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The Next Democratic Century

LARRY DIAMOND

This is an odd moment to predict a bright future for democracy. Despite the unprecedented expansion of political freedom during the three decades from 1974, democratic regimes are in trouble worldwide today. The past decade has witnessed democratic breakdowns at a growing pace, and levels of freedom have receded in many places. Autocrats are cooperating and innovating to preempt movements for democratic change. The world's oldest and most esteemed democracies, beginning with the United States, have lost their luster and (it seems) their capacity to function effectively to address their most important public policy challenges. Still, no other broadly legitimate form of government exists today, and authoritarian regimes face profound challenges and contradictions that they cannot resolve without ultimately moving toward democracy.

During the past century, democracy went from being a unique feature of the West (and a few Western-leaning Latin American countries) to a system incorporated by a growing number of non-Western countries, most of them former British colonies that reached independence during the first two decades after World War II. But the rise of communism and fascism and the shock of the Great Depression during the interwar period had occasioned what the political scientist Samuel Huntington called a “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns. From the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the world wrestled with a second reverse wave, during which military coups swallowed fragile and often deeply polarized democracies in Latin America, Greece, Turkey, and parts of Asia,

while elsewhere in Asia and Africa one-party or personal authoritarian regimes came to dominate.

A number of factors fed the authoritarian zeitgeist: the spectacular failures of some democracies to govern effectively or maintain order, the successes of East Asian developmental dictatorships, the popularity in poor countries of authoritarian socialist models and ideologies, and the US-Soviet Cold War rivalry that saw each superpower back any dictator who would offer geopolitical support. By the mid-1970s, democracy seemed to many a quaint relic of a liberal past—a model of where the world had been, not where it was headed.

Then came Portugal's Revolution of the Carnations in April 1974, overturning nearly half a century of quasi-fascist dictatorship, and a new wave of democratization began. Even with the rise of democracy in Portugal, Spain, and Greece in the subsequent few years, and then the transitions from military to democratic rule in Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, few imagined that a truly global process of transformation was under way. Even the popular protests that toppled Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, or the student demonstrations that compelled the military to hand over power in South Korea, did not suggest a global trend. The fall of the Berlin Wall, however, changed everything. Not only did it spark democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe; the end of the Cold War unfroze the African landscape and encouraged democratic openings throughout the continent. By the mid-1990s, democracy had become a global phenomenon, accounting for about three of every five states in the world.

BREAKING DOWN

The story since the early 2000s is more sobering. Since 1999, the rate of democratic breakdowns in the world has accelerated significantly (to nearly 20 percent of all democracies existing

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in the period 1999 through 2011, almost twice the rate of the preceding 12 years). Moreover, these breakdowns—whether by military or executive coup or by more subtle and incremental degradations—have come in some large and strategic states, such as Pakistan, Nigeria, Venezuela, Russia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The number and percentage of democracies peaked in 2006 and have ebbed since then. In fact, for most of the past seven years, the number of countries declining in freedom (as measured by the monitoring group Freedom House) has significantly exceeded the number of nations gaining in freedom.

These unfavorable trends have been particularly evident in Africa, where the proportion of democracies has gone from about half in 2006 to little more than a third today. In the former Soviet Union, parts of Latin America (such as the Andean region), and South and Southeast Asia, democracy has also faced a rocky road. Even many of the postcommunist countries of the European Union, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, have struggled with threats to the quality of democracy. And this is not to mention rising support for extremist parties in some older European democracies that are mired in economic crisis, particularly Greece.

A common set of problems underlies the vulnerability or erosion of democracies in diverse parts of the world. To put it most succinctly, formal democratic institutions have not gained sufficient strength to rein in undemocratic or corrupt informal practices. Clientelism, nepotism, and rent seeking vitiate the rule of law and the quality of governance and politics. The distribution of patronage to build and maintain bases of support overruns fiscal responsibility. Loyalty to leaders trumps fidelity to rules and institutions. And cynical and ambitious politicians mobilize identity—ethnicity, clan, religion, region, and, where useful, xenophobic nationalism—as a substitute for programmatic politics and the delivery of developmental progress.

It is easy in theory to identify the remedy: strengthening democratic institutions in both the political arena and the state. However, as the recent work of Francis Fukuyama has shown, building and reforming the kinds of impersonal institutions that sustain democracy, prosperity, and the rule of law present the toughest challenge

for national development. As we are seeing in the United States, Japan, and Europe, the struggle never really ends, since various forces and special interests are always trying to undermine impersonal rules and game the system to gain undue advantage. But it is particularly difficult for countries that have never institutionalized the rule of law, a bureaucratic state, and liberal democratic norms of freedom, accountability, and constraint of power to do so for the first time. Among the post-World War II “developing countries,” only a few—including Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica—have accomplished this.

PASSING THE TEST

Even so, a surprising number of other emerging democracies have met a litmus test of reasonably “liberal” democracy (garnering one of the two best scores on the seven-point Freedom House scales of both political rights and civil liberties). Forty percent of the world’s states and about two-thirds of the world’s democracies (or 79 nations in all) now meet this test. And while the number and proportion of liberal democracies have hardly changed in the last seven years, at least they have not declined.

Moreover, a number of other emerging market countries have consolidated a decent level of democracy—in the sense that it is very difficult to imagine another reversal of democracy in these countries. To the extent that they find democratic “consolidation” a useful concept, most scholars of Brazil would put it in this category. The same is true for Mexico, where democracy has survived in the face of widespread violence related to drug trafficking. For all its disturbing levels of corruption, clientelism, paralysis, and dysfunction, it is similarly difficult to imagine democracy being replaced by another type of regime in India. If, after a disappointing second term for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia elects a reformist president in 2014 (such as the energetic, progressive governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo, who is now leading in the polls), Indonesian democracy might also turn in a more liberal and stable direction.

South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, India, and Indonesia are among the emerging market members of the Group of 20 industrialized nations.

With rising education and incomes and growing access to information, values are changing.

Three other members of that club—Turkey, Argentina, and South Africa—fall into the category of more troubled or embattled democracies, with ruling executives and parties that appear to harbor hegemonic ambitions. Each of the three will hold national elections in 2014 or 2015, during which each could move either in the direction of further democratic decay or toward a more liberal and rooted democracy.

Having decimated the old power establishment in suspiciously wide-ranging trials of alleged coup plotters, while also continuing to intimidate and constrain the press, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) remain the dominant political force in Turkey. After serving more than a decade as prime minister, Erdogan (whose party's rules bar him from seeking another term in that post) is trying to change the constitution to create a muscular, French-style semi-presidential system, which would enable him to remain in power for a long time. Turkey will hold its first direct presidential election in August 2014, but it is not at all clear that Erdogan will succeed in amending the constitution to give that post the strong executive powers he seeks. Widespread youth protests in recent months signal the beginning of a societal pushback against the AKP's autocratic governing style.

In Argentina, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's bid to aggrandize her power has already failed. In midterm elections in late October 2013,

her party fell far short of the two-thirds majority it would need to amend the constitution to allow her a third term. Political momentum is now shifting from her party due to corruption and economic mismanagement, and Argentines are beginning to look beyond what will be a dozen years of rule by Fernández de Kirchner and her late husband, Néstor Kirchner.

In South Africa, while there is little doubt that President Jacob Zuma's African National Congress will win the 2014 national elections, a viable multiracial opposition is slowly beginning to rise in the form of the Democratic Alliance, the country's only party to have steadily and significantly increased its share of the vote in each of the four post-apartheid national elections. Led by a savvy and effective institution builder, Western Cape Premier Helen Zille, the Democratic Alliance is gradually expanding from its roots in South Africa's racial minorities to appeal to black voters dissatisfied with corruption, high unemployment, and poor service delivery—long-standing problems that have only grown worse under Zuma.

The fate of democracy outside the West will be shaped disproportionately by what happens in these weighty G-20 countries that could move in either direction—Indonesia, Argentina, Turkey, and South Africa—and by whether Brazil and India can demonstrate the ability of large democracies to generate vigorous, sustainable, and reasonably equitable economic growth. If these countries move even incrementally to entrench democracy and deliver development, the G-20 will have become a strong “club of democracies,” with only Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia holding out.

From the archives
of *Current History*...

“Democracy at its shabby third-best is better than Fascism at its proudest. The cruelties, the repressions, and the injustices committed in the United States today, though far from negligible, are still nothing compared to the efficient assault that Fascism has made on the very principles of civilization. In one case, the evils are accidental; in the case of Fascism, they are essential—part of the very structure of the state itself.”

Lewis Mumford

“America at Armageddon”

March 1939

HISTORY IN THE MAKING
100
years
1914 - 2014

CHANGING VALUES

There are other reasons for optimism about the future of democracy. Particularly in Asia, economic development in a number of countries is having the predictable effects it had in South Korea and Taiwan, and before that in Spain and Portugal. With rising levels of education and incomes and growing access to information, values are changing. People are becoming more tolerant of diversity, more politically demanding and assertive, and more willing to protest. As Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan and Christian Welzel of Leuphana University put it, people's value priorities are shifting from material gain to “emancipation from authority.” Closely intertwined with this psychological shift is the rise of civil society—of

independent organizations and flows of information, opinion, and ideas.

These psychological and social changes undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian rule and generate favorable conditions for democratization in Asia—not only in Malaysia and Singapore, where it will probably happen within a decade, but in China itself, where both the decay of communist rule and the rise of a middle-class society are much more advanced than has generally been appreciated. Without major political reforms, it is unlikely that communist rule can survive in China beyond Xi Jinping’s expected two five-year terms as president. And in terms of the pressure for political change, Vietnam is not all that far behind China (particularly given South Vietnam’s earlier experience with more pluralistic politics and more capitalist economics).

Factor in as well the incremental progress toward reviving democracy in Thailand, the efforts of reformist President Benigno Aquino to rein in corruption in the Philippines, and a political opening in Myanmar (though it is still far from democracy), and it becomes possible to imagine that one of the most powerful emerging-market trading blocs could be predominantly democratic within a decade.

GENERATIONAL CHANGE

The disheartening outcomes of the Arab Spring protests suggest that a “zone of democracy” is probably a more distant prospect in the Arab world. In Egypt, democratic hopes have been crushed first by the power grab of the Muslim Brotherhood under President Mohamed Morsi, and then by an Egyptian military all too eager to respond to massive anti-Morsi protests with a coup that has silenced all antiestablishment criticism, both Islamist and secular. In Bahrain, peaceful pro-democracy protests were crushed with the aid of Saudi and other troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council—with American acquiescence. Syria has disintegrated into a state of total civil war; Libya is struggling to build a government that can wrest authority from the tyranny of multiple armed militias accountable to no one; and Yemen is engaged in a United Nations–medi-

ated national dialogue to try to avoid dissolution or another civil war.

Yet this is only part of the story. While security is deteriorating in Tunisia as well, that country still has a real chance to produce a democratic constitution and elect a new democratic government in 2014. None of the region’s monarchies can be considered truly stable, and in the near term, Morocco and Jordan also present interesting possibilities for democratic transitions if the leadership can be found to implement them or to assemble a broad societal coalition to demand them.

The 16 Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa are a diverse group with widely varying near-term possibilities for sustaining pluralist politics. But to one degree or another, all of them are showing signs of frustration and exhaustion with the stagnation and injustice of authoritarian rule. What began with the

self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor in December 2010 was not an “Arab Spring” but rather a generational process of political disruption and change that will, sooner or later, though certainly not in linear fashion, give concrete

form to the increasingly broad aspirations in the region for political dignity, voice, and accountability.

If one considers as well the persistent popular aspirations for better governance in sub-Saharan Africa, even among (we know now, from several rounds of Afrobarometer surveys) very poor and ill-educated citizens—and the signs of civic vitality in at least a few post-Soviet states (such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan)—it is hard to sustain analytically the current mood of gloom about democracy’s prospects. Democracy, to be sure, can hardly have a secure future without a restoration of confidence in its ability to function in the wealthy, advanced states of the West. But governance is always a difficult challenge, especially in the internet age of intensified attention and heightened cynicism. It is worth considering the intrinsic political dilemmas of authoritarian regimes, and the tenacity of popular aspirations for government that is open and accountable, before we conclude that the historical moment for democracy has passed. ■

*No other broadly
legitimate form of
government exists today.*
