

Freedom vs. Oppression, Not Ideologies

Why pro-democracy coalitions must transcend partisan and ideological barriers

A foundational training essay for members of the World Liberty Congress and the World Liberty Academy. First principle of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, November 2025).

The principle, in one sentence. The struggle is not left versus right, religious versus secular, or East versus West. It is freedom versus oppression. Framing it that way unites diverse actors who would otherwise divide over ideology, and keeps the movement focused on human dignity and self-determination, the universal language that transcends political labels and mobilizes solidarity across borders.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic error of fighting autocracy as a partisan tribe

One of the most dangerous mistakes democratic movements can make is to confront authoritarianism as if it were merely a partisan contest. Autocracy is not simply the victory of one party over another. It is the destruction of the rules that allow all parties, beliefs, communities, and citizens to coexist in freedom. When opposition groups reduce the struggle to left versus right, conservative versus liberal, religious versus secular, nationalist versus cosmopolitan, or social democrat versus market liberal, they often do the work of the autocrat for him.

Authoritarian regimes thrive when democratic forces fragment. They understand that a divided opposition is easier to infiltrate, discredit, exhaust, and repress. They know that if pro-democracy actors spend more energy debating who is ideologically pure than building a common front for freedom, the regime can survive even when

it is unpopular. This is why the first principle of the World Liberty Congress strategic framework is so important: the struggle must be framed as Freedom vs. Oppression, Not Ideologies. The Berlin Framework explicitly warns that the struggle is not a battle of left versus right, religion versus secularism, or East versus West, but a shared effort to restore people's universal right to self-determination, rooted in human rights and dignity.

For the World Liberty Congress, this is not merely a slogan. It is a strategic doctrine. Democratic actors may disagree on tax policy, social policy, religion, foreign policy, or constitutional design. But if they believe in pluralism, free elections, human dignity, the rule of law, freedom of conscience, independent institutions, and the right of citizens to change their rulers peacefully, they belong inside the democratic coalition.



SECTION I

Autocrats are already practicing ideological agnosticism

Anne Applebaum's Autocracy, Inc. offers one of the clearest descriptions of the modern authoritarian ecosystem. Her central insight is that today's autocracies are not unified by a coherent ideology. They are unified by interests: regime survival, wealth protection, propaganda, repression, sanctions evasion, surveillance, and the desire to weaken liberal democracy. Applebaum describes a network of dictatorships that includes regimes such as Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, Belarus, Cuba, Myanmar, and North Korea, emphasizing that they are not united ideologically even as they cooperate to preserve their systems of power.

This insight is essential. Vladimir Putin may deploy ultra-conservative, nationalist, and Orthodox civilizational rhetoric, but that does not prevent cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party, an officially atheist Leninist regime. The Islamic Republic of Iran may be theocratic, but that does not prevent alignment with secular or atheist authoritarian powers when their interests converge. The Venezuelan ruling elite may speak in socialist language while relying on kleptocratic networks, military patronage, illicit finance, and alliances with regimes that have very different ideological narratives. Applebaum's broader argument is that contemporary autocracies are sustained by networks of kleptocratic finance, surveillance technologies, propaganda professionals, and cross-border regime support.

“If autocrats can cooperate across ideological contradictions to preserve oppression, democrats must cooperate across ideological differences to restore freedom.”

Authoritarian regimes have already learned the discipline of pragmatic collaboration. They may disagree about theology, economics, or national identity, but they cooperate when it comes to repression, propaganda, intelligence, sanctions evasion, and diplomatic cover. Democratic actors, by contrast, too often demand ideological agreement before strategic cooperation. This is a strategic asymmetry, and it must be corrected.



SECTION II

Freedom is the minimum common program

A broad pro-democracy coalition does not require ideological uniformity. It requires a shared minimum program. That program is not “everyone must become liberal,” “everyone must become conservative,” “everyone must become secular,” or “everyone must become progressive.” The minimum program is more fundamental:

- The end of arbitrary rule.
- The release of political prisoners.
- The restoration of civic space.
- The protection of freedom of conscience and religion.
- The defense of free expression and independent media.
- The recovery of electoral integrity.
- The independence of courts.
- The end of torture, forced exile, denationalization, and transnational repression.
- The right of all citizens to organize, vote, dissent, and live without fear.

This is the meaning of Freedom versus Oppression. It is not an empty moral phrase. It is the basis for a democratic social contract among opposition forces.

The WLC strategic framework reinforces this logic through several related principles. It teaches that movements need a compass, not recipes, because each context requires adaptation; that coordination wins but does not mean unanimity;

and that restoring democracy is everyone's job, requiring cooperation among political, state, civil, social, academic, media, and private-sector actors.

This means that democratic coalitions should not try to erase differences. They should organize them. A coalition is not a monastery of agreement. It is a disciplined alliance among different actors who understand that no meaningful ideological debate is possible under dictatorship. First, the democratic arena must be restored. Then society can freely debate its future.



SECTION III

The evidence: broad participation makes movements stronger

The empirical literature on civil resistance strongly supports the importance of broad-based participation. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's research found that nonviolent campaigns have historically been more successful than armed campaigns, in part because they allow wider participation and create greater opportunities for loyalty shifts among regime supporters. Harvard's summary of Chenoweth's work identifies four key ingredients of successful nonviolent resistance: a large and diverse participant base, the ability to create loyalty shifts among regime-supporting groups, tactical variety beyond mass protest, and organizational discipline under repression.

This is directly relevant to coalition-building. A movement that is ideologically narrow cannot easily become socially broad. If the democratic movement is perceived as belonging only to one party, class, ideology, region, religion, ethnicity, or generation, many citizens will remain passive even if they dislike the regime. They may fear that the fall of the autocrat would simply mean the domination of another faction, and they will hesitate.

Broad coalitions reduce that fear. They signal that the democratic project is not revenge by one camp against another, but the recovery of a shared civic space. Chenoweth and Stephan's work also suggests that higher levels of participation increase resilience, tactical innovation, civic disruption, and loyalty shifts among former regime supporters, including security elites.

This is why ideological humility is not only morally attractive. It is strategically necessary. A coalition capable of reaching workers, students, entrepreneurs, religious communities, public servants, rural citizens, women's groups, youth

movements, diaspora networks, indigenous communities, journalists, artists, and political parties is much harder for an autocracy to isolate.



SECTION IV

The polarization trap

Autocrats do not always need to persuade the majority. Often, they only need to ensure that the majority distrusts the opposition. Polarization is therefore one of the regime's most powerful tools.

The regime wants conservatives to fear liberals. It wants liberals to fear conservatives. It wants religious citizens to fear secular activists, and secular activists to distrust religious leaders. It wants left-of-center movements to suspect market liberals of elitism, and market liberals to suspect social democrats of authoritarian temptation. It wants young activists to dismiss older leaders as compromised, and older leaders to dismiss young activists as naive. It wants exile leaders and internal actors to compete for legitimacy. It wants families of political prisoners, political parties, NGOs, student groups, and diaspora organizations to operate in parallel rather than together. A movement that falls into this trap may remain morally passionate but strategically weak.

The antidote is not artificial unity. It is structured coordination. Democratic coalitions must learn to distinguish between three different levels of disagreement, because confusing them is one of the most common ways coalitions destroy themselves.

First: legitimate pluralism

Differences over policy, ideology, party identity, leadership style, religion, economics, or constitutional models. These should be accepted as normal in democratic life. They are precisely what democracy is for.

Second: strategic disagreement

Differences over tactics, timing, negotiation, elections, protests, sanctions, international advocacy, or institutional engagement. These should be debated seriously and resolved through agreed decision-making mechanisms, not through public denunciation.

Third: anti-democratic behavior

Defense of repression, support for political imprisonment, justification of torture, incitement to violence against civilians, rejection of pluralism, or willingness to

replace one dictatorship with another. These cannot be treated as normal differences inside a democratic coalition. They are disqualifying.

Coalitions fail when they confuse the first category with the third. They expel potential allies over normal pluralism while tolerating destructive behavior because it is politically convenient. The World Liberty Academy should train activists to make these distinctions carefully, and to defend them publicly when the regime tries to blur them.



SECTION V

Practical principles for building pro-democracy coalitions

The following ten principles translate the doctrine of Freedom versus Oppression into operational practice. They are not a recipe. Each movement will adapt them to its own conditions. But coalitions that ignore these principles will tend to fail in similar ways.

1. Start with a minimum democratic agreement

The first step is to draft a short minimum democratic agreement. It should not be a full party platform. It should be a civic pact. It can include commitments to free elections, nonviolence, political pluralism, release of political prisoners, independent media, judicial independence, protection of minorities, freedom of religion or belief, and rejection of vengeance. The agreement should be short enough for very different actors to sign, but strong enough to exclude authoritarian substitutes.

2. Define the coalition's purpose

Coalitions collapse when they try to do everything. A coalition should clearly define whether it exists for electoral coordination, prisoner advocacy, international sanctions, constitutional reform, civil resistance, diaspora lobbying, digital security, humanitarian protection, or transition planning. A coalition may have several lanes, but each lane must have its own objective, leadership, timeline, and decision rules.

3. Separate the democratic cause from party competition

Political parties are essential to democracy, but the democratic cause is broader than any party. In authoritarian contexts, parties, civil society, student movements, churches, unions, independent media, professional associations, and diaspora

groups must coordinate without one sector absorbing the others. A useful rule: parties compete for office; democratic coalitions cooperate to restore the rules of freedom.

4. Create a table of trust before a table of power

Many opposition coalitions fail because they begin with leadership negotiations before building trust. The first meetings should not be about who leads everything. They should be about shared analysis: what kind of regime are we facing, what are its vulnerabilities, what mistakes have we made, what risks are our people facing, and what can we do together that none of us can do alone? Trust is built through repeated, concrete collaboration, not through declarations.

5. Use strategic lanes

A plural coalition can organize itself into lanes: political coordination, civic mobilization, legal defense, communications, international advocacy, religious and community outreach, youth engagement, women's leadership, digital security, political prisoner support, and transition planning. Different ideological actors can work together in the same coalition without agreeing on everything if each lane has a defined purpose, and if all lanes serve the same democratic objective.

6. Agree on rules for public disagreement

Unity does not mean silence. But coalitions need rules for disagreement. Members should agree not to publicly delegitimize other democratic actors as enemies merely because they differ ideologically. They should avoid language that helps the regime portray the opposition as chaotic, vengeful, foreign-controlled, anti-religious, extremist, elitist, or anti-national. Internal debate should be honest. Public communication should be disciplined.

7. Protect the coalition from infiltration and provocation

Authoritarian regimes infiltrate, provoke, and manipulate coalitions. They create fake opposition actors, amplify rumors, leak partial information, and encourage public fights. Coalitions need security protocols, verification practices, internal communication rules, and trusted mediation mechanisms. Digital security is not a technical add-on. It is a coalition survival requirement.

8. Build bridges to people who are not yet opposition

A pro-democracy coalition must speak beyond activists. It must reach people who are afraid, skeptical, exhausted, religiously conservative, economically vulnerable, rural, apolitical, or dependent on the state. The message must not be: "Join our

ideology.” The message must be: “You deserve to live without fear, corruption, humiliation, and arbitrary power.” The most powerful democratic language connects freedom to ordinary life: safety, dignity, faith, family, work, justice, truth, and the future of children.

9. Practice ethical nonviolence and democratic discipline

Broad coalitions require confidence that change will not produce vengeance. Nonviolent discipline is therefore crucial. It expands participation and helps movements maintain legitimacy. The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict offers extensive training resources, including a multilingual civil-resistance library and online courses, to support disciplined movement-building. The deeper treatment of this principle is set out in the Playbook training document Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy: Principle and Pragmatism.

10. Build mechanisms for mediation

Every coalition will face conflict. The question is not whether conflict will happen. It is whether conflict will be managed. The coalition should create a small mediation group composed of respected figures from different sectors. Its job is not to impose ideology, but to prevent disputes from destroying the shared democratic front.



SECTION VI

The role of the World Liberty Academy

The World Liberty Academy can become a practical training and advisory platform for building plural pro-democracy coalitions. It should help WLC members and national movements move from symbolic unity to operational coordination.

A coalition-building curriculum could include the following modules:

MODULE 1 · FREEDOM VS. OPPRESSION

Training activists to frame the democratic struggle in universal civic terms rather than narrow ideological labels.

MODULE 2 · MAPPING DEMOCRATIC ACTORS

Identifying parties, civic groups, churches, student organizations, unions, professional associations, independent media, diaspora networks, women’s groups, youth leaders, and local communities.

MODULE 3 · COALITION ARCHITECTURE

Teaching how to design decision rules, strategic lanes, communication systems, working groups, and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

MODULE 4 · MANAGING IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Helping actors distinguish between legitimate pluralism, strategic disagreement, and anti-democratic behavior.

MODULE 5 · NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE AND PUBLIC LEGITIMACY

Using resources from the civil resistance field, including ICNC materials, to help movements protect moral authority and broaden participation.

MODULE 6 · DOMESTIC LEADERSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Training coalitions to work with foreign governments, donors, NGOs, universities, media, and diaspora organizations without losing local legitimacy.

MODULE 7 · COALITION STRESS TESTS

Simulating regime tactics: infiltration, arrests, fake leaks, online smears, ideological provocations, candidate disqualification, and diaspora fragmentation.

The Academy should also offer advisory support: confidential coalition diagnostics, facilitation of strategic dialogues, templates for minimum democratic agreements, mediation support, security checklists, and case-based peer learning from other WLC members.



SECTION VII

A practical coalition-building checklist

Before launching a coalition, democratic actors should answer the following questions together. The exercise itself is part of the work, because the answers reveal which assumptions are shared and which are not.

FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

- › *Who must be included for this coalition to be socially credible?*
- › *What is the minimum democratic agreement?*
- › *What ideological differences are legitimate and expected?*
- › *What behaviors are outside democratic boundaries?*
- › *What is the coalition's concrete purpose?*

STRUCTURE AND DECISIONS

- › *Who decides what?*
- › *How are disputes resolved?*
- › *How are youth, women, religious communities, minorities, regional actors, and exiles included?*
- › *What security protocols protect members?*

PUBLIC POSTURE AND RESILIENCE

- › *How will the coalition communicate publicly?*
- › *How will it avoid becoming a platform for personal ambition?*
- › *How will it measure progress?*
- › *How will international allies support without dominating?*

These questions should be part of the Playbook for Liberty and World Liberty Academy training, and revisited at every major inflection point in the coalition's life.



SECTION VIII

The WLC experience: a coalition beyond ideological borders

The World Liberty Congress itself embodies the principle this essay defends. It brings together activists from different countries, religions, ideologies, languages, generations, and political traditions. Its common ground is not a single party doctrine. Its common ground is the struggle for liberty against authoritarian domination.

This is precisely what makes the WLC valuable. It can model the type of democratic pluralism that authoritarian regimes fear: people who disagree on many things, but who agree that no dictatorship has the right to crush human dignity. In this sense, the WLC is not only an organization. It is a demonstration of the principle that freedom can unite where ideology divides.



CONCLUSION

The discipline of democratic unity

Autocracies are collaborating without ideological purity. They cooperate because they understand their shared interest: preserving power and weakening democracy. Democratic movements must show equal strategic maturity. They do not need to abandon their beliefs. Conservatives can remain conservatives. Liberals can remain liberals. Social democrats can remain social democrats. Religious citizens can remain religious. Secular citizens can remain secular. But all must recognize that under autocracy, none of them is truly free.

The first task is not to win the ideological debate inside the opposition. The first task is to restore the democratic space in which such debates can occur freely, peacefully, and honestly.

The central doctrine of the Playbook for Liberty is therefore clear:

Freedom versus oppression is the common ground.

Pluralism is not a weakness; it is the democratic alternative to authoritarian uniformity.

Coordination does not require unanimity.

Unity does not mean ideological surrender.

It means disciplined cooperation to recover the right of free people to decide their future.

For WLC members, this is both a moral commitment and a strategic imperative. The autocrats have learned to cooperate across ideological contradictions. The defenders of democracy must now learn to coordinate across democratic differences.

SOURCES CITED

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CONTINUE TO PRINCIPLE 2

Principle 2 of the Playbook for Liberty is A Compass, Not Recipes. It addresses why imported strategies fail and how movements can learn from comparative cases without imitating them.

Fuerza y fe.

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