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Stepping Back From Democratic Pessimism

Thomas Carothers

Bad news about the state of democracy has accumulated steadily this decade, producing talk of a “democratic recession” and a general sense of pessimism about democracy’s global prospects. Is democracy in fact in retreat and authoritarianism on the march in the world?

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Summary

Pessimism about the progress of democracy in the developing and postcommunist worlds has risen sharply in recent years. Negative developments in a variety of countries, such as military coups, failed elections, and the emergence of anti-democratic populist leaders, have caused some observers to argue that democracy is in retreat and authoritarianism on the march. A broad look at the state of democracy around the world reveals however that although the condition of democracy is certainly troubled in many places, when viewed relative to where it was at the start of this decade, democracy has not lost ground in the world overall. The former Soviet Union is the one region where democracy has clearly slipped backward in this decade, primarily as a result of Russia's authoritarian slide. The Middle East has also been a source of significant disappointment on democracy but mostly in comparison with unrealistic expectations that were raised by the Bush administration. In most of the rest of the world good news with respect to democratization is found in roughly equal proportion to bad news and considerable continuity has prevailed as well.

This more balanced perspective on the global state of democracy undercuts some of the explanations that are currently offered by democratic pessimists, such as that citizens of struggling democracies are withdrawing their support for democracy as a result of poor socioeconomic performance of their governments, that elections are tearing apart many weak democracies, that economic gains by authoritarian states are causing authoritarianism to spread, and that antidemocratic foreign policies by some assertive nondemocratic states, such as Russia, China, Venezuela, and Iran, are doing significant harm to democracy. The Obama administration should take on board this more balanced perspective. Doing so will help ensure that unnecessary democratic pessimism does not reinforce the natural tendency to respond to the Bush administration's negative experiences with democracy policy by backing away from U.S. support for democracy abroad.

Bad news about the state of democracy in the developing and postcommunist worlds has accumulated steadily this decade. Military coups have ousted democratic governments in Bangladesh, Mauritania, and Thailand. Disputed elections have erupted into violence in many places, including Armenia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mongolia, and Zimbabwe. Populist leaders or populist movements of doubtful democratic fidelity have gained ground in South America and Central Europe. Hopes that new pressures for political reform might spark a wave of democratization in the Arab world have not materialized. The initially inspiring “color revolutions” in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine have lost their luster and sparked repressive countermeasures against independent civil society and international support for democracy in a growing number of places. Some large countries, notably Iran, Nigeria, and Russia, have slid backward away from gains on democratic reforms of the late 1990s. Talk of a “democratic recession” as well as a general sense of pessimism about democracy’s global prospects has become common in Western policy circles.¹

As the bad news has multiplied, so too have the explanatory accounts. These accounts usually emphasize the inherent difficulties and liabilities of democratization. The wave of democracy that unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s, observers note, swept many countries into democratic transitions even though these countries were poorly prepared for democracy in traditional terms, lacking the socioeconomic underpinnings and other structural conditions often thought essential for successful democratization. Being inherently fragile, the argument goes, these attempted transitions are being undermined by accumulated citizen discontent over poor socioeconomic performance and corrupt, incompetent governance. Moreover, pessimists assert, many of these societies have such sharp ethnic, tribal, or religious divisions that they are pulled into conflict by elections that bring these divisions to the fore.

The explanatory accounts of democracy’s troubled decade point not only to the weaknesses of new democracies but also to authoritarianism’s growing strength. In the past several years, the idea that authoritarianism is “on the march” has gained credence in many quarters.² According to this view, democracy is reeling in the world not just because it is being undermined by its own shortcomings but because it is being muscled aside by increasingly confident, capable authoritarian regimes. The economic gains of numerous nondemocratic states in this decade (at least until the onset of the global financial crisis) solidified these regimes, keeping citizens happy at home while also burnishing the regimes’ external legitimacy. These gains increased the attraction of an ideological alternative to democracy—the “China model” or, possibly more broadly, the “authoritarian capitalism” model embodied by both China and Russia.³ In addition, various authoritarian governments, not only those in China and Russia but also those in Iran and Venezuela, are asserting themselves more forcefully on the international stage, supporting undemocratic friends and sometimes working against democratic governments.

This picture of democracy in retreat and authoritarianism on the march is discouraging, even daunting. Yet although it contains important elements of truth, it slips easily into overgeneralization, becoming a dramatic storyline that builds on itself and pushes aside any contrary evidence. Stepping back from the headlines and looking at the state of democracy around the world today compared to a decade ago, one sees that democracy has in fact not suffered a broad retreat. Bad news certainly there is. But some good news exists alongside the bad, and considerable continuity also exists. The overall balance sheet for democracy in this decade relative to ten years ago is surprisingly close to neutral. Although the latest Freedom House report highlights setbacks for democracy in 2008, it also contains revealing figures comparing the overall numbers for democracy between now and the start of the decade: the number of free countries has risen from 86 to 89 and partly free countries from 58 to 62, while the number of not-free countries has diminished from 48 to 42.⁴ This more balanced picture points to a need for caution and critical reflection with regard to the explanatory factors outlined above, both the pressures apparently pulling democracy down as well as the notion of a broad authoritarian rise.

Taking on board a more accurate and less discouraging picture of democracy's global state is especially important now in the current U.S. policy context, given the arrival to power of a new administration. With all the controversies, and the rank sense of disappointment or even failure surrounding Bush democracy policy, the Obama team is naturally looking to reformulate U.S. policy in this domain. A tempting option is to back away from support for democracy abroad, especially in places where it has been most visibly problematic, such as the Middle East. An exaggeratedly negative view of democracy's state in the world only strengthens that temptation. A more balanced account may contribute to the search for a constructive approach to recalibrate U.S. policy in a way that eschews the Bush administration's mistakes without turning away from the many democratic challenges at hand.

The Politicization of the Political

Before turning to a region-by-region look at the state of democracy in the developing and postcommunist worlds, let us take note of one aspect of such assessments. When U.S. political observers write about the overall state of democracy in the world, they tend to tilt heavily toward either the positive or the negative—either that democracy is on a roll or, more often (in part perhaps because bad news sells much better than good news), that democracy is in trouble. An almost inescapable pressure exists in the competitive market of public policy debate to present a bold, clear storyline that reduces a field of grays down to an easily comprehensible picture in black or white.

A sharp politicization of views within the U.S. policy community about democracy's global fortunes has exacerbated this polar tendency. As President

Bush increasingly articulated a determination to democratize other parts of the world, culminating in his extremely ambitious global “freedom agenda,” partisan division and rancor quickly attached to the topic of democracy’s global fortunes. Commentaries about how democracy was doing in the world became Rorschach projections of feelings about Bush and his policies. Bush supporters almost invariably found grounds for optimistic views about democracy’s advance. Bush critics almost always read the same analytic tea leaves much more negatively. This politicization emerged first with respect to Iraq. Once the Bush team settled on democracy building as its principal rationale for the invasion of Iraq (after the invasion, when weapons of mass destruction were not found), commentary on how the political evolution of post-Saddam Iraq was progressing fell into a deep partisan divide. Persons who had supported the invasion continued (and continue) to insist on the most positive accounts of Iraqi politics they could muster. Those who had opposed the invasion took (and take) a much more skeptical view.

As President Bush expanded his prodemocratic transformational vision to cover not just Iraq but the Middle East as a whole, the politicization of political analysis widened in parallel. Assessments of whether democratic stirrings were in fact percolating in the region fell into the same divide as analyses of Iraq. For example, after Iraq’s 2005 elections, Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution, and Egypt’s decision to hold presidential elections, some observers heralded the arrival of a “Baghdad Spring,” a wave of Arab democratization stimulated by the ouster of Saddam Hussein.⁵ Others doubted whether in fact, as Thomas Friedman wrote, that what was occurring in the Arab world was “the fall of its Berlin Wall.”⁶ Opinions on this question tended to correlate highly with the observer’s views about the wisdom and credibility of Bush’s democracy push from its very start.

When in his second term Bush broadened his prodemocratic ambitions even further, to encompass the entire world, the terrain for politicized accounts of democracy’s condition widened still further. The color revolutions in the former Soviet Union combined with the encouraging news in the Middle East to prompt some enthusiasts to declare the arrival of a new global wave of democracy.⁷ Other observers, less sympathetic to the Bush administration, took a much more cautious view of the same events.⁸

The fact that accounts of democracy’s progress (or lack of progress) in this decade generally fell on one side or the other of the partisan divide surrounding Bush foreign policy does not mean they were all shaped only by partisan perspectives. Reasonable people could and certainly did disagree over how to judge the complex political landscape of recent years, regardless of their underlying views about Bush. Nevertheless, the fact that the basic thrust of many accounts of democracy’s progress in Iraq, the Middle East as a whole, and the world in general correlated with the analysts’ views of the Bush administration was hardly a coincidence. And the current prevalence of a harshly negative narrative

about democracy's state in the world is probably related to the prevalence of a harshly negative view of Bush policy overall.

Of course, partisanship in analyses of democracy's progress has happened before, during other periods of sharply polarized foreign policy debates having to do with democracy. In the 1980s, for example, when President Ronald Reagan cast his hard-line anticommunist policy in Central America as a prodemocratic campaign, the ensuing debates for the rest of the 1980s over whether El Salvador and other states in the region were in fact democratizing were often distinctly partisan.

The Decade's Balance Sheet

Former Soviet Union. Arguably the most dispiriting region in terms of democracy this decade has been the former Soviet Union. At the end of the 1990s, it was possible to imagine that the punishing legacy of 70 years of Soviet totalitarianism might be giving way, albeit only in parts and very slowly, to political pluralism and open political competition. At the end of this decade, it appears instead that the Soviet legacy is distressingly durable. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the basic idea that political opposition is a useful, legitimate political phenomenon remains remarkably weak in much of the region. Dominant political elites treat political opposition as inherently disloyal and view political openness as something that will weaken and even fatally divide their countries.

Russia's authoritarian turn under Putin is an enormous setback for the region's democratic prospects and probably the most significant negative development for democracy at a country level anywhere in the world in this decade. Not only does democratization now seem a dim prospect in Russia, but Russia's strong-arm approach to governance serves as a model of sorts for political elites in countries around it, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Russian government goes beyond that demonstration effect to support undemocratic governments in its near abroad, while also pressuring and sometimes seeking to undermine democratic ones, seeing their pro-Western orientation as a security threat.

Most of the rest of the former Soviet Union is either as undemocratic as it was at the start of the decade or even more so. Uzbekistan, for example, has closed down the already greatly constrained space for independent civil society that it had permitted in the 1990s. The hopes that Tajikistan might attempt some modest political liberalization coming out of its civil war have been dashed. Even Armenia, one of the few former Soviet republics with a certain amount of political pluralism in the 1990s, has drifted toward greater political centralization and electoral manipulation.

The decade's hopeful moments in the region—the color revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine—have faded quickly. Georgia remains somewhat democratic but President Mikhail Saakashvili has fallen into troubling habits of political intolerance and haphazardness. Ukraine's Orange Revolution descended with unfortunate rapidity into crippling infighting among contending political elites. Kyrgyzstan's post-Tulip Revolution government is no more democratic, and possibly less, than the one it replaced.

Asia. Commentators sounding the alarm about democracy's troubled state often cite Asia as a major source of bad news.⁹ Asia is indeed home to many troubled democratic governments and outright nondemocratic governments. At the same time, however, Asia is not, on the whole, substantially or even much less democratic today than it was ten years ago. Most Asian countries have not moved much either backward or forward in terms of democracy, including the two giants, China and India, and also Burma, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, North Korea, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, or Taiwan. This is not to say these countries are politically static—many have experienced important political developments of various types—only that they have not moved clearly in one political direction or the other.

The two Asian giants, for example, are largely where they were politically a decade ago, at least in terms of the nature of their basic political system. China, for example, may be a surging authoritarian power in terms of its presence in international affairs, but its political system has not changed character in this decade. Western experts hotly debate the direction of China's political life, with some certain that it is on a path of gradual but real political liberalization while others are equally certain that China is stuck in a "trapped transition."¹⁰ India has also begun to gain a greater international profile. It, too, however, has not changed the character of its political system, remaining a very flawed but still live democracy.

To the extent that Asian countries did make significant political moves, the direction varied. Several countries suffered democratic setbacks—Bangladesh and Thailand with military coups in 2004 and 2006, respectively, and the Philippines's increasingly personalistic, semi-autocratic government of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Both Bangladesh and Thailand have recently returned to civilian rule, but their veneer of electoral democracy is precariously thin, uneasily covering deep conflicts among rival elites.

One Asian country, Indonesia, moved decisively forward on democracy, building on the transition away from President Suharto's rule in the late 1990s. During this decade Indonesia introduced direct presidential elections and other political reforms at the national and local levels, increased the freedom of expression, and reduced the army's political and economic roles. Many political problems persist, such as political interference in legal matters, serious corruption, and weak enforcement of minority rights. Overall, however, as the world's most populous Muslim society, Indonesia's democratic advance counts for much.

Several other Asian countries are today somewhat more democratic than they were at the start of the decade, but their political life is nevertheless so troubled or their progress so fragile that it is hard to mark them as clear gains for democracy. These are Afghanistan, where the Karzai government is at least somewhat more pluralistic and politically open than its predecessor but is plagued by fundamental shortcomings; Pakistan, which has returned to civilian rule but remains politically chaotic; and Nepal, which has come through a civil war and the abolition of the monarchy into a new period of elected government but one led by Maoists and resting on a shaky peace. Malaysia shows signs of progress, experiencing some greater political openness and pluralism, but still within its semi-authoritarian framework.

Middle East. U.S. commentators expressing concern about democracy's global condition also often point to the Middle East. Despite the hopes of many in Washington who decided in the first half of this decade that the time had come for Middle East democratization, the region remains largely undemocratic. Israel is the only country in the region that Freedom House rates as free. The rest are either harsh authoritarian states or partially liberalized, semi-authoritarian ones. Bad as it is, this political situation is not so negative when viewed relative to what prevailed a decade ago. Most of the countries in the region have not moved backward; the story, rather, is one of relative stasis, leavened by a certain amount of liberalizing political reforms. These reforms consist of milder but useful steps by some governments to increase women's political rights, augment media freedom, clarify parliamentary powers, and the like. Although they contribute in some places to greater political openness, they should not be seen as early steps on a democratization trail but rather as a continuation of the long-standing strategy by many Arab autocrats of "defensive liberalization."¹¹

The top-down reforms enacted in most Arab countries are not intended to transfer political power from monarchs and presidents to elected institutions but to consolidate political power in the executive in light of the challenges posed by economic stagnation, high unemployment, rampant poverty, and mounting social tensions. The ultimate objective is to develop more efficiently governed and economically successful versions of the existing states.¹²

The two major exceptions to this picture of relative stasis combined with scattered partial reforms are, of course, Iran and Iraq, which point in contrasting directions. In this decade, Iran has moved away from what now appears a reformist interlude of the late 1990s. The conservative ruling establishment has reduced political space, persecuted independent civil society actors, and sidelined political liberals. Somewhat in contrast, Iraq has passed from a harsh, brutal dictatorship to a shaky elected government that is trying to put an end to a civil war (in which multiple external actors have played roles), one that has inflicted enormous suffering and damage on the country.

Africa. Africa also provides much grist for the mill of pessimistic political observers: Ethiopia's and Nigeria's flawed presidential elections of 2005 and 2007, Kenya's shocking postelectoral violence in early 2008, Mugabe's undermining of the effort to reach a genuine postelection power-sharing, the ongoing and recently intensified war in the Congo, and continuing civil conflicts in Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere.

In fact, however, although Africa is indeed replete with political troubles and tremendous human suffering, in terms of overall democratic progress or regression since 2000, the continent is surprisingly stable. The democratic wave that hit Africa in the early 1990s left it roughly equally divided by the end of that decade between a sizable group of countries that had made some real democratic gains and a slightly larger group of countries that had not. That overall picture remains largely the same today.

Of the nine African states Freedom House rated in 2000 as free democracies (Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Africa), all are still rated as such. Similarly, all but two (Nigeria and Senegal) of the eleven countries designated by Freedom House in 2000 as partly free democracies maintain that rating. Competitive elections for presidential and legislative office became more common in this decade, and electorally based alternation of power, which was largely absent in African politics in the 1990s, increased, with opposition figures winning presidential elections in six countries.

Of course, even those African countries that have managed to establish working democratic systems are plagued with political shortcomings. They typically have personalistic, unstable political parties, weak rule of law, high levels of corruption, poorly functioning legislatures, and other grave deficiencies. Yet such conditions do not represent backward movement in this decade—the same conditions were largely present in 2000. In addition, at least some positive developments mark these countries, such as increased civil society activism, especially relating to governmental accountability, and greater political and civil liberties.

The cases of highly visible, troubled elections in the continent, such as Kenya and Zimbabwe, are daunting indeed; yet they do not for the most part represent backward motion when viewed from a longer time perspective. For example, although the Kenyan government's attempted manipulation of the January 2008 elections led to terrible violence, Kenya is actually as or more democratic today than it was ten years ago. Similarly, the various civil and interstate wars afflicting Africa in recent years are indeed horrendous. They do not necessarily, however, represent an overall increase in such conflict relative to the 1990s, a decade that saw devastating conflicts in Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere.

Latin America. During this decade concerns have arisen that democracy is in trouble in Latin America, threatened by a rising tide of antidemocratic, and often anti-U.S., populism. Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez is Exhibit A in this account. Bolivia's President Evo Morales, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, and Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega are additional cases in point.

All four of these leaders spell trouble for democracy in their own countries and draw on somewhat similar populist impulses. Hugo Chávez, in power now for ten years, has gone the farthest down a troubling road, undermining the institutional checks and balances in the Venezuelan political system, abridging political rights, and undercutting the very concept of legitimate political opposition. Evo Morales is seen by some as trying to concentrate too much power in his hands and aggravate the fundamental sociopolitical division that threatens to tear the country apart. Rafael Correa has pushed through a new constitution that would greatly expand his powers and extend his time in office until 2017. Although gaining office with only 37 percent of the vote, Daniel Ortega is flaunting his power and showing contempt for democratic norms in multiple ways, including manipulating the country's recent local elections.

Worrisome though these four cases are, they do not constitute a regional trend. In most of Latin America, democracy is not under fundamental threat and not heading backward. Most Latin American states are grappling with myriad political deficiencies, including weak, unresponsive states, serious corruption, haphazard rule of law, and discredited political parties. Yet these problems are not newly emergent features of this decade but rather conditions that date back to the start of Latin America's democratic wave in the 1970s and 1980s and, to a significant extent, long before that as well.

Attention grabbing though the populist wave has been, the broader, more significant story of Latin American politics in this decade is the persistence of democracy despite all its flaws, a persistence that has cut sharply against the earlier pattern of democratic reversals following fairly soon on the heels of significant democratic expansion.¹³

Central and Southeastern Europe. Warnings about a crisis of democracy have been heard in this decade about Central Europe as well. Several prominent experts on Central European politics have called attention to the rise of populism in the region, arguing that it is transforming the region's democratic transitions by undercutting liberalism and replacing it with intolerance, anti-elitist demagoguery, and other types of illiberalism.¹⁴ They highlight especially the growth of populist politics in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Although this populist wave may have been exacerbated by European Union accession, its roots lie in "transition fatigue," that is, increased anger and frustration over differential socioeconomic gains in the transition to capitalism as well as the sense of alienation vis-à-vis national elites and international technocrats.

This Central European populism is ugly and an unpleasant surprise for those who believed the region would head smoothly to European “normalcy” after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet it should not be viewed as a fundamental crisis of democracy in the region. In the first place, Western Europe has its own share of populism yet has long had consolidated democracy. In the second, Central Europe’s populism appears to be diminishing in most, though not all, places from its initial surge in the middle of the decade. In the third, although the EU accession process can be blamed for provoking some nationalist reactions and anti-elite sentiments and has led to less institutional transformation (such as in the rule-of-law domain) than many people hoped, it represents a major anchoring of the democratization of Central Europe.

With regard to Southeastern Europe, democracy’s record in this decade is mixed but on balance not negative. Serbia has moved away from the Milosevic era much more hesitantly than many hoped, but it is not slipping backwards. Albania, Croatia, and Slovenia have many democratic shortcomings but are not less democratic than ten years ago. Bosnia and Macedonia are the greatest sources of concern. Although they are formally in the same political state they were at the start of the decade, the underlying ethno-political divisions in each are festering dangerously.

Implications

In sum, the only region of the world that is significantly less democratic today compared to ten years ago is the former Soviet Union. And that retreat is largely due to the slippage by one country, Russia. Africa has experienced some serious setbacks but on the whole is not less democratic today than it was at the start of the decade. The same is true with Asia. A surge of populism has hit parts of Latin America and Central Europe, but democracy is still widely in place in both regions. The Middle East is still dismayingly authoritarian but not more so than ten years ago, and mild currents of political reform are present there. The overall story of democracy’s state in the world in this decade is more one of continuity than change.

The fact that democracy is not moving backward overall does not mean that democracy is in good shape. These two issues (direction versus overall condition) are frequently confused. Democracy is indeed troubled in many places. Most democratic governments in developing and postcommunist countries are rife with serious problems, ones that involve the most basic issues of representativity, effectiveness, and lawfulness. But this is not new. The same has been true throughout the expansion of democracy in the world over the past several decades. There was no golden era in which democracy was largely untroubled in its new locales, as accounts highlighting the different crises and setbacks that democracy is facing in different parts of the world seem to imply. Democracy was expanding in the 1980s and 1990s, thus giving its overall global condition

a more positive coloring. Yet its expansion was not consonant with success. Although many countries experienced a brief democratic honeymoon after moving away from authoritarian rule, they very quickly began to struggle with the same fundamental problems that provide the grounds for pessimistic accounts of democracy's fortunes today.

Undermined by poor performance? The fact that democracy, troubled and problematic though it is in many countries, has not been losing ground overall in the world in this decade has implications for the various propositions commonly offered as explanations of its faltering state. For example, it takes at least some of the wind out of the sails of the idea that accumulating citizen frustration and anger about governments' poor performance are undermining democracy in the developing world.

This belief that citizens fed up with either poor socioeconomic conditions or governmental corruption and ineptitude will withdraw their support for their country's democratic experiment has a powerful intuitive logic. Some prominent cases from the 1990s support it. Citizen unhappiness with the actions of the two main Pakistani political parties in the 1990s, for example, helped ensure a fairly wide public acceptance of the 1999 military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf. The election of Hugo Chávez to the Venezuelan presidency in 1998 reflected widespread citizen anger about the socioeconomic results achieved by previous governments and by the corruption of those governments. Vladimir Putin enjoyed strong public support for his revision of Russian political life in the early years of this decade because of accumulated disillusionment with Russia's attempted democratization under President Boris Yeltsin.

Specific cases of democratic reversal in this decade, however, highlight the fact that other factors are often at work. The collapse of democratic rule in Bangladesh in 2004 can be attributed in part to weakened public support for the two main political parties because of their persistent corruption and fecklessness. Yet other recent cases of democratic reversal, such as Thailand and Mauritania, or serious democratic slippage, such as the Philippines and Nigeria, were as much or more about other things—such as clashes between contending sociopolitical groups or overreaching power holders.

The surges of populism that have roiled both South America and Central Europe this decade are rooted in citizen dissatisfaction, although it would be too simple to say that it is merely dissatisfaction with the performance of new democratic governments. The populism in the Andean region is rooted in long-standing resentment in certain social sectors of exclusion and unfavorable treatment by entrenched elites. These resentments increased in the 1990s when these countries attempted market-oriented economic policies and the benefits of the growth that these policies produced did not pass through to many poor people. In Central Europe, governmental performance was by many standard measures relatively good in the second half of the 1990s and first half of the next decade, at least compared to the past. Populist currents were stoked in this

period by the rising inequality that the economic growth produced and by the resentment toward national and external elites (such as Western aid providers) perceived as gaining too much influence.

Thus, in both Latin America and Central and Southeastern Europe, citizen discontent with governmental performance has contributed to some problems for democracy but not provoked widespread reversals. Despite many shortcomings of governmental performance, public belief in the value of democracy remains high almost everywhere in the developing and postcommunist worlds, with the vast majority of people preferring democracy to all other forms of government and that belief generally being on the rise rather than in decline.¹⁵ Even in Africa, where citizens of the new democracies have ample, indeed powerful, reasons to be unhappy about the conditions in which they live, it is difficult to point to a country where democracy has in this decade been undermined by public abandonment of the ideal. In public opinion polls, Africans continue to evince a notably high level of commitment to the idea of democracy, despite everything.¹⁶

Certainly people's attachment to democracy cannot sustain itself indefinitely if the performance of their (democratic) governments is consistently bad. Yet the persistence of this attachment in most parts of the world in this decade indicates that a complex set of factors is relevant. It seems likely that although people in countries with weak democratic governments naturally lament their governments' failings, they are also often aware, either through past experience in their own country or from knowledge of other countries, that authoritarian governments often do not perform well either. In most regions there is significant experience—sometimes in the recent past, sometimes ongoing—with authoritarian governments that have performed or are performing very poorly. In addition, people's attachment to the ideal of democracy does not necessarily rest solely on the socioeconomic performance of their government. The various ways democratic governments treat their citizens better than authoritarian governments do—such as repressing them less, allowing them to express themselves and take part in political life—also count for something. It is difficult to measure how much it counts for, but, especially in societies where the previous experience of authoritarianism or totalitarianism was harsh, it seems to be considerable.

Dangerous elections? The overall picture of democracy as relatively stable in this decade also puts a different light on the explanatory argument about elections, that is, that elections in societies with sharp identity-based divisions are tearing apart the weak political fabric of such places, yanking them backward from democratization into civil war or authoritarian rule. It is certainly true that this decade saw various elections go awry in disappointing and at times shocking ways. The eruption of violence in Kenya after the disputed election there in December 2007 was an especially horrifying case. It reanimated the view that has long been quietly held in some Western aid agencies and foreign

ministries that elections are too dangerous for some African societies given the ethnic and tribal divisions they contain. The fighting that followed Zimbabwe's January 2008 election added to the picture of "dangerous African elections." Moreover, postelectoral violence broke out in some unexpected places in recent years, in countries such as Armenia and Mongolia that had previously held multiple successive elections without any significant conflict.

Yet although elections do sometimes go off the rails in some new democracies, the lasting political significance of such events is sometimes more mixed than it might at first appear. The violence in Kenya was horrendous, but another part of the story was that the country has moved ahead democratically enough that manipulated elections can no longer be carried off without a significant counterreaction from within the country. Similarly, although Zimbabwe's recent election was strong-armed and annulled by Mugabe, it did give the opposition a chance to make its weight felt and has drawn considerable international attention to the country's plight. If Zimbabwe had not held any election at all, it would have avoided a "failed election" yet would likely be only worse off politically.

The negative attention that troubled elections in new democracies attract is understandable. It distracts attention, however, from the less dramatic fact that elections are regularly and successfully taking place in dozens of new democracies, many of which have deep societal divisions. Although as I have argued elsewhere these elections often are not helping cure many of the basic shortcomings of these political systems, such as persistent corruption, they are nevertheless at least fulfilling the function of giving citizens a real say in who their leaders are and apportioning power peacefully.¹⁷

Rising authoritarianism revisited. A balanced perspective on democracy's fortunes in this decade also has implications for the arguments that authoritarianism is "on the march." Most basically, of course, it highlights the fact that while some authoritarian regimes may have become more secure and self-confident in recent years, authoritarianism is not spreading. While the high price of oil between 2005 and 2008 did bolster an array of existing oil-rich authoritarian regimes, it did not foster the emergence of a whole set of new ones.

This basic fact points to a need for a sober view of the effects of what some observers have feared is a powerful wave of antidemocratic foreign policies by various newly emboldened (at least while the price of oil was high) undemocratic governments. Russia's support for authoritarian regimes around it and its hostility toward the struggling democratic governments in Ukraine and Georgia are certainly negative factors for democracy in that region. Yet Russia has not actually changed the basic political system of any neighboring states. Furthermore, its efforts to affect the political makeup of other countries is concentrated on its immediate surroundings. The Russian government has, of course, been out in the world lately kindling ties with other anti-Western governments, such as in Venezuela and Cuba. But such activities are foreign

policy posturing, not a serious effort to multiply anti-Western, undemocratic governments widely in the world.

Hugo Chávez's political adventurism in Latin America has contributed to the victory of a few presidential candidates, like Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and buoyed the Castros in Cuba and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. It has not, however, significantly blunted or reshaped the basically democratic trajectory of Latin American politics of the past ten years. And Chávez's star in the region, as well as in his own country, appears to be falling.

Iran's political influence outside its borders has unquestionably grown in this decade, thanks in no small part to the Bush administration for having removed Saddam Hussein and damaged the reputation of the United States so grievously in the Arab world (giving Iran greater status as an anti-U.S. power). Troubling though this expanded influence is for U.S. security interests, its antidemocratic impact is relatively limited, given the near absence of democracy in the region. The largest impact is on Iraqi politics where Iran's involvement has complicated the construction of a stable, pluralistic post-Hussein order, but is not a principal reason why that construction has been so difficult. Lebanon is another clear example of direct Iranian political influence. Iran's support for Hizbollah is a significant obstacle to the building of a democratic, peaceful Lebanese political order, although by no means the only obstacle.

China certainly has expanding influence on the world stage, and unlike with Iran, Russia, and Venezuela, its influence is felt in multiple regions, often far from its borders. China's expanding reach is sometimes antidemocratic. China is the key supporter of some dictatorial governments in its neighborhood, most notably those in Burma and North Korea. China's growing aid to Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere, being unencumbered by good governance or human rights conditions, boosts various undemocratic governments, such as those in Angola, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. But these antidemocratic effects are side effects rather than principal goals of a foreign policy driven above all by China's economic interests. It is worth bearing in mind that the United States and other Western democracies themselves bolster more than a few undemocratic governments in pursuit of their economic and security interests, yet are not accused of mounting foreign policies that are explicitly antidemocratic.

In short, the antidemocratic effects of the foreign policies of various states are a cause for some concern, especially in particular cases like Russia's role in Georgia and Ukraine and Iran's in Iraq and Lebanon. On the whole, however, they did not make a significant dent on the overall state of democracy in the world in this decade.

There is a need for similar caution with respect to the influence of the China model as a rising alternative to liberal democracy. Certainly, the China model has entered the political lexicon in many places, sometimes invoked by ruling elites as the solution to their country's ills, especially in Central Asia, the Middle East, and parts of East and Southeast Asia and Africa. It serves as a useful

justification by undemocratic power holders for their rule—they can claim that their nondemocratic nature is in fact part of a positive developmental strategy. It does not appear to be swaying large numbers of political elites in democratic countries—the China model has little apparent force as a basis for actual political action in most of Latin America, Central and Southeastern Europe, South Asia, and many parts of Asia and Africa. Given the relatively stable hold across this decade of democracy as the preferred political model among people in every region, the China model does not appear yet to have had a strong converting effect on ordinary citizens either.

The notion that the China model is a new antidemocratic virus sweeping through the developing world tends to overlook the fact that such a model is hardly a new idea. The belief that strong-arm governments are better at development than democratic ones has enjoyed wide currency both in the developing world and among Western policy makers at many times in the past 40 years. The Pinochet model, advanced around the developing world in the 1970s and 1980s, was just one of many earlier forms of this proposition. China's developmental success has given some new life to the idea but has not created a new concept.

Looking Ahead

The fact that democracy has been more stable around the world in this decade than pessimistic accounts would indicate has significant implications for the incoming Obama administration. One of the many foreign policy issues that the new president and his team will have to face is what to do about supporting democracy abroad. The negative experiences of the Bush administration in this domain, especially in the Middle East, clearly create some impetus for tamping down emphasis on the subject. The very negative readings of the state of democracy in the world that have become common in the past year or two only fortify that impetus—democracy appears as a dismal arena of likely policy setbacks rather than possible policy gains. Seeing instead that democracy has in fact been relatively stable overall, despite a complex mix of both bad news and good news, will help temper that negative assessment.

Democracy's relative stability in this decade is no guarantee that it will continue to be stable in the decade ahead, of course. The global financial crisis and resultant recessions in many countries are having or will have punishing effects on governments all around the world. Many fledgling democratic governments were able to survive in the past decade or two despite weak socioeconomic performance, for reasons discussed above. Devastating downturns could nevertheless undermine them. Of course, many undemocratic governments will also be hit, and some of them may also be de-legitimated in the eyes of their citizens as a result. It may be that some undemocratic regimes are even more vulnerable than democratic ones because they rely more heavily on performance

legitimacy, lacking the basic legitimacy of express citizen consent. Yet at least some undemocratic governments do have other sources of legitimacy—such as religious authority or anti-Western resistance. Moreover, unlike fledgling democratic states, they are quick to step up repression to quell citizen discontent. It remains very difficult to predict how the global financial crisis will affect the overall political configuration of governments around the world, but it is certain to increase political instability overall.

Notes

I thank Julia Brower and Maame Boakye for their research assistance in the preparation of this paper.

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