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Is Democracy in Decline?

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Is Democracy in Decline?

Bonn, Stanford, 23 February 2015. Over the past decade, the expansion of freedom and democracy in the world has become to a prolonged halt. One could view this as a period of equilibrium. Given that democracy expanded to a number of countries with weak facilitating conditions (such as poverty or an authoritarian neighbourhood), it is impressive that democracy survived in so many places.

We are now four decades into the third wave of global democratic expansion that began with the Portuguese Revolution in 1974. Any assessment of the state of global democracy today must begin by recognizing its impressive durability. When the third wave began in 1974, only about 30 percent of the world's independent states had free and fair elections to choose their leaders, and democracy was a relatively rare phenomenon outside the rich West.

In the subsequent three decades, the number of democracies held steady or expanded every year from 1975 until 2007. Nothing like this continuous growth in democracy ever had been seen before in the history of the world.

Beyond the stagnation or modest erosion of democracy and freedom globally, there have been several other causes for concern. One has been a significant and accelerating rate of democratic breakdown. Second, the quality or stability of democracy has been declining in some large and important emerging-market countries, like South Africa, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Third, authoritarianism has been deepening. And fourth, the advanced democracies have been performing rather poorly and seem to lack the will and self-confidence to promote democracy effectively abroad.

Since 2000, I count 25 breakdowns of democracy in the world – not only through blatant military or executive coups, but also through incremental degradations of democratic rights and procedures that finally push democracy over the threshold into authoritarianism. It is sometimes difficult to assign a particular date to the latter form of failure. But just as Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chavez gradually strangled democracy in Russia and Venezuela, I think President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has by now done so in Turkey.

The Decline of Freedom and the Rule of Law

There has also been a trend of declining freedom since 2005. In each of the last nine years, more countries have declined in freedom than have improved, usually by a factor of two to one or more. Since 2005, 29 of the 49 sub-Saharan African states declined in freedom, while only fifteen countries improved.

The trend of erosion in freedom and accountability is not always evident to outside observers. In a number of countries where we take democracy for granted, such as South Africa, we should not. In fact, there is not a single country on the African continent where

democracy is firmly consolidated and secure today.

Why have freedom and democracy been regressing in many countries? The most important and pervasive answer is bad governance. The deterioration in transparency and rule of law is particularly visible. As more and more African states become resource-rich, with the onset of a second African oil boom, the quality of governance will deteriorate further. This has already begun to happen in one of Africa's most liberal and important democracies, Ghana.

The Authoritarian Resurgence

Another recent blow has been the crushing or implosion of Arab movements for democratic change. Levels of freedom are actually lower in most Arab countries today than they were at the end of 2010, and nowhere has the resurgence or reinvention of authoritarianism been more evident than in Egypt.

In Russia, space for political opposition and principled dissent has been shrinking. In China, human rights defenders and civil society activists have faced increasing harassment and victimization. The resurgence of authoritarianism has been quickened by the diffusion of common tools, such as laws to criminalize assistance from democracies to democratic parties, media, and civil society organizations in authoritarian regimes. There have also been broader restrictions on the ability of NGOs to form and operate and the creation of pseudo-NGOs to do the bidding of autocrats. In addition, authoritarian (and even some democratic) states are becoming more resourceful, sophisticated, and unapologetic in suppressing Internet freedom and using cyberspace to frustrate, subvert, and control civil society.

Western Democracy in Retreat

Perhaps the most worrisome dimension of the democratic recession has been the decline of democratic efficacy, energy, and self-confidence in the West. We in the United States and in parts of the EU have some hard reform work ahead to reduce polarization, foster better policymaking and diminish the corrupting influence of money in electoral politics and lobbying. The lackluster performance of democracy in the West, most of all the US, is hurting its cause globally.

As a global democratic community, we also need to recover our energy, and our confidence in our own values. If we do not undertake more rapid, resourceful, coordinated, and explicit actions to confront the resurgence of authoritarianism, the mild democratic recession of the past decade will mutate into something far worse.

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