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## **Defending open society: UCT lecture confronts rising threats to democracy and justice**

The advancement of human rights, equity and justice is critical in today's rapidly changing global landscape; a landscape faced with rising authoritarianism, shrinking civic spaces and increasing threats to democratic governance – according to renowned activist Binaifer Nowrojee, who delivered a lecture at the University of Cape Town (UCT) recently.

The lecture was titled “The State of the World: Defending Open Society in a Dangerous World”.

“And so, we must ask ourselves: How do we defend open society values in a dangerous world? How do we return to the core values that bind our common humanity? The vision of a democratic and open society is one that we need to hold on to, and defend, through these dangerous times. This isn’t a time for us to back down, but a time for us all to stand by the courage of our convictions,” said Nowrojee, president of the [Open Society Foundation](#).

The timely and thought-provoking special lecture was held at the [Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking Afrika](#) (d-school Afrika). It was organised by UCT’s [Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance](#) in collaboration with the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), the Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika and the [UCT Graduate School of Business](#) (UCT GSB).

Offering both a critical analysis of threats to human rights, equity and justice, and a hopeful vision for the future, the lecture drew a distinguished audience of leaders and policy makers dedicated to promoting human rights and fostering more inclusive societies. It coincided with South Africa’s Human Rights Month, commemorated in March under the 2025 theme, “Deepening a Culture of Social Justice and Human Rights”, honouring the sacrifices of anti-apartheid activists.

### **A stark reminder: inequality and injustice persist**

Nowrojee reminded the audience that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world – a stark reminder that the end of apartheid’s laws did not mean the end of its injustices. According to the World Bank, the top 10% of earners in this country take home two-thirds of national income, while the bottom 50% earn just 5%, she said.

Oxfam reports that over the past five years, the world's richest 1% have captured two-thirds of all new wealth created. "This is not an accidental byproduct of a mismanaged system; it is the result of a system designed to produce such outcomes.

"The grotesque concentration of wealth has given rise to a new oligarchy – or, as some have called it, a "tech bro-ligarchy," dominated by a handful of billionaire Silicon Valley men, and it is always men!, who now wield immense power over our economies, our politics, and even our thoughts."

She added: "An unequal planet is also an endangered planet. The ravages of inequality are inextricably linked to the ravages of climate change. The same system that allows a tiny elite to amass unimaginable wealth also fuels environmental destruction, as corporations prioritise short-term profits over the long-term health of our planet."

Nowrojee said that free elections, free markets and free speech were once hailed as the guiding lights toward a free, democratic and prosperous world. "Now, we see how these three strands have begun to unravel, revealing not only their differences but their contradictions. Far from reinforcing one another, they are now often at odds, exposing the fragility of the systems we once took for granted."

### **Strengthening civil society and youth leadership**

She called for a unified and strategic response from the global human rights movement to counter these threats and safeguard fundamental freedoms.

Despite the challenges, Nowrojee expressed hope in the next generation. "Across the world, we see flames of hope ignited by young people who are claiming their future. They aren't just protesting bad policies; they are challenging outdated and oppressive systems that have created the unjust world they will inherit."

### **Rebuilding democratic resilience in Africa**

Professor Faizel Ismail, the director of the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, said while countries such as South Africa and others in Africa made significant advances in building democratic states in the first decade of the 21st century, there has been much regression of democracy in many African countries in the past decade.

"Today, we are witnessing a dramatic rise of autocratic and authoritarian social movements and an increase in authoritarian states around the world. Hyper-globalisation, driven by the ideology of neo-liberalism, has exacerbated inequality between and within countries. And the competition for critical minerals and energy required to build the new technologies to address the challenges of climate change have contributed to increased geo-economic and geo-political tensions."

He said at the school, they are obsessed with re-building the resilience of democratic institutions in South Africa and across Africa.

The event also launched a commemorative book celebrating the 30-year legacy of the Open Society Foundation for South Africa. This publication traces the foundation's roots back to George Soros' early support for black South African students at UCT during apartheid. It was part of a series of engagements by Nowrojee during her visit to South Africa.



Binaifer Nowrojee and moderator Iman Rappetti

Photo: Lerato Maduna

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***Ends***

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