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# A People's Solidarity Can Strengthen the Rise of the Global South

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## Abstract

*This article analyses the contemporary rise of the Global South by situating it within shifting global power structures, expanding labour reserves, and the growing assertion of people's solidarities. It argues that demographic weight alone cannot secure justice or development unless accompanied by grassroots mobilisation and transformative state policy. As neo-colonial dominance weakens and new South–South formations emerge, communities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America are advancing a renewed decolonising consciousness. Youth-led protests, feminist movements, workers' organisations, and ecological struggles collectively challenge inequalities and demand people-centred governance. The article highlights the role of democratic decentralisation, human rights movements, and popular education in forging autonomous development pathways rooted in dignity, solidarity, and ecological balance. It contends that the Global South's rise will be meaningful only if governments align with these social energies to build a more just, democratic, and caring world order.*

**Keywords:** global south, people's solidarities, decolonisation, democratic participation

## 1. Background and rationale

The term 'Global South' may be fluid, but its demographic and political significance is undeniable. World Economics estimates that a commonly used grouping of 99 countries in the Global South is home to over six billion people — about two-thirds of the world's population. Other estimates suggest that as much as 85 per cent of humanity lives in these countries. This share will grow in the coming decades, particularly with the demographic expansion of Africa.

The Global South is also the main site of the world's labour force. Nearly two-thirds of the world's working population is already located here, and this is projected to rise to around three-quarters by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet this demographic weight has not translated into secure livelihoods, social justice, or political voice for the majority.

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An overwhelming share of working people in the Global South are engaged in 'informal' work. ILO data indicates that informal employment constitutes around 85.8 per cent of total employment in Africa and 68.2 per cent in Asia-Pacific. These figures do not even capture those who are completely out of work. By most indicators of social and economic progress, vast sections of the working classes remain in conditions of deep precarity.

Over the past three decades, many countries have seen the emergence of a distinct social category: a broad class of 'out-of-work people' — those who are unemployed, underemployed, or stuck in intermittent and insufficient work. Expanding labour reserves, coupled with their concentration in the Global South, have created a situation where large segments of the population cannot meet basic needs within a single wage relation, or even through wage work at all. Peasant and worker households straddle multiple labour regimes, rural and urban, combining wages, petty production and trade, simple use-values, and unpaid reproductive labour to secure their social reproduction.

For national governments in the Global South, this reality poses a double challenge and a historic opportunity: how to transform demographic and labour weight into social justice, democratic deepening, and autonomous development, and how to do so in ways that are rooted in people's solidarities rather than elite bargains.

## **2. Global shifts and the crisis of neo-colonial power**

The rise of China, India, and several other Southern economies is reshaping the lebenswelt — the lived world — of peoples of the Global South. From being positioned as peripheral to a Northern-dominated global system, these countries have recorded rapid economic growth and visible developmental gains, especially in technology and infrastructure. China has emerged as one of the largest capital suppliers in the world —signaling a dramatic shift from the previous era where capital and power were overwhelmingly concentrated in Western countries now facing economic and political stagnation.

The infrastructure of neo-colonial rule — its financial dominance, ideological authority, and institutional control — is buckling. Over roughly the last two decades, the global economy has moved towards new patterns of trade, finance, and power whose centre of gravity is increasingly shifting to the Global South. This tectonic shift is evident in voting patterns and debates at the UN, but also in formations such as BRICS+, the assertive positions within the African Union, and the growing insistence on a more equitable global order.



At the same time, the Global North is witnessing a renewed rise of racist and exclusionary politics. Young migrant workers, students, and residency seekers — many from the Global South — are being directly targeted. The white supremacist project, of which racism has been a foundational premise, is 'coming home to roost' in the West, centuries after it inflicted devastating violence on colonised peoples.

Empires require moral and ideological narratives to justify their power. Today, the imperial enterprise has lost much of this ideological legitimacy. The moral imagination of humanity — its aspirations for dignity, equality, and planetary survival — is now in sharp conflict with the neo-colonial pursuits of the Global North.

In this context, the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are witnessing a new phase of decolonisation. This phase is no longer only about formal independence — most countries achieved that in the 20th century — but about dismantling the lingering economic, cultural, and epistemic structures of domination. The key question before governments in the Global South is: how can state policy align with and strengthen this deeper decolonising impulse, rather than blunt or co-opt it?

### **3. A new social consciousness from below**

Across villages, towns, and informal settlements, communities in the Global South are asserting their right to live with dignity. Localised struggles — for land, wages, housing, education, gender justice, and ecological survival — are increasingly connected to global efforts to decolonise the political economy and democratise international governance institutions.

These everyday assertions are often led by youthful workers, women, farmers, and historically excluded communities, who are confronting inequality and injustice in their lived realities. Their demands are not simply for marginal improvements but for a more just social order.

Recent youth-led uprisings in Nepal, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Sri Lanka are examples of this new social consciousness. They are rooted in a deep desire for material improvement and social dignity, and they foreground a people-centric articulation of individual and collective rights. These movements compel a rethinking of what justice, equality, and development mean from the standpoint of the majorities in the Global South.

The manifold aspirations of these youthful majorities can no longer be suppressed or indefinitely postponed. They are becoming the life-force of planetary struggles.



For these energies to translate into durable transformation, cooperation between national institutions and social formations — unions, cooperatives, women's groups, farmers' organisations, youth networks, and other people's organisations — is indispensable.

Parallel to this, a new imagination is gathering strength among our peoples — an imagination that looks beyond the limits of Western-led development models towards people-centred, ecologically grounded futures.

## 4. The political identity of the Global South

The story of the Global South is not only geographic or economic. It is profoundly political. It is a story of a shared political identity forged over decades of struggle against colonial rule, racist hierarchies, patriarchy, and climate injustices driven by neo-colonial and extractive neoliberal models.

This identity is increasingly expressed as a quest for psychological liberation, in the sense articulated by Frantz Fanon: liberation not only from external domination but from internalised racism, casteism, and socio-economic mimicry. It involves building a 'national culture' that can serve as the foundation for a renewed national consciousness — one that resists both external domination and internal oppression.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-colonial liberation struggles in Asia and Africa placed the task of building national consciousness at the centre of their projects. National sovereignty and self-determination were claimed not only in legal and territorial terms, but also in cultural, economic, and epistemic terms. The 1955 Bandung Conference embodied this choice of an autonomous path for the Global South.

Today, however, anti-imperialist consciousness is under strain. Social consent within many Southern countries is fragmented; popular energy is unevenly organised. The Global South has become a plural, contested space — with mass mobilisations coexisting alongside abstentions, contradictions, and powerful conservative currents. Yet this very plurality contains the potential for major democratic and transformative turns.

Dismantling the colonial mentality has been difficult and riddled with contradictions, especially given the persistence of deep inequalities and social discriminations. Neo-colonial trajectories still shape economies and institutions. And yet, it is clear that change is underway, driven by ordinary people and popular classes.



Amid these dynamics, India — with its vast and diverse population and its civilisational continuity based on pluralist values — remains a vital pillar of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Global South. India can offer pathways for building new social and national consciousness that move beyond colonial mentalities. Its strength lies in combining postcolonial solidarity with pragmatic diplomacy and reimagining global cooperation not through dominance but through shared development, justice, and democratic values rooted in unity in diversity.

## 5. Democracy, decentralisation, and people's governance

The corrosion of multi-party liberal democracy is visible across the world. Procedural democracy and electoral competition have often lent themselves to elite capture, leaving large sections of the population feeling that these frameworks have not served their interests and sometimes seem barely distinguishable from authoritarian rule.

There is growing social consent for populist authoritarianism and a deepening erosion of trust in democratic institutions. The ILO's 2025 report, *A State of Social Justice: A Work in Progress*, observes that while the world has become healthier, wealthier, and better educated over the past 30 years, deficits in social justice persist. It notes that at least 71 per cent of a person's earnings globally are determined by the circumstances of their birth, and that trust in institutions has been declining since the early 1980s. Without concerted action to strengthen the social contract, this erosion could undermine the legitimacy of democratic systems and global cooperation.

For the Global South, genuine and rooted democratisation requires freeing democracy from colonial and institutional bondage. Democracy must move beyond narrow representational forms towards the more substantive vision articulated by Dr B. R. Ambedkar: political democracy infused with social and economic justice. In its limited legal and institutional form, 'democracy' has too often served neo-colonial interests.

However, many societies in the Global South possess rich traditions of participatory governance and collective decision-making. In India, practices such as *koodams* and *choupals* function as traditional community assemblies. In Southern Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* invokes shared humanity, interdependence, and collective living. Similar institutions and practices exist across Latin America, the Caribbean, West Asia, and Southeast Asia. These traditions hold a balance between rights, cultures, and nature and offer important resources for contemporary democratic renewal.

In recent decades, decentralisation and local governance reforms have become key components of democratic reform in the Global South. Governments in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia have attempted to devolve power from central authorities to local governments — often supported by progressive international organisations. Community-driven development projects have enabled local decision-making, with positive impacts on resource management and poverty alleviation.

In India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (enacted in 1992) provided a formal framework for rural and urban local governance, empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipalities with greater authority and responsibility. These reforms resonate with Mahatma Gandhi's vision of 'village republics' — self-sufficient and self-governing communities. Today, with rapid urbanisation, this vision must extend to 'urban republics' in neighbourhoods and towns.

Although challenges remain — especially in terms of financial autonomy, administrative capacity, and meaningful participation — these reforms represent a significant shift toward inclusive, community-driven governance. A continued push for decentralisation across the Global South signals a commitment to a more participatory and just democracy, provided it is accompanied by genuine devolution of power and resources.

These are powerful ideas that, if deepened, can allow villages, towns, and urban neighbourhoods to blossom as 'little republics', linked through the unity and diversity of nations and transnational solidarities.

## **6. Human rights, people's participation, and social formations**

The current global human rights landscape is marked by declining freedoms and rising abuses. Armed conflicts, wars, authoritarian regimes, repressive laws, and widening inequalities define our moment. As disparities within and between nations increase, discrimination against the weakest intensifies. New human rights risks emerge as technology races ahead of protective standards and policies. The climate crisis poses a particularly grave threat to the rights of nations and peoples in the Global South.

International law, national constitutions, and human rights institutions have contributed to significant advances in rights protection — especially in the post-colonial Global South. Yet, much more is required. Today, some of the most vital defences and advances in human rights are being led by social movements, people's organisations, and human rights and social justice defenders across the world.



These actors are holding states and corporations to account and demanding redistributive justice.

From the Geneva Conventions to the Refugee Convention, and the emerging calls for conventions on debt cancellation and reparative justice, we see efforts to expand the horizon of rights and responsibilities. The Global South is increasingly defined by collective resistance to new forms of exclusion: climate injustice, digital surveillance, casualisation and platformisation of labour, and the weakening of social protection systems.

Drawing on community-level experiences and local life-worlds, movements in the Global South are reframing human rights 'from below' — emphasising collective rights, ecological balance, and the moral imperative of dignity. Feminist, ecological, and decolonial perspectives are expanding the human rights imagination beyond a narrow focus on civil and political rights.

Rising female labour-force participation and women's expanding social consciousness, even in the face of backlash, are generating new energies for social action. Women's struggles for equality and dignity, combined with their experiences of precarious labour, are fuelling both social anxiety and transformative agency.

At the same time, the spread of 'out-of-work' conditions and the expansion of surplus labour create anxieties that can be manipulated into xenophobia, 'sons of the soil' movements, and violence against perceived outsiders — Dalits, religious minorities, migrants, Black communities, and others. These regressive trends pose serious challenges in the realm of social psychology and politics, but they also highlight the importance of building solidarities that can redirect anger towards structural transformation rather than scapegoating.

Across these terrains, we see strong trends challenging the epistemic dominance of the Global North and foregrounding Southern ways of knowing, organising, and imagining freedom.

To advance this struggle, it is not enough to democratise institutions; democracy must be deepened in everyday practice. Peoples' social formations — unions, cooperatives, self-help groups, farmer producer organisations, grassroots movements, and NGOs — are central to this project. They constitute the living infrastructure of people's protagonism.

A key policy task for governments in the Global South is to support and not suppress these formations: to protect civic space, recognise human rights defenders, and enable popular participation in shaping development and rights agendas.



## 7. The centrality of popular education and consciousness

At the heart of this long-term project lies education for human rights, justice, and constitutional values. Building the capacity of people to know, claim, and shape their rights is essential to the unfinished tasks of the post-colonial liberation project.

National governments have a crucial role in supporting popular education on constitutional values, human rights, social and ecological justice, and democratic participation. This work is most effective when carried out in collaboration with institutions mandated to protect rights and with movements and human rights and social justice defenders. Together, they can nurture the 'new woman and man' — new subjectivities capable of acting as protagonists in the struggles for justice and liberation.

## 8. Conclusion: From demography to people's solidarity

Today, the relevance of the Global South lies not only in its demographic weight or diplomatic presence, but in its living ecology of people's solidarities: climate justice movements, feminist economies, youth uprisings, struggles for labour rights, and efforts to decolonise knowledge, culture, and governance.

From Bandung's call for political freedom to today's demand for planetary justice, the Global South remains an evolving idea and practice — a collective insistence that another world is still possible. It asserts the right to epistemic sovereignty: to define knowledge, progress, and justice on its own terms rather than through Northern frameworks.

For national governments in the Global South, the policy challenge is clear. We must align with and strengthen people's solidarities rather than contain them. We have to deepen democracy, decentralisation, and rights in practice, not just in law. Build support for social formations that organise workers, women, youth, peasants, and marginalised communities. Pursue development paths that are just, ecological, and people-centred.

If these commitments are taken seriously, the rise of the Global South can become more than a geopolitical shift. It can be a breathing ecology of solidarities that contests inequality and builds alternate futures from the ground up. Futures of a more equal, democratic, and caring world order.