**Building Blocks of Democracy**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. There can be no more doubt that democracy is not just in crisis; it is in retreat. Although the methodologies and details vary, that is the unavoidable conclusion of the data crunched each year by the likes of V-Dem, EIU, Freedom House, etc.
2. Although there are a few notable exceptions, this democratic recession is global, ladies and gentlemen, in established and fledgling democracies alike. It is measured not only by falling voter participation, but also by the falling trust that citizens express in their institutions, whether governments, parliaments, political parties and media, and voting itself, the building blocks of democracy. Why bother counting votes when votes don’t count? is a popular mantra.
3. Naturally this is not true. Had Bush not been elected in 2000, the US would not have launched the war in Iraq, which destabilized the entire region for decades. The UK’s Brexit referendum changed the fortunes of the country for at least a generation. In Kenya too, the elections last year brought to power William Ruto in a surprise victory showing the power of the vote.
4. So why is democracy in retreat? I see several factors at work:

First, the relative decline of traditional democratic powers in relation to authoritarian ones;

Second, the erosion of the middle class, recognized as the backbone of democracy since Aristotle;

Third, growing polarization, fueled by the rise of the internet and social media, and foreign interference by powers intent on discrediting democracy;

Finally, the failure of many democracies to deliver. The logic of elections pushes politicians to over-promise. Globalization means they are less in control of many forces that impact their societies, whether climate change, financial crises or pandemics. Their room for maneuver is curtailed by international agreements and financial markets.

1. Yet, Afrobarometre shows a large majority of Africans want more democracy, not less. That is because they know that, in the long run, and despite its many failings, democracy delivers better than all other systems.
2. Of the twenty countries with highest levels of human development as measured by the UN’s human development index, nineteen are liberal democracies. Among the top forty, thirty-six are liberal democracies. And even the citizens of poorer democracies live, on average, nine years longer than citizens of poor autocracies, because they have better access to health and education.
3. Democracies are also less vulnerable to famines and conflicts. Most importantly, however, as Amartya Sen has cogently argued, freedom itself is development. Subordination to the caprices of other human beings, rather than to the law, is a source of despair to the human soul.
4. I am skeptical about the sustainability of “authoritarian growth”. In most cases, both historically and globally, those regimes become fragile when growth slows or ends, because they have no other sources of legitimacy. So rather than looking for alternatives to liberal democracy, we should instead seek to reform our systems through concrete measures in at least three areas.
5. **First, we need to make our democracies more effective**. Much of the debate in our democracies turns on the politics of redistribution and public spending, but not enough on effectiveness. We are trying to solve today’s problems with yesterday’s solutions. We must harness new technologies and management techniques to overhaul the administration of the state to make our democracies less bureaucratic and more responsive to families and individuals.
6. **Second, we need to tackle inequality, both economic and political. I**ncreasing inequality is one of the drivers of resentment, especially since economic equality leads to political inequalities as well, as several studies have confirmed. There is a growing perception that the priorities of the extremely wealthy take precedence over the well-being of the middle class thanks to campaign contributions and lobbying. At the other end of the spectrum, the poor, youth and minorities are, or at least feel, excluded from the political system. Governments must respond by redistributing fairly the benefits of globalization by restricting tax avoidance and evasion schemes, and most importantly, discouraging tax havens.
7. Fortunately, democracy is one of the only systems in which the concerns of the majority can overturn the interests of the wealthy if the majority harnesses the mechanisms at their disposal. But this demands more political participation, not less. **This means that we need to make our democracies more inclusive.**This requires bold and innovative reforms to bring in the young, the poor and minorities into the political system.
8. **Third and finally, we need to champion democracy.**The victory over Nazism, fascism and communism were also ideological struggles that were won on the battlefield of ideas. Yet many of the tools of that battle have been abandoned or are underfunded today. Democracy’s enemies are spending billions to undermine it, both in practice and through misinformation. In a world of “alternative facts”, who do we believe? We know that armies of state-financed trolls are creating “AstroTurf movements” to sow the seeds of mistrust and disunity to weaken our democracies. We must not let them win by abdication.
9. Democracies have to reclaim the lost ground by defending and promoting liberal ideas, just as they did against democracy’s past ideological enemies. This cooperation between the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Democracy and Culture Foundation began at the Athens Democracy Forum. Athenian democracy, a glorious experiment in human history, lasted only two hundred years. But a system created thousands of years ago continues to inspire throughout the world today. We must cherish, reform and defend democracy, or else it may be lost for future generations, just as it was lost to the ancient Athenians.