing people, particularly those that are more susceptible to manipulation by authoritarian narratives and movements. Then just really bolstering our ability to build more inclusive institutions that can give rise to what I was saying, this new, I think re-imagined vision for 21st century democracy.

Those are the challenges that are facing us globally and Keseb was really focused on how do we bolster national efforts through a cross national lens? If the authorities are doing it, why should we not do that on the pro-democracy side, and how do we enable those systems and infrastructures to exist to support pro-democracy actors?

Lissa Harris: Who do you serve most directly? Who directly benefits from your work, and how do you engage with them?

Yordanos Eyoel: We are a systems change effort, and so what that means is that we are not directly touching people on the ground, but we work through actors who are. Broadly speaking, we talk about a democracy ecosystem encompassing many different industries or even ecosystems. So if you think about citizens as one block to business community or media or government institutions or politicians and political parties, but then you have this huge part of the ecosystem that we refer to as civil society and other folks call it the NGO sector, whatever it may be, people use different language to refer to it, but ultimately this third sector. That is our primary focus. Within that specifically, we focus on pro-democracy practitioners, philanthropists, and policy architects. It's a bit sequenced for us.



For right now, we are building the ecosystem to connect and fortify the efforts of pro-democracy practitioners that specifically we call democracy entrepreneurs. Like social entrepreneurs, visionary leaders that have built organizations and are doing really impactful work across three countries, US, Brazil, South Africa are our current focus areas. Then broadly, we also refer to other types of democracy innovators that we call democracy champions. These can come in the form of elected officials or philanthropists that are all really committed to, as I said, addressing the challenges democracy faces now while also simultaneously envisioning the democracy of the future. Civil society is the sector that we're focused on, and within civil society we're focused on those that are innovating for democracy, so democracy champions, and then even a subset of those folks, democracy entrepreneurs, are those that we are specifically working deeply with through our fellowship program.

Lissa Harris: What makes your approach distinctive from other organizations that are working on similar problems or in a similar space?

Yordanos Eyoel: Really excellent question. I would say a few elements. One is that a lot of efforts tend to focus on national groups, and even then there's a lack of infrastructure to support pro-democracy practitioners. Whether it's the gap between grassroots and grassroots organizations, there's a lot of siloing and really very few opportunities to collaborate and build capacity of leaders and organizations in the field at the very national level. Cross nationally, there are very few operators like us that are actually weaving innovations and organizations together strategically. So the cross-national component is one.

The second is that even those that do the cross national or the longstanding bilateral institutions, like National Endowment for Democracy or the International Republican Institute and others, they actually are mandated not to focus on the US because they receive funding from the US government. Historically what has happened is that the US has been doing a lot of pro-democracy promotion work abroad and bringing actors from various countries, but the US actually has never been at the table as a player. So the second unique thing that we're doing is that we are bringing the US as an equal participant on the global stage. Yes, the institutions of our democracy have been existent for close to 250 years, but realistically, the US did not become a liberal democracy until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. So it is a relatively young democracy, and one that continues to face really big challenges as we're witnessing over the last number of years. It's really important to take away this kind of American exceptionalism paternalistic approach and really be at the table with the humility that there is a lot that the US has learned and can contribute to the world, but there's also a lot that the US can learn from the rest of the world.

The third piece I would say is our emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship. Organizations like Ashoka, The Skoll Foundation, and others have worked extensively to build this ecosystem for



social innovation and entrepreneurship that has completely revolutionized the social sector. What we at Keseb are bringing is that we should also be thinking similarly about the democracy space. The challenges that we're facing in democracy require innovation, and the folks that are in the business of building institutions and really embracing, and we have a definition for democracy entrepreneurship, really organizations that are employing or demonstrating those kind of characteristics should be viewed as entrepreneurial and innovative, which requires us to support them in ways that we've supported social entrepreneurs for over two decades.

I would say those are the three elements structurally. The last thing I will say is that I think there is this emphasis around balancing the short or long-term. A lot of efforts may exist to counter authoritarianism, but there should be an emphasis on how do we build this kind of inclusive, multiracial democracy that is of the 21st century. Really balancing the two from a global perspective and bringing the elements of inclusivity, I think is another place we're pretty distinctive because if you look at the think tanks that focus on the authoritarian piece, often they are not focused on the inclusivity piece from a transnational perspective.

Lissa Harris: I know you're a very young organization so this might be a tricky question, but can you share an example that illustrates the impact of the work that you do?

Yordanos Eyoel: We're super young, but we move really fast. We have three impact initiatives, Keseb Democracy Fellowship, Keseb Democracy Champions Network, and Keseb Insights.

For the fellowship, we had done extensive research. As I said, we focus on three multi-ethnic consolidated democracies that are all facing a crisis of democracy. Brazil, South Africa, and the US. We looked at over a thousand groups and then narrowed it down to 300, and then we selected 12 organizations and entrepreneurs to support. We provide them two years of financial support as well as a community of learning and practice. We just hosted our in-person retreat for them. That community will continue to convene over the course of the next year, which is the mega 2024 election year. In addition to the fellows who are leaders of those organizations, we also support another senior leader from each of those entities to really deepen the connections across the ventures and also really deepen the transference of knowledge.

On the Global Democracy Champions Network, we've hosted two global summits and partnerships with some of the leading universities across the three countries, and we've convened over a thousand people from over 60 countries. Our summit that just took place in October was themed Preparing for the 2024 Mega Election Year. We had over 35 speakers from 12 countries. We touched on the critical themes of countering authorities and safeguarding civil liberties, protecting our information ecosystems, and then advancing towards a more pluralistic democracy.



For Insights, we released our first major report in addition to op-eds, and then a TED Talk that I just did at TEDWomen that was a culmination of a multi-time month research, including interviews with over 75 civil society leaders from US, Brazil, India, and South Africa, really lifting up the core drivers of democratic regression globally, but also the immediate opportunities for civil society investments with a call to action specifically for philanthropists, but also for practitioners in the field.

So we are really young, we're just getting started, but I think we've been able to produce some pretty strong content and create this kind of demonstration point for the type of cross national collaborative platform that we're trying to build and scale.

Lissa Harris: What do you think that collaboration and that community of practice across national borders does for people in this space? What is that helping to facilitate?

Yordanos Eyoel: I'll start tactically. This isn't a random collection of people. We were very strategic about the types of organizations and leaders we selected to be in the fellowship. For that, based on our research, we prioritized four specific pillars. The first is promoting free, fair, and trusted elections. The second is building a leadership pipeline for more representative government. The third area is combating misinformation. The fourth category is cultivating informed, engaged, and empowered citizens and voters. The groups that we chose all play in one of these strategies. Because they're doing similar work, although in different contexts, there are obvious parallels between their strategies and approaches. That naturally creates an immediate opportunity to share effective practices, failures, or even possibilities and questions. There's an immediate opportunity to transfer lessons at the organizational strategy level, which is really important, which is what the authoritarian have been really good at. They test different things in different contexts and it gets perfected. It's not to say that something that worked in South Africa is automatically going to work in the US, but the ability to be able to explore that and even extract insights, even if it's not direct replication, I think could be really catalytic.

The second is really around core democracy themes, because a lot of the challenges that we're facing, as I said, are global in nature, although they manifest in different ways within the national context. So really unpacking and exploring those and how these trends play out in different contexts just makes people smarter. It's kind of like without having to go through grad school, just really getting the opportunity to pull up the bird's eye view level, get out of your organizational strategy and really think about these challenges, and then that should make you smarter about the strategies that you employ within your organization.

The third piece honestly is really around the leadership component. Part of what I think we have done really well is in building solidarity networks. The lack of support in the field makes people



feel really isolated. One of our fellows was saying to me, "This is like a bubble wrap, you're taking me out of my context, but to connect with other peers that are also facing similar challenges." And so it enables them to know that, one, they're not alone in this fight. Sometimes I think when you're so mired in the day-to-day battle, you feel stuck in your context, especially when there are many losses. Being able to come out of that and connect with others who share a similar kind of pain, but also share the hope and optimism that you have for what's possible for your community, for your country. That kind of psychological support and community of peers that can support you, that understands the unique challenges that you go through, but is removed enough where they can provide a bit of a safe space for you to have the type of conversation perhaps you may not feel comfortable having with your peers in your national context. Those are the intangibles that you can't easily measure. Those are the things that we've heard from folks in terms of what is really valuable about having a peer community that is cross national. This is not to supplant anything that needs to exist at the national level, but as a complimentary effort can provide added benefit. As I said, especially when the challenges are so grave and people are feeling threatened for doing this type of work, it becomes really important to have allies beyond your borders.

Lissa Harris: What insights or lessons do you think could be taken from your work that others working in this space could use? What can they learn from you?

Yordanos Eyoel: That's such a great question. We're so young. We're probably the youngest in Skoll's portfolio, to be honest. I would say in terms of the enterprise level, what have we learned as an organization that others can too. To start with, one thing that we are learning and we'll continue to learn is that operating in a highly dynamic space requires a different type of planning. We have our 2030 vision. We're pretty organized. Some of my team members are hardcore former consultants, strategy consultants. We have our plans in place, we have a vision, we have a strategy, we have a plan. At the same time, we hold that plan very loosely, meaning that the vision's intact, however it's highly dependent on what happens in the political context. We're also constituent driven, and so it really depends on what the practitioners need in the midst of that evolving context.

While building the muscle to being strategic and disciplined and all of the things that make an organization successful, all of us who are working the democracy space, have to simultaneously take a different approach to strategic planning. Be nimble, be adaptive, be constituent driven, to both have the foresight to get on the offensive, meaning doing a lot of scenario playing, but also just the ability to be responsive to unforeseen crises. There are actually lots of different muscles that you have to build as an organization, which is very different from my days working in social entrepreneurship and supporting social entrepreneurs. Just the pace of change in the external environments is not as rapid. You can create a five-year plan and you can adjust here and there, but you can pretty much directly move into execution mode and be okay. Whereas I think in the



democracy space, and perhaps it could be for other systems change efforts too, just the nimbleness, adaptability that is required to continually evolve and be responsive I think is a new type of capability that organizations have to build.

We have developed our own internal framework that we call Democracy Entrepreneurship In Action for how to do that. For us, strategic planning is not an annual review process. It literally happens every quarter. That is not to say we veer off from our vision, but it's continually revisiting that based on what we're learning from what's happening externally, what we're learning internally, what we're hearing from our constituents. Our goal is to continue to pilot that and then based on those lessons, we hope to be able to share it with the field. I think that would be the biggest lesson, that it's much harder to be in a dynamic space where you're constantly dealing with so many changing variables.

Lissa Harris: How do you measure success? What's the evidence that you look to to see if you're making progress?

Yordanos Eyoel: We've mapped out a set of short-term outcomes, meaning five to 10 years and then beyond those. I mean the most immediate impact that we are measuring is the feedback that we're getting from our fellows who are the most proximate actors that we're serving. On the fellowship side, we have a whole set of metrics from satisfaction, learning, sense of belonging, support, et cetera, a whole set of metrics that we track on the fellowship side.

Then it's our ability to influence through the convenings and the insights that we're generating. To what degree are we not doing work ourselves, but to what degree are we, for instance, influencing philanthropists, for example, US based philanthropists that traditionally have only worked on domestic issues to start investing in transnational approaches. To what degree are we influencing other types of entities to embrace the entrepreneurship lens and how they think about supporting the pro-democracy field?

There are a whole set of influence related metrics that we're also in the process of developing. There are things that we are directly accountable for and there are other things that we want to catalyze the field to be able to implement based on the demonstration points and insights that we're generating.

Lissa Harris: This might be another tough question for such a young organization, but is there something that you've tried that didn't work that you learned an important lesson from?

Yordanos Eyoel: Yeah, absolutely. I will say in my initial conceptualization of, for instance, our fellowship design, the idea was we would do 50% US, 50% international. Very quickly, as we began to delve into deeper conversations about design and having discussions with leaders outside of



the US, it became really clear that the US centric nature of how the US often shows up in global conversations, it's actually really important to have proportional representation from the countries that we pick. That was an important lesson.

Also recognizing the overall suspicion of US foreign policy. Even as an independent civil society organization, I think the question around, "is this an extension of a US foreign policy agenda that is trying to promote a specific angle around democracy strengthening efforts in other countries, or is this truly about fortifying the work of proximate leaders from those countries to be the ones shaping and defining those agendas?" For that matter, at the stage of our organization, not that we've been offered, but we are not pursuing funding from US government because we think it's really important for this to be a truly civil society driven approach, and as I said earlier, really bringing us actors with their peers from other countries as equal partners as opposed to a dominant voice or more like a paternalistic US is here to educate, that type of approach.

Lissa Harris: Setting aside the issue of funding, because that's something that everybody struggles with, are there broad scale challenges that you are facing that you haven't yet been able to overcome that you want to talk about?

Yordanos Eyoel: Yeah, the big barriers. **The biggest thing we face, not just for us, but I think as a field is that we're still very much taking on a defensive posture and that when we are painting a picture of what is at stake, it's always what we're against as opposed to what we're for.** The more inspiring vision for democracy and making a really strong case as to why it is the best system.

There are lots of reasons and we haven't been able to really capture that during consequential moments when people are starting to pay attention to a major election cycle. This is what we're learning from Turkey in particular and from other places where they have not been able to actually defeat their authoritarian leaders, is that what we're learning is that it is not just okay to have an opposition and say, "Okay, we're not them. You don't want to go there because these are all the reasons that are wrong." The opposition also has to be very compelling and galvanizing and motivating. I think this is something that the field writ large is struggling with. There are many flaws to democracy, and I think there are legitimate questions that have been raised particularly by those who have been historically civically marginalized as to why democracy. I think we need to be able to address that. From the overall fight for democracy, I would say that's one of the biggest challenges that we face.

At the organizational level, as I mentioned, we are not only a new entity, but we're also an entity that's trying to break through this pernicious old mentality of American exceptionalism. Even just watching the news cycle will let you know that there is something happening globally, but I think there is still the resistance that the US is so unique, could that actually be applicable and relevant



here? I would say from a mindset shift perspective, which is where it all starts, I think that is one of the biggest barriers that we face is really breaking through that and helping Americans see that yes, America has a very unique history, has a very unique role to play in the global order, and has played a critical role in defending democracy globally. Yet it is not so unique because all of these things that people thought would never happen here have happened, and unless we shift that attitude, they will continue to happen. That is the biggest barrier.

The second barrier, I mean you mentioned funding, but it is really baffling to me that there's so much philanthropy that goes to a wide variety of issue areas, but very little is committed to democracy. It's mind boggling to me because if you don't have a strong democracy, then you're not going to have a great education system, good health system, or the ability to sustain a strong workforce and economy. I think that is a place where philanthropy really needs to continue to coalesce around and really build a vision around how, not just come in when there is a crisis, but really commit to straightening democracy in the US and globally.

Lissa Harris: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you're working to advance systems level change, whether that's through partnerships or policy change?

Yordanos Eyoel: We know systems change happens on three levels. It happens at the structural level, it happens at the field relational level, and happens at the behavioral mental model level. We're working at all three.

At the structural level right now, we're focused on more of the resource flow. Obviously we're a small intermediary funder, so we're not moving a significant amount of capital, but from the perspective of, how do we take national funders and then even allocate a small percentage of what they're giving to transnational efforts and supporting groups in other countries? Or investing in practitioners from their countries to be able to learn from others? That is a pretty significant shift from how things have operated.

Our hope is that right now we're in the build and demonstrate phase, and over time we want to be able to grow that. Then eventually as we acquire more insights and also weave these communities together, we imagine that there will be opportunities to do advocacy, so to be able to shift policy, whether it be at the transnational level or influencing national policy makers based on those insights.

At the relational level, I would say this is the biggest place where we're focused, creating these cross-national relationships and connections between some of the leading pro-democracy actors. These types of platforms and infrastructure don't really exist. That is really where we're investing a lot of time through the fellowship, through the convenings that we're doing, and then ultimately lifting up those insights so we can shift the mental models of the actors, particularly those that



are of significant scale and could incorporate those lessons to inform their own strategy. We're not assuming that, or at least from my point of view, that we don't need to build a new massive global entity, but we can create this catalyst for impact that is both creating the demonstration points, lifting up insights, certainly deepening and growing our impact. But also how can we influence all of the other actors, whether it be in philanthropy, whether it be in government, or whether that be in the pro-democracy practitioner field, so they themselves become more effective. Take those lessons and translate them in ways that make sense for them.

Lissa Harris: What do you think is needed from some of those other actors to advance change? I thought your example of the philanthropists not focusing enough on democracy was a good one. Are there other needs that you see for other partners or actors to step up?

Yordanos Eyoel: This is core to what I was saying about Keseb and why we even exist, the transnational component. In some ways it's very unique to the US because in other contexts you have to very much pay attention to what's happening beyond your borders. I think the US is very much isolated from that perspective. Even the way we talk about it, I mean people say to me all the time, because all of my work was domestic until I launched Keseb, and so people would say, "Oh, now you're doing international work?" Like, "No, I'm doing transnational work. The US is not a planet, it is part of the globe." Just this bifurcation that we have in our minds that if you're doing domestic work, then what's happening outside of the US is not relevant to you.

That is actually, I think, much more pronounced here than any of the other practitioners we work with in other contexts who have a tendency to look beyond their borders. I think there's that muscle that's built. Even if they do that, that doesn't mean the infrastructure exists to support them. I think no matter where we are, whether it be Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria or the US, wherever we may be, really understanding that a transnational component is actually an important critical ingredient to strengthening national level efforts. It's the same argument we make about diversity. You want to create a diverse organization or you want to expand the table because in doing so, you actually make yourself more strategic. You allow for new possibilities to emerge. It's the same thing, why would you want to limit yourself to what you already know? You want to be able to expand that.

We're not the only ones because there are increasingly a cohort of organizations that are really emphasizing this transnational component, but I hope that in the next decade we will see that become a part of the trend and that the idea that people learning from their peers in other countries is actually a key component to strengthening their own strategies and it's not seen as an anomaly or something that people take on only if they're interested or they have connections.



Lissa Harris: This is a tricky question without a crystal ball, but how do you see your work evolving over the next five years?

Yordanos Eyoel: That's an exciting question for a young organization. We launched in May of 2022. This year we were focused on operationalizing all of our impact initiatives, which we have. As a systems change organization, we want to remain humble and in learning mode continually and just really evolve and iterate. Beyond 2025, we really want to be in the space where we are deepening and growing our impact. Basically taking all of the lessons that we've learned from the first three years to certainly expand our own reach. We want to be able to grow the number of organizations we directly support through the fellowship. We want to create other mechanisms to support transnational learning. If you think about the fellowship as the deep, high-touch model, we're going to be experimenting with other ways to expand that and support groups and build a capacity of groups to be able to do that on their own and through the network.

Then we want to be able to really saturate the field with actionable insights, whether that be really lifting up case studies or promoting deeper collaboration between academics and practitioners, to generate insights that are going to be helpful to the field. For us, it's both about, yes, of course we want to grow and expand our reach, but also it's identifying these areas and partners through which, as I said, we can influence. That's really what's on the horizon for us, really taking what we've learned from the first three years and then identifying where Keseb needs to directly grow to meet those needs. Then where we can partner to really shift the field in strategic ways to fortify. Our aspiration is to have this really robust, vibrant, pro-democracy field that is an amalgamation of really strong national efforts that are woven globally.

Lissa Harris: We've covered a lot of territory here, but is there anything that we didn't get to that you thought was important to add or to expand on?

Yordanos Eyoel: I think you asked really great questions. I would say we are going into a major election year, which we and others are referring to as the mega election year, over 2 billion people are going to be heading to the polls. Obviously elections are central to democracy. But I would say that we should not lose sight of the fact that democracy is bigger than elections. I think this is something that obviously is not going to be emphasized over the next year because you want as many people to vote and participate in their election processes. Many of these elections are going to be highly consequential, but I am of the mindset that, and I think this is what in particular young people are demanding, is it just about my vote? Or what does democracy entail? I think it is incumbent upon the field to really paint that larger picture. I think a lot can happen. A lot is at stake during elections, but I think we also have to take the longer view in order to remain resilient. I think we need to keep a commitment to democracy so that people's hopes are not shattered based on election outcomes, but we remain committed to the longer vision and fight even when



there are losses. I just hope that we keep that in mind because obviously I hope for very positive results and obviously we're working towards ensuring that democracy wins. I also know that there are tough moments in history and we shall overcome them if we stay united and stay focused.

Lissa Harris: Thank you for your time and for your insight.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter and science writer (MIT '08) based in the Catskills of upstate New York. She currently writes about climate, energy, and environment issues from a local perspective for the Albany Times Union, her own Substack newsletter, and various other digital and print publications.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*