

The People Have Spoken: No More Democracy!

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Apologists for political freedom are sounding the alarm: Democracy is in decline around the world. This was especially clear from the latest report on political rights and civil liberties issued by Freedom House in late January. Although a steady negative trend has continued since 2005, 2014 was a particularly grim year: The level of freedoms declined in 61 countries, but increased in only 33 — a record low for the last nine years.

Freedom House evaluates the behavior of the world's various states according to the criteria of 1) political rights — the ability to freely participate in choosing leaders and making decisions important to the community, and 2) civil rights — the freedom to put forward opinions, institutions and personal autonomy independent of state policy, the existence of independent media and the protection of minority rights.

How then to explain this negative trend, the decline of democratic freedoms in the world? The advance of democracy has never been a linear process. In his book, "The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century," American political scientist Samuel

Huntington suggests that the process consisted of three long periods, or waves.

The first wave, 1828–1926, began with the revolutions in the United States and France and eventually led to the emergence of democracy in 29 countries. It was followed by a regressive wave between 1920 and 1940, marked by the rise of fascist and communist regimes. The second wave of democratization followed the Allied victory in World War II and the process of decolonization, increasing the number of democracies to 36.

Then, between 1958 and 1970, a number of former colonies experienced the second regressive trend away from democracy. The third and final wave of democratization between 1974 and 1991 began with the liberalization of the southern European states, a process that later spread to South American, Asian and communist countries.

By 1994, the total number of democratic states reached 72. Is the current trend simply the third regressive wave away from democratization?

Not necessarily. Political scientist Jay Ulfelder recently explained that the number of democracies has not fallen since 2005. The decline in democracy that Freedom House identified primarily concerns Middle Eastern states and former Soviet republics that were never especially liberal to begin with.

In other words, the problem is not that a number of countries have stopped following a democratic model, but that authoritarian regimes have begun tightening the screws on their societies. Thus, according to Freedom House, of the eight countries in the Middle East, only Tunisia managed to become more liberal, while the rest actually backtracked on freedoms — a trend that began in each of those seven countries even before 2014.

A similar dynamic characterized the Eurasian region and sub-Saharan Africa. Russia, which earned the classification of a non-free state back in 2004, has since fallen from a grade of 5 to 6, with 7 the lowest on that scale.

In a similar vein, in their 2015 essay "The Myth of Democratic Recession," political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way suggest that current democratic pessimism has more to do with the excessive optimism during the early post-Cold War transitions when many scholars unrealistically assumed that most of the third wave democracies would last.

Levitsky and Way argue instead that the number of democratic transitions rather than a democratic setback that followed is what was really unique about that period. In the early 1990s autocrats all across the globe faced a virtual "perfect storm" — severe fiscal crises, collapsing states and intense international pressure for multi-party elections that forced most of them to liberalize their systems.

By the 2000s the economic recovery, state-rebuilding, and a more permissive international environment reinforced those autocrats again, and since many of those regimes were never remotely democratic to begin with (for example, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) they returned to their original state.

The conclusion is somewhat optimistic: If anything, one should be impressed with the breadth and robustness of the third wave democracies, which survived until now in many

countries despite severe economic crises and radical economic reforms.

But not everyone is as cheerful. In his recent essay, "Is democracy in decline?" Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations attributes the authoritarian trend to the curtailment of the West's active support for human rights and freedoms worldwide.

Beginning in the 1970s, the United States played a major role in preventing military coups from overtaking young democratic governments. Washington intervened in the natural political cycles of those countries to ensure that they did not revert to their previous authoritarian modes of government.

With the United States playing this role, the third wave of democratization was unprecedented in its scope and duration. However, the democratic superpowers have now ended that practice and are busy trying to solve their own problems.

Conversely, the powerful autocracies of China and Russia, as well as Middle Eastern theocracies that dream of establishing a new caliphate, have demonstrated the strength and inclination to influence the international system. It is their regional influence that accounts for the decline in democracy.

The Economist magazine published a list of the radical and populist parties in Europe that are rumored to have close ties to Russia or even direct Kremlin funding. They include Ataka in Bulgaria, Syriza in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and the National Front in France.

By itself, the funding of right-wing parties would not be so dangerous if the authoritarian model were not becoming increasingly attractive to part of the population of democratic countries. As renowned journalist Christian Caryl has pointed out, most people do not consider democracy an end in itself. They view its importance only as a source of economic growth, social justice and security.

What happens when democracy does not deliver those results? The world learned the answer in December 2013 when thousands of Thai citizens took to the streets to demand that the country's democratic elections be replaced by direct appointments to a people's council. Decades of economic progress in that country led to a sharp increase in regional and class inequalities that provoked widespread discontent with democracy.

In Egypt, a large number of people supported a military coup against the legitimately elected government of the country. Russia also offers numerous illustrations of this thesis. Samuel Huntington noted this snowball effect: New democracies were often established "from above," under pressure from the elite. It turned out that many of those countries were not ready for democratic consolidation.

The struggle for democracy is far from finished: Democracy has proven weaker, and dictatorships stronger and smarter than anticipated by those who predicted "the end of history" a quarter-century ago. Now a new stage of history is unfolding before our eyes.

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