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A GLIMPSE OF THE WAY FORWARD

William J. Dobson

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Thirty years ago, just as the Soviet bloc had begun to crumble, the first issue of the *Journal of Democracy* laid out this publication's mission. It declared from the outset that it would be "pluralistic," that its pages would be "open to a wide variety of perspectives and shades of opinion." Obviously, in the struggle between democracy and its opponents, the *Journal* would not be ambivalent. Rather, as a genuinely international forum for ideas and debate, it would seek to "advance understanding of the broader conditions and strategies for instituting, consolidating, and maintaining democratic government."¹ As the totalitarian shadow of the Soviet Union receded, democracy's prospects appeared bright.

We find ourselves now in a very different moment. It is impossible not to see the last decade, or more, as being anything but an advance for autocracy and the forces sympathetic to it. The appeal of xenophobia, populism, and authoritarian causes has risen, not coincidentally at the same time that faith in democratic ideals has faltered. The crisis of confidence is mounting as illiberal populists propagate divisive notions that tear at democratic norms from within. The covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a convenient calamity for those set on expanding emergency powers and snatching away citizen rights—spoils that they may not readily relinquish. At times, the halting and unsatisfying response from democracy's defenders recalls the words of E.B. White, who in 1954 wrote, "Democracy is harder to explain and harder to propound . . . because it is subtler. Its devotees tend to take it for granted. There is every evidence, though, that we should not take it for granted, or assume that it is well understood or generally approved."²

We can indeed afford no assumptions, and the urgency of the *Journal of Democracy*'s original mission is perhaps greater now, when democracy finds itself on its back foot, than at any time in the past three decades. Yet for all the headwinds facing democracies today, if the past thirty

years teach us anything, it is that our pessimism should be as tempered as our optimism: It is hardly obvious that the authoritarian resurgence will necessarily have staying power, either. Authoritarian states, just like democracies, are wracked by contradictions. Just as many “third wave” democracies failed to consolidate their political institutions or fully embed the basic ingredients of democracy, so the political rule of many authoritarians and illiberal populists rests on thin reeds. Authoritarians’ promises of law and order soon dissolve into little more than strongman rule, and their economies are buffeted by the same forces as others. The banner of Putinism is not being lifted up in Africa, South America, or anywhere else. The words of Chinese president Xi Jinping offer a rallying cry for no one.

What is abundantly clear is that people the world over are deeply discontented and willing to assume new risks in order to see their grievances addressed. In the past eighteen months, protest movements have toppled leaders in Algeria, Bolivia, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan. Large-scale nonviolent protests have sprung up in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America, with agendas that run from climate change to regime change. In autocracies, people are standing up to repression or agitating for a better life. In democracies, citizens are no longer content to wait for the traditional institutions to deliver on their promises. And while the covid-19 pandemic may slow these movements for a time, people filled with despair, or those seeking freedom or the righting of a wider wrong, will not wait on a cure to press their cause, as the mass demonstrations over the killing of George Floyd in the United States and around the world have shown. Such is the power of people when their hope or anger stirs them to action. As it happens, in the present moment it is the latter that is more often compelling people to challenge their leaders, whether democratic or not.

How governments do or do not learn from the experience of combatting the covid-19 pandemic may offer a glimpse of the way forward. The debate over whether authoritarian states or democracies have the upper hand in fighting the scourge was always misdirected. What mattered was whether or not the public-health crisis was met with a competent, expert-led response (with timely testing, contact tracing, and travel restrictions). Democracies such as Taiwan, New Zealand, and Iceland succeeded early on because they responded quickly, with data and expertise. So did authoritarian Vietnam. The nature of a country’s political system alone has not determined success in fighting the coronavirus. Not surprisingly, the hallmarks of failure are remarkably consistent: The large countries with the worst outbreaks of covid-19—whether democratic or authoritarian—are each led by those who eschewed listening to public-health experts in fighting a public-health crisis.

The instability and uncertainty of this moment is a challenge for every state, no matter its stripes. With this July issue, my first full issue as

coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy*, our authors examine many sides of the tumult, including the disruptive power of social media, the future of nonviolent protest, how some of the worst regimes manage to hang on, and Taiwan's extraordinary success in standing up to China. But if liberal democracy is to pass through the crucible of its present trials, it is essential that we be clear-eyed about what we aim to preserve—and the vulnerabilities that are inherent in our systems. William Galston turns a sharp and introspective lens on liberal democracy and its “impressive roster” of infirmities, both real and imagined. “Like every other form of government, liberal democracy has inherent structural weaknesses that the difficulties of the moment exacerbate but do not create,” he writes. Liberals would be wise to reckon with Galston's inventory, as there is nothing inevitable about liberalism's success. Without exaggeration, he warns, “If liberal-democratic governments fail to address their countries' most urgent problems in a manner that wins public approval, support for liberal-democratic institutions will decline, opening the door to alternatives.” For all the concern over authoritarianism's advance in the world today, it may be the competence of governance that determines the next chapter in the struggle between democracy and dictatorship.

In this enterprise, the *Journal of Democracy's* role, more than thirty years later, is the same but renewed. To quote E.B. White once more, “A democracy cannot survive merely by being well-informed, it must also be contemplative, and wise.”³ In a news-drenched world with a surfeit of information—and increasingly disinformation—we believe it is essential to maintain a calmer venue for rigorous, thoughtful, and accessible analysis of some of the most important questions of the day. We will continue to strive to be a home for that contemplation and wisdom. The work could not be more vital.

NOTES

1. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, “Why the ‘Journal of Democracy,’” *Journal of Democracy* 1 (Winter 1990): 4.

2. E.B. White, “One Hour to Think,” in E.B. White, *On Democracy*, ed. Martha White (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 113.

3. E.B. White, “FCC Background Noise,” in White, *On Democracy*, 109.