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Democracy Embattled

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Thomas Carothers ■ Minxin Pei

Ghia Nodia ■ Andrew J. Nathan ■ Sumit Ganguly

Laura Rosenberger on This Is Not Propaganda

BREAKING OUT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SLUMP

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For the past twelve years or so, democracy around the world has been in a funk. It was inevitable, of course, that the remarkable “third wave” of global democratization (which began in the 1970s) would slow, if not grind to a halt. By the mid-1990s, most of the countries with favorable conditions for democracy—at least middling levels of education and per capita income, prior histories of democracy, and benign regional neighborhoods—had already become democracies. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of the additional likely candidates joined the ranks of new democracies, particularly following the “color revolutions” in several postcommunist states. But by 2006, democracy started trending downward. In every year since then, Freedom House has found that more countries have declined in freedom than have gained, reversing the pattern of the early post-Cold War era.

The Green Wave movement in Iran in 2009, the Arab uprisings of 2010–12, and the stirring electoral challenges to autocracy in Venezuela and Zimbabwe in 2018 sparked hope that a new burst of democratic progress might be imminent. But almost all these liberating possibilities fell short. With the notable exception of democratic Tunisia, the Arab Spring left in its wake heightened repression and civil wars. Popular protests in Ukraine forced the increasingly autocratic pro-Kremlin president Viktor Yanukovich from power in 2014, but then Russia went to war against Ukraine’s revived democracy. Since then, the Gambia, Malaysia, and Nigeria have seen stunning defeats of autocratic incumbents, but none seems to have made a sufficiently clean break with the old ways of politics to be called even an electoral democracy.

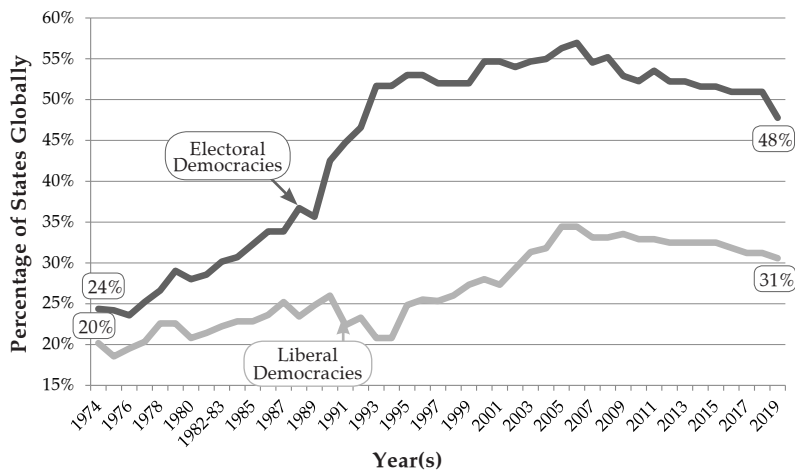
The long democracy slump has seen a surge in democratic failures. If we break the period since 1976 into four equal segments of eleven years each, we find that the rate of democratic failure declined from 14 percent in the first period (1976–86) to under 11 percent in the next two segments. In the most recent period (2009–19), however, this figure has increased to 18 percent, with democracy failing in key states including Bangladesh, Thailand, and Turkey, and for the first time in an EU member state, Hungary.

The trend probably does not quite yet amount to what Samuel P. Huntington would have called a “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns, but it is getting uncomfortably close. The ill winds are affecting every kind of regime. A number of liberal democracies are becoming less liberal. Many electoral democracies are descending into competitive authoritarianism. Some competitive authoritarian regimes, such as Cambodia and Uganda, are losing many of their pluralistic features, as space for dissent slowly narrows. And the more blatant authoritarian regimes—China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and now Egypt, among others—are becoming more intensely repressive, often aided by new digital technologies of surveillance and control. Yet despite the pattern of democratic decline, there have been recent encouraging signs of pushback against a principal agent of democracy decay in our time: illiberal populism.

Among states with populations of more than one-million people, the share of electoral democracies has recently fallen to less than half for the first time since the very early days of the post–Cold War world (see the Figure). To be sure, many of these failures involve incremental and subtle deterioration. Senegal, for example, retained the same president and superficially the same institutions, but President Macky Sall was reelected in 2019 only after jailing his two most popular challengers and then imposing a controversial new electoral law that narrowed the remaining field of opposition candidates to the smallest in three decades.¹ The assaults on constitutional principles have been more brutal in the Philippines, but they have produced a similar effect. The military did not overthrow the elected government (as it did in Egypt in 2013 and Thailand in 2014). The elected president, Rodrigo Duterte, did not suspend the constitution or close down the Congress. Indeed, he scored a breathtaking victory in May 2019 midterm elections, winning all twelve of the Senate seats at stake—in a political context that could no longer be called democratic.

“Coups” of the officially declared sort are not generally how democracy dies these days. Rather, death occurs step by step, through the steady degradation of political pluralism, civil liberties, and the rule of law, until the Rubicon has been crossed as if in a fog, without our knowing the precise moment when it happened. Yet the outcome is the same as it would be if democracy had succumbed to a sudden swift blow: Opposition parties, civil society, and independent institutions find

**THE GLOBAL EXPANSION OF DEMOCRACY (1974–2019)
(COUNTRIES WITH POPULATIONS LARGER THAN 1 MILLION)**



themselves within a system where it is almost impossible to depose the ruling individual or party through free elections; where there is no longer anything close to a level playing field; and where criticism of the president and efforts to check his arbitrary power can be dangerous as well as futile.²

During 2019, at least five more countries fell out of the ranks of the world's democracies. The most significant was the Philippines, the world's thirteenth-largest country and a longtime strategic ally of the United States. Opposition media have been shut down and intimidated; Duterte's fiercest critics on the Supreme Court and in the Senate have been ousted and jailed; the Supreme Court has been politicized to serve the president's political aims; other independent leaders of accountability institutions have been threatened, hounded, and denounced; discredited figures from the authoritarian past have been rehabilitated; and election anomalies have grown more common. President Duterte and his allies are steadily subduing all countervailing power centers and using the law as a weapon against political opponents. Meanwhile, an estimated twelve-thousand Filipinos have been killed by extrajudicial means in Duterte's "war on drugs."³ Sadly, democrats in civil society and the party system have been too weak, divided, and under-resourced to mount much resistance. With the demise of Philippine democracy, only six of the world's fifteen most populous countries (India, the United States, Indonesia, Brazil, Japan, and Mexico) are now democracies. In most of these, the trend has been toward growing concentration of power in the executive at the least, and often toward more full-blown illiberal populism.

With the United States and Europe distracted if not apathetic, democracy has continued to erode in Latin America and Africa. Daniel

Ortega met with remarkably little resistance from the United States as he crushed opposition parties and civil society in Nicaragua and coasted to a third consecutive term as president in 2016. Why? Because his second run at authoritarianism (unlike the first, made in his earlier incarnation as a Sandinista rebel) did not mobilize revolutionary antagonism to the United States, the local business community, or the Catholic Church. Instead, Ortega reinvented himself as an old-fashioned *caudillo*, who merely sought to give himself, his friends, and his family (including his wife, the vice-president) a chance to loot the country.⁴ In Bolivia, years of escalating erosion of democratic norms took a more blatant turn in 2019 as the economy grew weaker and resistance to the rule of President Evo Morales surged. Morales, first elected in 2006, ran for a fourth term in 2019 despite having lost a referendum held three years earlier on his right to do so. He then claimed a first-round victory in a highly disputed October 2019 election, which the Organization of American States condemned as marred with irregularities. Amid widespread street demonstrations and under military pressure, President Morales resigned on November 10, leaving the future of the political system uncertain. In Guatemala, a right-wing former director of prisons won the presidency in August 2019 with only 42 percent turnout. His victory followed the disqualification of the most serious opposition candidate, a former attorney general and anticorruption crusader who had opposed the incumbent president's closure of a UN-backed commission seeking to end corruption and impunity.⁵

Few outside Senegal complained when Macky Sall narrowed the electoral playing field to a set of candidates that would ensure him a comfortable victory. In Benin, the first African country to democratize after the end of the Cold War, President Patrice Talon gradually turned the screws on civic and political pluralism after his election in 2016. Following the playbook of elected autocrats from Russia's Vladimir Putin to Hungary's Viktor Orbán to Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Talon shut down opposition newspapers, arrested prominent critics, and imposed new electoral rules that made it almost impossible for his opponents to win office or even run for parliament. After an opposition boycott of the 2019 parliamentary elections, human-rights violations escalated, Talon's leading opponents fled into exile, and Benin went from an African success story to a harsh autocracy, with scarcely any protest from Western democracies.⁶

Neutering Democratic Institutions

None of these defections from democracy were heralded with martial music, tanks in the streets, or presidential broadcasts suspending the constitution. Instead, elected presidents (or prime ministers, such as Sheikh Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh) have managed to neuter or take over the

institutions meant to constrain them—courts, prosecutors, legislatures, mass media, oversight and regulatory agencies, electoral administrations, and the like. Once conquered, these institutions are then deployed as weapons against opponents. Eventually, a pall of fear and resignation descends over the political arena. Opportunists in politics and civil society join the autocrat's bandwagon to sustain their careers, to enrich their families and cronies, or simply to stay out of harm's way. A dwindling band of courageous democrats fight the good fight, but they find themselves outgunned and on treacherous ground. These liberals, based among the educated class of urban, cosmopolitan elites, cannot match the authoritarian populists' ability to speak the language of rural and less educated constituencies, to manipulate the symbols and grievances of identity politics, and to stir nationalist fears and ambitions.

Then, too, once authoritarian populists win power, they have the national treasury at their disposal and can use it to dispense patronage, enrich loyal crony capitalists, and expand welfare payments in order to solidify the support of swing constituencies. In EU member states such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, populist strongmen have also taken advantage of a US\$65-billion-a-year system of agricultural subsidies that is "shrouded in secrecy" and "warped by corruption and self-dealing." Populists have reaped hundreds of millions of dollars in EU transfers, with broad discretion as to how the funds are spent and little accountability; billionaire Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš collected \$42 million for his companies in 2018.⁷

Despite the steady downward trend, there continue to be glimmers of hope that underscore the universal appeal of democracy, human rights, and good governance. In December 2018, Armenia held democratic parliamentary elections following a grassroots "Velvet Revolution" that evicted a semiauthoritarian ruler in this post-Soviet country despite its vulnerability to Russian pressure.⁸ Eight months of popular protests last year forced the military to depose Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, after three decades of corrupt and murderous rule. A three-year transitional power-sharing arrangement between the military and the popular Forces of Freedom and Change has opened a transitional process that could restore democracy.⁹ Mass prodemocracy protests similarly toppled decrepit Algerian dictator Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019. Months of valiant (though not always nonviolent) popular protests forced Hong Kong's government to withdraw an odious bill that would have made it possible for any Hong Kong citizen to be extradited to mainland China, with no legal protections. Then, in the November district-council elections, prodemocracy forces tripled their seats and won majorities in seventeen of the eighteen councils, dealing the pro-Beijing parties a stunning defeat. None of these four mass movements, however, has yet produced a democracy (though Armenia is on the brink of it), and all must labor to defy the discouraging record of mass protests

failing to produce democratic transitions in such deeply authoritarian countries as Egypt, Iran, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

The Illiberal Populist Wave

The predominant trend thus remains decidedly negative. Much of that negative momentum has been generated by one force: populism. Elected rulers and parties are diminishing democracy with populist appeals that polarize the polity and marginalize their opponents, whom they depict as self-serving, effete elites or undeserving minorities who do not understand or care about the deserving majority. This logic pits the leader and his party against the corrupt politicians and “deep state” who, if they are not bending to the will of the populist leader, by definition are not serving the people. This brand of populism is illiberal in its demonization of minorities and critics as well as in its preference for plebiscitary mechanisms over the filters and deliberation of representative democracy. But it is also antidemocratic in its hostility to political pluralism, its aspirations for political hegemony, and its tendency to exalt the leader above all other democratic actors and institutions. The danger of illiberal populism, intrinsic to large-scale democratic politics, was recognized from the outset by Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist 1*: “Of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.”¹⁰ That neatly sums up the career trajectories of autocrats such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.

In the past two years, the percentage of the world’s population living in democracies has dipped below fifty for the first time since 1993. That it has not fallen much lower is due to the persistence of democracy in India, home to more than one-sixth of humanity. Since Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in 2014, India has had stronger government. But that government has grown less and less respectful of dissent and minority rights. With the landslide reelection of Modi and his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the May 2019 parliamentary contest, Indian democracy has entered a new era of peril. The story bears a close resemblance to many other cases where illiberal populists rode to power on a fierce backlash against governments seen to be feckless and corrupt, even if they were also relatively tolerant and democratic. In come populists pledging to clean out the Augean stables, serve the real people rather than a careerist ruling elite, promote the dominant religion and culture, and make the country great again.

This narrative can play well politically for quite some time, but at a significant cost to freedom. Even during Modi’s first term, the quality of Indian democracy gradually eroded, with growing discrimination and violence against India’s Muslim minority—whose nearly two-hundred-million members account for around 15 percent of the population but less

than 5 percent of the members of Parliament.¹¹ Prominent critics of the BJP have been detained, legally harassed, and in a few cases assassinated for their dissenting views. As Sumit Ganguly notes elsewhere in this issue (see pages 193–202), India’s “once-feisty” press has been “largely cowed” due to political pressure and legal intimidation directed at critical media enterprises, as well as violence against journalists. Universities are under pressure to avoid what the BJP chief minister of India’s largest state called “antinational activities,” a designation that allows the application of draconian sedition laws. And critical independent institutions—the Election Commission, the Reserve Bank of India, the Supreme Court, and law-enforcement bodies—are coming under pressure from Modi’s government.¹² Most disturbingly, on 5 August 2019, with relatively little parliamentary debate, the BJP government terminated the special federal status of Jammu and Kashmir (India’s only Muslim-majority state), dismissed its elected government, and imposed direct central-government rule. As of this writing in December 2019, Kashmir festers in a state of fear and occupation, subject to recurrent internet and telecommunications shutdowns. A recent UN report also notes mounting arrests of “political figures, journalists, human rights defenders, protesters and others.”¹³

Distinguished analysts fear that such actions are transforming India into a highly illiberal and majoritarian democracy. Yet the trajectory of chauvinistic populism elsewhere—especially where it has been laced with claims to religious legitimacy—does not inspire confidence that Indian democracy’s downward path will level off at “illiberal majoritarianism.” The incremental erosion of liberal norms and institutions does not cease of its own accord. Rather, it must be met with countervailing pressure from political actors, civil society, and what remains of independent institutions. In some circumstances, international pressure can also make a difference—but India is too big and too proud to allow much scope for that. In the absence of effective countervailing pressure from within, the world’s largest democracy will be at risk of failing altogether.

A similar story is now unfolding in Poland. Like the BJP a few months earlier, Poland’s incumbent populist party (Law and Justice, or PiS) returned to power in October 2019 with an absolute majority of seats in parliament. Like the BJP, Law and Justice took a share of votes that fell well short of a majority but was nevertheless impressive in a fragmented field. Like the BJP, PiS waged a potent populist campaign built around religion, tradition, and resentment of liberal elites, while also expanding welfare payments to financially pressed constituencies. The “mix of faith, financial largess and aggrieved nationalism” played well with “the country’s rural heartland” and small towns bypassed by India’s economic boom.¹⁴ And like the BJP, PiS seeks something more than the authority to govern; it wants political and cultural dominance. Since winning power in 2015, PiS has aggressively transformed state media into an instrument for government messaging. In the 2019 election campaign,

PiS pounded away at familiar right-wing populist themes: identification with the real and forgotten people, condemnation of liberal elites who threaten traditional families with a gay-rights agenda, and fear of migrants bringing rape and other crime. The election results place PiS in a position to resume its pressure on independent media and the courts, and thus on liberal democracy. But Poland's democrats were able to deny the ruling party control of the upper house of parliament, and hence the unilateral ability to amend the Polish constitution. And in contrast to the Indian case, liberal democrats in Poland are backed by meaningful if inadequate external pressure from the European Union. The EU has brought its diplomatic and financial weight to bear on Poland and, much too belatedly, on Hungary, seeking to rein in their assaults on the media and the courts. More pressure will be needed to check the authoritarian ambitions of Poland's ruling populists.

The Achilles' Heel of Authoritarian Populism

Fortunately, authoritarian populism is beset by its own contradictions. Its Achilles' heel is its tendency to exalt one leader and to eviscerate checks and balances, which inevitably opens the way to widespread corruption and ever more extreme abuses of power. What begins as an electoral revolution in the name of the forgotten people gradually deteriorates into an orgy of venality, cronyism, and misrule. Two decades of the "Bolivarian Revolution" in Venezuela have devastated a once vibrant middle-income country, driving more than four-million people to flee into exile and leaving millions more scavenging for food and basic necessities. Over the past few years, Venezuela's economy has shrunk by half and its currency has been rendered worthless, while regime elites have grown rich feeding off the country's dwindling oil revenues and illicit traffic in drugs and gold. Most of "the people" no longer rally politically behind this failed socialist project. Hugo Chávez's inept and brutal successor, Nicolás Maduro, would lose any faintly free and fair election, which is why he does not allow one.

Turkey's strongman president Erdoğan has left more space for electoral competition, but his support base and ruling-party leadership have begun to fragment and defect as a result of his "increasingly oppressive tactics toward opponents, his harsh nationalistic rhetoric, economic mismanagement, disregard for the rule of law, and his apparent unwillingness to listen to those urging him to change course."¹⁵ That effectively sums up the core structural flaw of authoritarian populism. Once the aspiring autocrat crushes all normative and institutional checks, there is nothing to restrain him from increasingly predatory, impulsive, and inept governance. Sooner or later, he blunders in domestic and foreign policy, and earlier economic progress gives way to decay (Turkey's once-booming economy is now slumping as inflation rises). It is no coincidence that Erdoğan's au-

thoritarian abuses and use of disinformation intensified notably over the course of 2014 in the midst of a sprawling corruption scandal.¹⁶

Democrats can turn all this to their advantage if they rise above the polarizing, zero-sum narrative of the populist ruler. In 2019, Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party suffered their most serious electoral setback since coming to power in 2002 when they were defeated in municipal elections in Istanbul and Ankara. Transcending Erdoğan's divisive populism with an electoral strategy of "radical love," the opposition Republican People's Party finally left behind its liberal elitism and disdain for Erdogan's more religious and traditional supporters, reaching out to them with pragmatic and inclusive appeals centered around economic concerns.¹⁷ In Greece, a similar de-polarizing, issues-based approach by the liberal-centrist New Democracy party and its leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis brought an end to rule by the left-wing populist Syriza party.¹⁸ Such campaigns must navigate around a painful contradiction: However tempting (and indeed normatively compelling) it may be to launch a frontal assault on a populist incumbent's defection from democratic norms, it is often a poor electoral strategy. As Milan Svobik has demonstrated in his experimental research, "In sharply polarized electorates, even voters who value democracy will be willing to sacrifice fair democratic competition for the sake of electing politicians who champion their interests."¹⁹ And the degree of polarization matters: The bigger the partisan and policy gulf between candidates, the more voters may be ready to overlook the democratic misdeeds of an incumbent leader or party in order to avoid handing over power to the dreaded alternative. So democrats need strategies to bridge, not reinforce, polarization.

The more the core features of electoral democracy remain intact, the easier it is to bring an end to the populist project. In South Africa, popular revulsion at extreme corruption (quite literally, "state capture") coupled with dogged investigation by independent institutions ultimately compelled the resignation of President Jacob Zuma in 2018 and the transfer of power to a more responsible leader, Cyril Ramaphosa. Members of Parliament from Zuma's African National Congress forced out their own leader, threatening him with a formal vote of no confidence if he did not resign, because they knew that they would be courting disaster in the May 2019 national elections if they did not act.²⁰ In March 2019 in Slovakia, Zuzana Čaputová, an environmental lawyer who had courageously challenged the corruption and creeping authoritarianism of the populist parliamentary government, became the first woman to win election to the country's presidency.

Causes

The structural factors conducive to democratic failure are well known. In particular, democracies are much more likely to die in poor countries. As Adam Przeworski and his colleagues reported in these pages a quar-

ter-century ago, with each step down the ladder of per capita income, the probability of a democracy dying in any given year increases.²¹ The democratic fragility that comes with poverty can be managed, but it requires avoiding economic crisis, maintaining brisk economic growth with low inflation, and reducing income inequality. While Przeworski and his coauthors found that parliamentary systems are more conducive to democratic survival, Ethan Kapstein and Nathan Converse found the opposite.²² They concluded that the more consequential factor is the strength of constraints on executive power. Democracies with weak constraints on power are dramatically more likely to break down.

These and other studies stress another consequential factor: the international environment. One major theme of Huntington's seminal study of the third wave of democratization was the importance of international factors, especially the democratic resolve, power, and example of the United States.²³ A favorable international environment—in particular U.S. and European commitment to supporting democratic change and pressuring or sanctioning authoritarian regimes—was key to the third wave's strength and endurance.

In the early period of the third wave—from the mid-1970s up until the late 1980s—democracy spread mainly to countries with favorable conditions. These were countries in or beyond what Huntington called the “zone of transition,” with some claim to at least middle-income status. Moreover, many of these countries had been democracies before, or at least they were in regions—Western Europe, Latin America, East Asia—that had either many democracies or a strong linkage to the United States. Then, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy spread to former communist states and to many of the poorest states in the world, principally in Africa but also in Asia. European and U.S. pressure, support, and conditionality were crucial to holding these democracies in place. New democracies knew that generous flows of Western aid, investment, and diplomatic support depended in part on them respecting democratic norms—free elections, presidential term limits, judicial autonomy, and space for independent media and civil society organizations. Nondemocracies knew that they would fare better with the West if they at least gestured toward these democratic values and restrained their authoritarian tendencies.

In the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, Western democracy assistance and the conditioning of EU membership on adherence to liberal-democratic norms powerfully reinforced home-grown democratic movements. All this international pressure helped to shore up such constraints on executive power as independent judiciaries, parliaments, media outlets, and civil societies—precisely the sectors that aspiring autocrats target. In most low-income and even many middle-income new democracies, the rule of law was still weak, strained by frequent attempts at using public power to corruptly benefit the chief

executive and his family, friends, and party. But there were forces at work trying to improve the rule of law, especially by exposing and punishing corruption.

Then, several things changed in the international environment. First, the Western democracies became preoccupied with the Global War on Terror and other “hard” security and economic interests. Security concerns had heightened after the 9/11 terror attacks, and they grew steadily in importance with the rise of radical Islamist groups in East and West Africa and Southeast Asia. More recently, concern with stemming the tide of immigration, especially from the Middle East and Africa, has shaped the foreign policies of European countries. Second, China and Russia emerged as powerful competitors for international influence. China became the largest builder of physical infrastructure in developing countries, as well as the largest provider of development assistance (if one ignores the extent to which this “aid” was delivered through lending at commercial rates, creating a fearsome debt trap in many countries). In addition, both China and Russia were developing tools of sharp-power projection to penetrate, sway, discredit, and undermine democracies while stifling or muddying criticism of their own repressive systems.²⁴ By the early years of the twenty-first century, the democratic West was not the only game in town; autocrats had alternatives, and when they touted this fact, the Western democracies grew reluctant to call them out.

Around 2004–2005, the global dynamic shifted in another way. When the George W. Bush administration invaded Iraq in 2003 and did not find evidence of weapons of mass destruction, it sought to justify the costly invasion with a massive, high-stakes effort at democratic nation-building. The result was a prolonged period of violent conflict in which the formal introduction of democratic institutions was undermined by insurgency and civil strife. This tarnished the idea of “democracy promotion,” as well as perceptions of the American democracy’s effectiveness and ability to realize its will abroad. The very limited success of the parallel U.S. effort in Afghanistan further contributed to the backlash. No U.S. president in modern times has evinced a stronger and more deeply felt commitment to promoting democracy and freedom around the world than George W. Bush. But even he began to retreat in the face of global realities, including the surprise electoral victory of the terrorist group Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections (which the Palestinian National Authority held under heavy pressure from the Bush Administration).

U.S. power and standing in the world suffered another blow in September 2008, when deepening disarray in the subprime-mortgage market in the United States erupted into the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression. This was a crisis bred by greed and the failure of government oversight in the United States, and it added to the

swelling global cascade of doubts about the model of liberal democracy plus market capitalism. All these shocks spawned a crisis of confidence within the democratic West and hastened its pullback from the most forward-leaning days of democracy promotion—a trend that has become particularly pronounced under the current U.S. president.

It is not surprising, then, that the remarkable thirty-year period of democratic expansion drew to a halt around 2006, as these global developments were dramatically changing the balance of international power and perceptions. Adding to the mix were several deeper trends driven by technological change (especially the revolutions in information technology and artificial intelligence), the uneven distribution of the gains from globalization, and the weakening of government regulation and social policy. Inequality was dramatically increasing, and a gulf was opening up in advanced industrial democracies between the younger, more educated, cosmopolitan, and technologically sophisticated populations of the cities and the older, less “globalized” populations of rural and small-town areas.²⁵

In the United States and many European democracies, this provided rich social fodder for appeals by illiberal populists and a sharper fault line for deepening political polarization. Social media—initially seen as liberating tools of democratic expression and mobilization—increasingly proved to be explosive instruments for fanning grievances and intensifying polarization. They also proved highly vulnerable to Russian efforts to manipulate public sentiment, spread disinformation, and amplify social divisions. These long-term trends were crystallizing even as democracies were reeling under the impact of the abovementioned short-term shocks.

Remedies

Given these unfavorable trends, perhaps the surprising thing is that we are not (yet) seeing a clear reverse wave of democratic breakdowns. Perhaps we are on the precipice of such a wave. But another possibility is that elected leaders are still constrained by public opinion in their countries. While popular support for democracy has been eroding somewhat in Asia and Latin America, majorities in most countries still prefer a democratic form of government—broadly and overwhelmingly so in Africa. Budding autocrats such as Erdoğan, Orbán, and Duterte may initially mobilize considerable popular support behind their political projects, but ultimately leaders have to deliver. Even populists can lose the support of “the people” when they are no longer able to deliver economic growth and the appearance of clean government, and when their corruption and other failures can no longer be concealed by fear-mongering.

Thus, there is still an opportunity to pull the world out of this slump and to renew democratic progress. What is most needed is democratic conviction and resolve. The advanced democracies, above all the United

States, must shake themselves loose from their current political malaise and return to first principles. Whatever its failings, democracy is still the best form of government for protecting human rights and improving human well-being. It is in the U.S. national interest to return to a foreign policy in which this fact is clearly stated and clearly informs our diplomacy, investment, and aid. Such a policy can make a real difference, but this will happen only if we are ready to call out and condemn departures from democratic norms. After President Yoweri Museveni (then already in power for 31 years) sent troops into Uganda's Parliament in September 2017 to beat up legislators who were resisting a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for reelection indefinitely, a prominent Ugandan human-rights activist lamented to me: "The whole region is in a democratic recession because of the loud silence from their Western allies."²⁶ If authoritarian backsliding and impunity are to be slowed and ended, the Western democracies must recover their voice. And they must use it to defend embattled democrats, free elections, and civic space.

But that is not enough. We also need a renewed effort, using a variety of technologies new and old, to promote the ideas and values of democracy, along with an understanding of democratic institutions. In this new era of geopolitical competition, China, Russia, and Iran are actively working to promote their authoritarian values and to fan doubt and suspicion about democracy. But these are decadent, corrupt, repressive systems that do not offer a compelling alternative. China's oncemeteoric economic growth rate has slowed by at least half, and its political "model" involves comprehensive surveillance of every citizen and the oppression of religious minorities such as the Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang. We can win a global campaign to counter authoritarian propaganda, but we must reinvest in our capacity to wage this battle. As Edward R. Murrow, the award-winning former journalist and U.S. Information Agency director, stated in 1963, "Truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful."²⁷ But to be any of these things, we must be in the arena with the resources and the new digital-communications technologies needed to reach people in both emerging democracies and authoritarian regimes.

There are many things that we must do to counter Russian and Chinese malign influence around the world and to push back against creeping authoritarianism. These include modernizing our voting and voter-registration systems to guard against foreign digital interference; applying the Global Magnitsky Act to impose targeted sanctions on officials responsible for serious human-rights violations, including disruptions of democracy; vigilantly monitoring Beijing's efforts to penetrate our universities, media, and think tanks, to control expression in these forums, and to misappropriate technological innovations and digital

data; and undertaking a new generation of legal initiatives to counter the kleptocratic flows of ill-gotten wealth washing onto democratic shores.²⁸

But all this can work only if we repair, reform, and improve our own democracies. There are promising political reforms, such as ranked-choice voting, that can help to reduce polarization by generating incentives for moderation and compromise. The first imperative, however, is to rededicate ourselves to the idea that freedom and democracy are transcendent values which require from every citizen a commitment higher than allegiance to any political party or electoral outcome.

NOTES

1. Rachel Beatty Riedl and Ndongo Samba Sylla, "Aspirations and Realities in Africa: Senegal's Vigorous But Constrained Election," *Journal of Democracy* 30 (July 2019): 94–108.

2. On the minimum standards for electoral democracy, see Jørgen Elklit and Palle Svensson, "The Rise of Election Monitoring: What Makes Elections Free and Fair?" *Journal of Democracy* 8 (July 1997): 32–46; Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Holt, 2008), 20–26; and Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7–11.

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28. See Diamond, *Ill Winds*, 192–98. A good place to start in the latter regard is to ban anonymous shell corporations and anonymous real-estate purchases, and to modernize and strengthen the Foreign Agents Registration Act.