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IS DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE?

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Since the publication of its inaugural issue in January 1990, the *Journal of Democracy* has published well over a thousand articles, exploring all aspects of the workings of democracy and the struggles of democratic movements. But we have been especially concerned with tracking democracy's advances and setbacks around the world. For 25 years, we have been "taking the temperature" of democracy. Since 1998, we have published annually an article summarizing Freedom House's survey of Freedom in the World, and we have featured numerous other essays analyzing democracy's global trajectory, beginning with Samuel P. Huntington's classic 1991 article introducing the concept of the "third wave" of democratization. So it should not be unexpected that we turn to this subject as the central theme of our twenty-fifth anniversary issue.

Some may be surprised, however, by the headline on our cover—"Is Democracy in Decline?"—which faithfully reflects the way in which we posed the question to our contributors. For a journal that is unabashedly in favor of democracy, this obviously is not the kind of celebratory theme that might be preferred for marking a historic milestone. Yet this seemed to be the question that everyone was asking as 2015 approached, and we decided that it deserved a thorough examination.

Tracing the viewpoints and opinions expressed over the years in the *Journal* (especially on its five-year anniversaries) suggests how evaluations of and sentiments about the state of democracy have evolved since 1990. The editors' introduction that Larry Diamond and I wrote for the inaugural issue was animated by the view that democracy was experiencing a "remarkable worldwide resurgence," but also by a concern that

it lagged behind its rivals with respect to political ideas and organization. Five eventful years later, we recognized not only that democracy had spread to many more countries but also that it had hugely improved its standing in terms of ideas and organization. We asserted that democracy had “gained enormous ground” with respect to “international legitimacy” and that it now “reign[ed] supreme in the ideological sphere.” Multilateral organizations were increasingly endorsing democratic principles, and a whole new field of international democracy assistance had emerged. At the turn of the century, these trends seemed only to be growing stronger. In introducing a special tenth-anniversary issue on “Democracy in the World” modeled on Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, we argued that Tocqueville had supplanted Marx and concluded, “We are all Tocquevilleans now.”

By 2005, however, our tone had grown far more downbeat, and we acknowledged a darkening mood among supporters of democracy. We attributed this in part to the travails of democracy-building in postinvasion Iraq and to Russia’s descent back into authoritarianism, but argued that the overall global trends were mixed and did not justify discouragement among democrats. By 2010, we were prepared to grant that “there now may even be grounds for speaking of an erosion of freedom over the past few years, though its dimensions are very slight.”

Confronting Decline

Yet here in our twenty-fifth anniversary issue, we feel compelled to confront head-on the question of whether democracy is in decline. Why? There are two aspects to the answer, which although intertwined are in some measure separable. The first deals with what is actually taking place on the ground: How many countries are democratic? Is their number rising or shrinking? What is the situation with respect to such liberal-democratic features as freedom of the press, rule of law, free and fair elections, and the like? The second, more subjective, aspect concerns the standing of democracy in the world: How is it viewed in terms of legitimacy and attractiveness? It is in this latter dimension that the evidence, or at least the widespread perception, of decline is most striking.

As readers will see, the first dimension is open to differing interpretations. The divergence among them is most sharply posed by comparing Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way’s essay on “The Myth of Democratic Recession” with Larry Diamond’s on the need for “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession.” Levitsky and Way point out that even the Freedom House data show only a very slight decline in levels of freedom since 2000 and that other indices show none at all. In addition, they argue that during the 1990s most observers (including Freedom House)

were too prone to count any country where an autocratic regime fell as a case of transition to democracy. In the view of Levitsky and Way, many of these countries temporarily enjoyed “pluralism by default” because of authoritarian weakness, but never truly established democracy. Many of them have now seen a consolidation of authoritarianism, but because their regimes were wrongly classified as democratic in the first place, this should not be seen as evidence of democratic decline.

Larry Diamond, while not necessarily disputing Levitsky and Way’s criticism of how these countries were rated in the early 1990s, finds other empirical evidence that the past decade has been “a period of at least incipient decline in democracy.” He cites an increasing incidence of democratic breakdowns, the poor performance of new democracies according to various measures of good governance and rule of law, and democratic backsliding or stagnation in the biggest and wealthiest non-Western countries. There are strong arguments on both sides of this debate, but ultimately I do not think that analyses of the Freedom House (or other) numbers can settle the larger question.

Moreover, the broad contours of the trends revealed by the data are not really in dispute. Democracy began to make significant gains in the world in the years 1975–85. It then advanced at a prodigious rate in 1985–95. Its progress then began to slow, and only modest gains were achieved in the following decade, with scores peaking sometime in the early 2000s. Since then, the pattern has been one of stasis or very minor decline—certainly nothing like the “reverse waves” that Huntington identified in previous eras. The absence of democratic progress can be characterized negatively as “stagnation” or more hopefully as the conserving of prior democratic gains. But even if one discerns in the data a slight fall in the number of democracies, this cannot account for the perception of decline that has been spreading among democracy’s friends, foes, and skeptics alike.

In my view, then, we must look elsewhere for the real sources of “declinist” sentiment about democracy, and several of the essays in this issue can help us to locate them. A number of these sources are introduced in the latter part of Larry Diamond’s article. One, which Diamond labels “bad governance,” is elaborated in the essay by Francis Fukuyama. This term refers in the first instance to the failure of many new democracies to build effective modern states. Because of this failure, which can lead to lagging economic growth, poor public services, lack of personal security, and pervasive corruption, the citizens of such countries understandably feel disappointed by democracy. Fukuyama contends that “the legitimacy of many democracies around the world depends less on the deepening of their democratic institutions than on their ability to provide high-quality governance.” Of course, bad governance afflicts most (though not all) nondemocratic countries as well, but this offers scant consolation to citizens who feel that their government is failing them.

Fukuyama concludes that those who wish to strengthen democracy need to pay greater attention to state-building, including such prosaic matters as public administration and policy implementation. This is no doubt useful advice. Yet good governance remain stubbornly hard to achieve, especially in new democracies. In such settings, where citizens are still new to democratic attitudes and institutions, there is an almost inevitable tendency to blame poor governance on democracy. This accounts, at least in part, for democracy's tendency to break down in countries that have adopted it for the first time, and its failure to take root in some places until it has been tried several times. Yet this pattern need not portend democratic failure in the long term. Many more years might be needed to attain democratic consolidation, but time would still be on the side of democracy.

Three Sources of Doubt About Democracy

This optimistic long-term scenario, however, presupposes that democracy remains the goal that countries are seeking. And this in turn is likely to depend on its being viewed both as the global standard of political legitimacy and as the best system for achieving the kind of prosperity and effective governance that almost all countries seek. What has changed most dramatically in recent years is that these presuppositions are increasingly being called into question. In my view, there are three chief reasons for this shift: 1) the growing sense that the advanced democracies are in trouble in terms of their economic and political performance; 2) the new self-confidence and seeming vitality of some authoritarian countries; and 3) the shifting geopolitical balance between the democracies and their rivals.

The first of these was generated by the 2008 financial crisis and its lingering economic consequences, including the recession and high unemployment rates that still plague much of Europe. That the advanced democracies suffered these reverses at a time when emerging-market countries were growing at a rapid clip undercut the notion that the institutions and policies of the West were worthy of emulation by "the rest." The political dysfunction that afflicted the advanced democracies as they sought to respond to the crisis further weakened their appeal. As Thomas Carothers notes in his essay on the changing global context of democracy promotion, "Democracy's travails in both the United States and Europe have greatly damaged the standing of democracy in the eyes of many people around the world."

The flip side of democracy's dwindling prestige has been the growing clout of a number of leading authoritarian regimes. Key among them is China, whose ability to make enormous economic strides without introducing democratic reforms has cast doubt on the notion that democracy is the only appropriate political system for wealthy countries. At the same time, as E. Gyimah-Boadi points out, China "is providing African

governments with alternative non-Western markets, trade partners, and sources of military and development aid”—aid that is not tied to considerations of human rights or government accountability in the recipient states. Nor is China the only assertive nondemocratic power. Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela also have been learning from one another and even cooperating directly to thwart democracy’s progress.

The essay on China in this issue by Andrew J. Nathan is the first in a series that the *Journal of Democracy* will be publishing in 2015 on what we have labeled the “authoritarian resurgence.” It hurts to use this title; our first *Journal of Democracy* book, published in 1993, was called *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*. But today it does seem to be authoritarianism that has the wind at its back, even if it has not yet spread to many more countries. One sign of this is the headway that the authoritarians have made in the realm of “soft power,” especially in major regional and multilateral organizations. The prodemocratic norms that the democracies helped to embed in organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the OAS in the 1990s are being weakened by antidemocratic nations represented in these bodies. Countries such as Russia and China also are ramping up their cultural diplomacy and international broadcasting while Western efforts in these fields have been unfocused and underfunded.

But it is not only in “soft-power” competition that the advanced democracies have fallen short. Increasingly, they are looking weaker in terms of hard power as well, shrinking their defense budgets even as authoritarian states spend more on arms. Over the past 25 years, the *Journal of Democracy* devoted little attention to issues of interstate relations or military affairs. In part, this reflected our sense of where the *Journal* enjoys a comparative advantage among world-affairs periodicals—most of them focus on security and foreign policy, while few study the domestic politics of non-Western countries. But we also felt that the internal developments accompanying or preceding struggles over democracy often were decisive in shaping the direction of international relations. Certainly that seemed true during the height of the third wave. Though the international context mattered, of course, the spark for change frequently came from internal grievances, movements, and conflicts, and by concentrating on these the *Journal*, in our view, was generally “ahead of the curve” in providing insight into how international developments would unfold.

We still think that the focus we have chosen is the right one for the *Journal*, but I have begun to wonder whether the period of the 1990s was atypical. Perhaps the “unipolar moment” of overwhelming dominance by the United States and its democratic allies had made it possible for internal prodemocratic struggles to take center stage, and without this favorable international environment democracy would not have prospered. This is certainly the interpretation suggested by Robert Kagan in this issue. As he puts it, “Geopolitical shifts among the reigning great

powers, often but not always the result of wars, can have a significant effect on the domestic politics of the smaller and weaker nations of the world.” Kagan asserts that the United States is in “a state of retrenchment” in the international arena, and that this is inflicting “collateral damage” on the fortunes of democracy.

In 2014, these trends became manifest. The rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, amid the disappointed hopes of the “Arab Spring” (outside Tunisia) and worries about Afghanistan, made it clear, as Tarek Masoud underlines, that Western efforts to impose some kind of order and to encourage democracy in the broader Middle East were not succeeding. Meanwhile, China’s muscle-flexing in the East and South China Seas seemed to foreshadow a return to the use of force in Asia. And most important of all, Russia’s brazen annexation of Crimea and stealth invasion of eastern Ukraine showed that the rules-based international order built by democratic powers could no longer be taken for granted. Moreover, if Lilia Shevtsova is right in her analysis of Russia’s political system, “the Kremlin will henceforth approach the outside world in a militarist mode, with any compromises limited to the realm of tactics and not meant to be lasting.”

If the liberal world order is indeed coming apart under pressure from the authoritarians, the future of democracy will be deeply affected. In a globe divided into spheres of influence and power blocs, a country’s ability to follow a democratic path will be determined above all by its international alliances and its geography. As Alina Mungiu-Pippidi points out, it increasingly looks as if the fate of democracy in the countries of the postcommunist world will depend on which side of the emerging border between Russia and the EU they find themselves.

This new salience of geopolitics threatens to change the rules of the game. It may both limit the centrality of the internal balance of forces in shaping a country’s regime choices and increase the chances that the imposition of external force will be decisive. Moreover, if the geopolitical balance appears to be tilting the authoritarians’ way, they will seem much more attractive to the many individuals and nations that seek above all to be on the stronger side. Under these conditions, democracy would lose much of its luster. Where it broke down, there would be less demand to restore it. One could no longer be confident that time would still be on democracy’s side.

This gloomy scenario is far from being foreordained. The authoritarians have many weaknesses (which will grow if the recent oil-price drop persists), and democracy has many strengths, including the capacity for self-correction. Though it is often complacent and slow to move, democracy also has shown a remarkable ability to respond to crises. It was arguably in deeper trouble in the 1970s than it is today, but it bounced back. It can do so again. But first its supporters must undertake a clear-eyed appraisal of its current decline and summon the resolve and seriousness of purpose needed to reverse it.