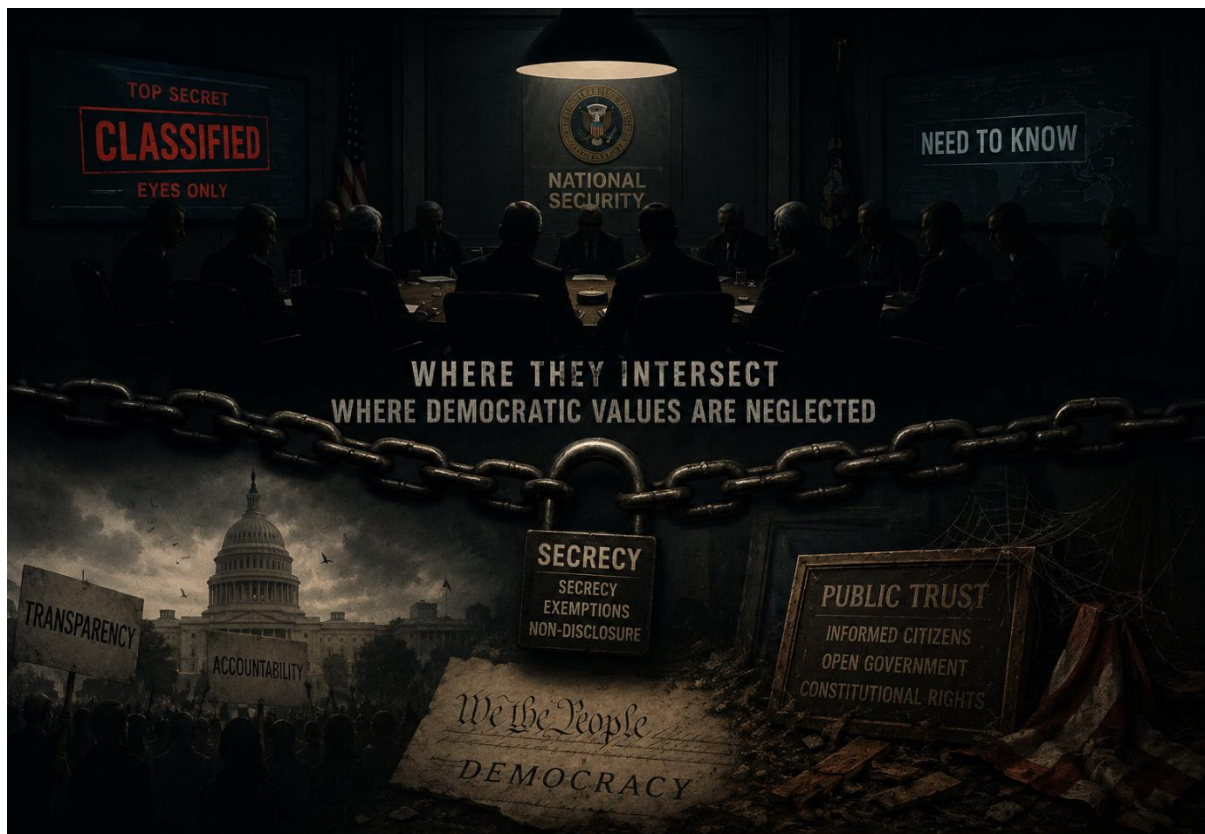


Secrecy, Secret Meetings, and National Security: Where They Intersect, Where Democratic Values are Neglected

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Secrecy and democracy have become increasingly tense in the twenty-first century. In all parts of the world, governments refer to national security as a pretext to restrict the access of citizens to information, to watch them without public scrutiny, and to hold some important deliberations in private. But this secrecy has multiple layers of significance, outlook, and impact.

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The inherent proposition that guides democratic states is that the powers of government do not extend to providing people with the education they are unable to afford.² Transparency is not just an administrative mode of doing things; it is an authentic state of democracy. If not, elections are ceremonies, legislatures evolve into a stage, and courts are made up of facades. But all of today's modern states also have the right to have secrets. But intelligence operations should not be revealed to opponents. The process of diplomatic negotiations calls for a confidential room. If plans can be broadcast, it is not military. So, there needs to be a degree of secrecy that's legitimate to democratic government.³

That is not the question if governments can keep secrets; it is where are the boundaries? Who is going to set the boundaries? And who is going to pay for boundaries when they are drawn too far? Looking at that question as it crosses the divide between Global North and Global South provides a glimpse of a world wherein the secrets have spread beyond their legitimate jurisdiction, invading the space where democratic accountability thrives, where parties perpetrate abuse, and where citizens bear the brunt of it, and outsourcing decision-making functions to the executive branch of governments.

The article looks at the relationship between the two pillars of secrecy and national security in two completely different parts of the world: the Global North and the Global South. It is argued that although both worlds are engaged in democratic erosion, this erosion against the pillars of secrecy is very different in nature, source, and depth on both sides. They all share the same denominator; that is, the silent eviction of the citizen from the heart of democracy.

Where do They Intersect?

Before exploring the variations of secrecy on the other side of the global divide, bringing together some of the varied stakes in closed government debates is necessary.

The government secrecy is not confined to Democratic or Republican administrations, but has been increasing in the U.S. under both administrations, and is more prominent than ever. The secret courts and secret legal systems, which add to the crisis. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) was created under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) of 1978 to provide court supervision of government surveillance.⁴ Its processes are all held

² Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente, "Does Democracy Produce Quality of Government?," *European Journal of Political Research* 49, no. 4 (2010): 443–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01906.x>.

³ George O. Liber et al., "The Big Question: What Should Governments Keep Secret?," *World Policy Journal* 30, no. 3 (2013): 3–8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0740277513506373>.

⁴ The US Department of Justice, "The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA) | Bureau of Justice Assistance," 1978, <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/it/privacy-civil-liberties/authorities/statutes/1286>.

behind closed doors; however, with very little discussion, its thoughts are seldom published, making it a rubber-stamp body that gives politicians a justification for mass data collection, which they don't have to face adversarial debates about. By itself, Section 702 of FISA allows the interception of foreign electronic communications, yet catches the content of countless American communications.⁵ The FBI has admitted illegal use of such power by the agency. This decision, which came over a decade after the programmes started operating without a warrant, has a landmark significance, as a federal district court ruled that such backdoor search warrants are normally required to be granted.

The other aspect would be turning to secret meetings of the highest intelligence officials, meeting behind closed doors, such as a national security council that is not even classified, or however else such summits are organized. A severe possibility would be the meetings behind closed doors between the highest intelligence officials, the national security council, without records, whatever, that are classified.⁶ Accountability cannot be realised where a decision may have far-reaching implications and a significant impact on the lives of people, and where no information can be made available to the public, not even to most legislators. It is not just energy that is localized, but also its understanding.

Different forms of these mechanisms are in place in the Global North and the Global South, and generate similar, but yet different, democratic outcomes.

Secret meetings, intelligence committee meetings, national security council meetings, or any other classified session of diplomats are a unique and specific type of damage to democracy, disconnected definitively from the deliberative link between decision and accountability. Meetings do not leave any compulsory trace, unlike classified documents that are at least recorded and have the possibility of being declassified or leaked.⁷ Actions can be taken, policies can be established, and civil rights can be impacted in total darkness without any record of any of these actions being made public.

The way government decisions are currently taken in the Global North, with classified briefings, in-camera congressional sessions, and executive-only national security deliberations, some of the more important ones in drone strikes, mass surveillance authorizations, and covert

⁵ Cato Institute, "The Fourth Amendment Forecloses a Foreign Intelligence Exception: A Brief Case Against the FISA Section 702 Program," Cato Institute, June 3, 2026, <https://www.cato.org/blog/fourth-amendment-forecloses-foreign-intelligence-exception-brief-case-against-fisa-section-702>.

⁶ "A Conversation With Former National Security Advisors | Council on Foreign Relations," September 15, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-former-national-security-advisors-0>.

⁷ European Parliament, "NATIONAL SECURITY AND SECRET EVIDENCE IN LEGISLATION AND BEFORE THE COURTS: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES," DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES POLICY DEPARTMENT C: CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS, 2014.

operations, are completely protected from democratic debate. Voters can cast their ballots for or against politicians who may have been involved in these decisions, but if they don't know what the decisions were, they can't vote on them, and it is not a workable example of democratic accountability.⁸

Instead, at least in the Global South, meetings are deliberately hidden from civilians or the civilian oversight of parliaments—among international security services, military commanders brief presidents, or foreign intelligence officers give talks in capitals under diplomatic guises, on topics no domestic parliament will ever address.

The Global North: Secrecy with institutional cover

The liberal democracies of Europe and North America are characterized by their reliance on sophisticated legal and institutional structures whose opacity is also an attribute and whose ability to provide oversight is claimed. Secretive government in liberal democracies of Europe and North America relies on a sophisticated body of law and an institutional system, which, at the same time, claims oversight. What is the outcome of such processes if they seem to be checked and balanced, but real review is excluded from citizens' grasp, and sometimes from legislators' grasp as well? The outcome is what can be called legitimised unaccountability.

The clearest case study is the United States. Over the years, the Cold War and post-9/11 era have been employed, the national security classification system categorizes millions of documents every year. And, according to the government's own internal claims, many of those documents contain absolutely no sensitive material. The tendency has been reinforced and mitigated to its detriment by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which passed in 1966 to be its coparent. FOIA is a slingshot trying to break through the tank armour of government non-disclosure.⁹

How the intelligence and surveillance strategy (secrecy) works trans-nationally in the Global North is further understood by the Five Eyes intelligence alliance of the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.¹⁰ These countries exchange intelligence with each other through agreements whose complete conditions are classified, and have an arrangement for surveillance that goes beyond a nation's legislative framework. Domestic transparency measures may be

⁸ DCAF, "Oversight and Guidance: Parliaments and Security Sector Governance," DCAF, 2015.

⁹ Tina Zappile, "Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).," 2014.

¹⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC)," accessed June 8, 2026, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/217-about/organization/icig-pages/2660-icig-fiorc>.

structurally inadequate since a programme that a national parliament could hold to account can be given to an allied intelligence service.

Secret meetings in the Global North create a specific form of democratic deficit. A democracy is formed that allows decisions to be made that relate to a life change of tremendous proportions, but from which the elected representatives can be excluded. Intelligence committees in the U.S. Congress also take classified briefings, but committee members do not share the information. Congress, and more precisely its members, are restricted from sharing intelligence information learned from the government.¹¹ That adds to the irony of elected officials who know the government is doing something, while they cannot tell their constituents what they are doing, not even as a matter of public debate.

This is dramatically illuminated by the Snowden revelations of 2013 of the judiciary committee of the United States Senate whose investigations of the FISA programmes were carried out in the dark and which allowed the Government to interpret the surveillance authorities it reviewed in ways that had little to do with what they actually meant. One senator pointed out, during congressional hearings thereupon, that for years the USA PATRIOT Act had been secretively interpreted to allow the bulk collection of Americans phone records on an unprecedented scale, which had been hidden from the public—and, indeed, most of Congress.¹²

The national security classification system also relates to the exercise of executive power, which centralises powers and detracts from legislative powers. The doctrine of ‘civilisational realism’ and ‘hard sovereignty,’ for example, borders on ‘civilisational warfare’ and ‘hard sovereignty,’ which generally involves a focus on the internal over the external by moving the departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and Defense into the national security. For instance, the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy points to a shift from the traditional focus on outward security toward security at home, a shift that reflects ‘civilisational realism’ and ‘hard sovereignty,’ a doctrine that extends the outside-to-inside paradigm to the field of security.¹³ The profound changes in structure that have far-reaching implications for civil freedoms and the balance of powers are expressed in texts in which there is often not enough debate or public understanding.

¹¹ Greg Moore, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Intelligence - Two Volume Set*, First edition (Auerbach Publications, 2015).

¹² The US Department of Justice, “The USA PATRIOT ACT OF 2001,” 2001.

¹³ The White House, “The US National Security Strategy 2025,” 2025.

The Global South: Secrecy as domination

Secrecy on the part of powerful foreign governments about what they do on Global South land is not always the most serious type of governmental transparency. Africa, Latin America, and Asia have also been the subjects of generations of under-the-covers politics, in the form of covert operations, regime-change activities, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and categorised political pressure from Northern governments, with often devastating ramifications for democracy.¹⁴

Across the Global South, government actions promoting domestic transparency often carry the shades of ‘national security’ or ‘sovereignty,’ legitimate historical resonance, and substantial democratic dangers. Developing countries have a history of being subjected to colonialism and then to pressure from international financial institutions and donor governments of the North, and they do not readily accept being pressured by nations of the North to adhere to transparency as something they see being imposed on them.

This scepticism has manifested itself in new multilateral initiatives. Through organizations such as G77 and BRICS, countries in Africa and Latin America have risen in protest against Western democracy-building efforts as a geopolitical means to influence other nations, a tactic that has long been employed, next to their own allegations of interfering in sovereign countries’ internal affairs behind closed doors.¹⁵ The Carnegie Endowment pointed out in an analysis on China-Africa relations that many countries are asking for ‘transparency’ from governments lacking transparency when they imposed the rule on their former colonial masters, while questioning norms that are rooted in the practice of requesting ‘suspension’ of democracy during the course of a war.¹⁶

But asymmetry exists. Western governments that require transparency from the governments of the Global South have developed their own complex modes of secret keeping, and have not left to others the same sort of review and checks that they conduct on the governments of the ‘other.’ But this is not necessarily the question answered by this legitimate grievance: does domestic ‘secrecy’ in governments of the Global South benefit or harm their own citizens?

¹⁴ Sudha Setty, *National Security Secrecy: Comparative Effects on Democracy and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Zainab Usman and Tang Xiaoyang, *How Is China’s Economic Transition Affecting Its Relations With Africa?*, May 30, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/how-is-chinas-economic-transition-affecting-its-relations-with-africa>.

In Both Hemispheres, the Accountability Deficit

The Global North and Global South are both facing a common failing. That is, a lack of accountability of governments for their actions in the name of ‘security,’ while behind the scenes. Where there is no accountability, there is no information; information is what security secrecy deprives. The outcome is a structural immunity that is in force whether a country is formally democratic or not.¹⁷

In the Global North, this means secret courts, whose decisions aren’t made public, intelligence programmes with their extent kept secret from the legislature, and classification policies that preserve the interests of the institution, not true security, and the arrangements of surveillance between institutions that are not subject to the authority of a single body. Structural constraints that disadvantage democratic institutions in their ability to police executive power: parliaments, courts, and free media.¹⁸ Structural weaknesses of democratic institutions to exercise hold on executives is asymmetric information that they are unable to rectify.

In the Global South, the accountability deficit exists in the same ways, but with less ability of institutions to hold foreign governments to account because they are less organized, easier to bully, and less transparent about what happens in the Global South. Repressive state laws can be used to open the floodgates for criminal, internet, and often physical violence against civil society groups trying to practice their accountability role.¹⁹

This means two different sets of immediate requirements for a better relationship between national security and democratic values, in the Global North and the Global South, but with the same result, with transparent process, accountability, and being bound by law: governance knowledge, citizens’ control over, and public debate on the law.

In the Global North, that translates to a real reform of the overclassification system, in the sense of restricting the amount of subjects that it covers to those that really need to be kept confidential, and some reform of secret court proceedings to make adversarial challenges possible. It does not mean setting up investigative bodies with limited, toothless authority or limited access to them.²⁰

Global South refers to the struggle to demand transparency on foreign intelligence services’ activities within other States’ borders and to create an accountability mechanism for global or

¹⁷ Marlen Heide and Jean-Patrick Villeneuve, “Framing National Security Secrecy: A Conceptual Review,” *International Journal* 76, no. 2 (2021): 238–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020211016475>.

¹⁸ Marcus G. Raskin, “Democracy versus the National Security State,” in *The State and Democracy* (Routledge, 1988).

¹⁹ Heide and Villeneuve, “Framing National Security Secrecy”; Setty, *National Security Secrecy*.

²⁰ Melley, *The Covert Sphere*. 2012

regional intelligence services that is not dependent on Northern donors' or intelligence services' priorities. It means bolstering domestic security institutions' oversight and accountability to other mechanisms, such as civil society organisations and journalists that do not work directly with security institutions.

Whatever happens, both worlds must be united behind the rule that questions of justification must be brought from the government to the subject and not the reverse. There is one exception to secrecy. The guiding principle is being transparent. Each secret meeting, each classified program, and withheld document is a loan of trust from the public that is due to be repaid, with interest.