

The Global Crisis of Democracy; As China and Russia attack free governments and push strongman rule, the U.S. has gone silent—and a new tide of authoritarianism is gathering.

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FULL TEXT

There is nothing inevitable about the expansion of democracy. Among countries with populations above one million, there were only 11 democracies in 1900, 20 in 1920 and 29 in 1974. Only for the past quarter of a century has democracy been the world's predominant form of government. By 1993, the number of democracies had exploded to 77—representing, for the first time in history, a majority of countries with at least one million people. By 2006, the number of democracies had ticked up to 86.

But we are now at a precarious moment. Democracy faces a global crisis. We have seen 12 consecutive years of erosion in global levels of political rights and civil liberties, with many more countries declining than gaining each year, according to the nonprofit group Freedom House. Over the past decade, one in six democracies has failed. Today only a bare majority of the world's larger states remain democracies.

Nor do the numbers capture the full extent of the danger. Behind the statistics is a steady, palpable corrosion of democratic institutions and norms in a range of countries. China, Russia and their admirers are making headway with a new global narrative, hailing strongman rule—not government by the people—as the way forward in difficult times.

Until recently, U.S. resolve had helped to hold back today's main foes of democracy: an ambitious and rising China, a resentful and declining Russia, and a new wave of populist authoritarians from Hungary to the Philippines. Now, however, America's own political decay is increasingly advanced. President Donald Trump has insulted U.S. allies, befriended Vladimir Putin, excused a grim list of other dictators, embraced nativist politics and movements, and shaken the post-World War II liberal order. But the problem also includes cynical politicians in both parties, calcified systems that don't deliver public goods and complacent citizens who cannot bestir themselves to vote. All of this is tarnishing the overall luster of democracy—and pulling America away from the world. If we do not soon reverse this U.S. retreat, democracy world-wide will be at risk.

As the late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington explained, democratic change doesn't happen in isolation. Rather, it surges forward and retreats in waves, across regions and the whole globe. In a democratic wave, the number of countries making the transition to democracy greatly exceeds the number moving away from it, and overall levels of liberty rise. In a reverse wave, the opposite is true: Democracy shrinks, and so does human freedom.

Huntington argued that the first wave of global democratization began with the democratization of the U.S., which he dates (disputably) to 1828, when more than half of all white American males became eligible to vote. Gradually, the first wave engulfed most of Western Europe as well as a few countries in Eastern Europe (such as Poland), Canada, Australia, New Zealand and four South American countries. A century later, more than 30 countries (some quite small) had "established at least minimal national democratic institutions," Huntington wrote.

As this first wave was cresting, a reverse wave began gathering in 1922, when the Italian fascist Benito Mussolini marched on Rome and quickly disposed of Italy's fragile democracy. Democratic reversals soon followed in

Portugal, Poland and the Baltics. The crucial turning point came in 1933, when the Nazis took power in Germany. As liberal societies struggled with the prolonged economic depression of the 1930s, doubts about democracy's viability grew, even in Britain and the U.S.

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It took the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II to halt this momentum and launch the second wave of democratization. That second wave restored democracy to most of Western Europe, introduced the first real democracies in Japan and Turkey, and spread democracy further into Latin America. But this wave was short-lived, ending in 1962. With the exception of Costa Rica, Venezuela and Colombia, most of the new and restored Latin American democracies fell in a spree of military coups.

The second wave also saw the birth of many new democracies through decolonization, as the European empires in Africa, Asia and the Middle East collapsed after World War II. These burgeoning democracies were mainly former British colonies that had some experience with elections and the rule of law, including India, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria and Burma. The first four of these democracies have survived (except a brief period of emergency rule in India in 1975-77 and a more recent interruption in Sri Lanka), but most multiparty systems in the Third World—including Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia and many African countries—ultimately gave way to military, one-party or one-man rule.

The third wave of democratization began in 1974, when a cabal of young, left-wing military officers in Portugal overthrew its dictatorship, one of the longest-surviving in Europe. Later that year, Greece—the birthplace of democracy—restored it after a seven-year-old military dictatorship collapsed following a defeat by Turkey in Cyprus. In 1978, Spain became Europe's third new democracy, under a young conservative prime minister determined to overcome the Franco dictatorship. Aspirations for freedom were also stirring in Asia and Latin America.

In 1977, a new U.S. president of deeply Christian faith, Jimmy Carter, began to change U.S. foreign policy. He elevated human rights through strong public denunciations of atrocities, foreign-aid cuts for some abusive regimes and the creation of a new human-rights bureau at the State Department.

Not everyone approved of this new idealism; in 1980, William F. Buckley Jr. sighed that Mr. Carter was mixing "business with displeasure." But U.S. pressure spared the lives of political prisoners, gave hope to democratic movements world-wide and undermined the legitimacy of military autocrats. In 1978, for instance, Mr. Carter sent stern warnings and U.S. warships to the Dominican Republic after its military stopped a vote count to thwart an opposition victory; the country's strongman, Joaquin Balaguer, was defeated, and a new (albeit tentative) democracy emerged.

When Ronald Reagan defeated Mr. Carter in 1980, few expected a new world-wide eruption of freedom. The new president and his U.N. ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, had condemned Mr. Carter for naively ignoring communist tyrannies while pressuring authoritarian U.S. allies like the shah of Iran to liberalize. Reagan vowed in his 1981 inaugural address to "match loyalty with loyalty," which seemed to portend renewed support for such autocratic friends of the U.S. as Augusto Pinochet's Chile, Ferdinand Marcos's Philippines, a coup-prone South Korea and apartheid South Africa. But by the time Reagan left office in 1989, all four regimes were gone or fading—followed in short order by the Soviet Union itself.

In June 1982, Reagan delivered a historic speech at the British Parliament in which he became among the first to recognize that a "democratic revolution" was sweeping the world—and that it deserved U.S. support. The next year, with unusually bipartisan support, Congress established the National Endowment for Democracy (where I have long served as an adviser).

Reagan's personal commitment was soon apparent. Take the Philippines: In 1986, amid an election there, the new endowment gave financial support to vote monitors, and the Reagan administration sent a delegation (led by the late Republican Sen. Richard Lugar) to monitor the balloting. As evidence mounted that Marcos had brazenly tried to steal the election, Reagan threatened to cut off military aid if the strongman used force and agreed to recognize the opposition candidate, Corazon Aquino, as president. A U.S. Air Force plane flew the Marcoses to exile in Hawaii, with 12 bags full of gold, jewelry, clothing and cash valued at \$15 million.

A third democratic wave was breaking across Asia. Under pressure from the U.S. Congress, Taiwan lifted martial law. In 1987, South Korea inaugurated its own democracy with a free election. Not every freedom movement succeeded. In 1989, China's Communist Party launched a deadly military assault on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square, killing what a recently declassified British cable estimated at more than 10,000 people. With them died the hope for democratic change in China for more than a generation.

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Still, by 1989, the proportion of democracies in the world had risen to 40% of all countries. Autocratic holdouts in Latin America were giving way, including Chile, where pressure from the Reagan administration helped to tip the balance against Pinochet's junta. Nicaragua's far-left Sandinista dictator, Daniel Ortega, was defeated at the polls after U.S. economic and diplomatic pressure got him to agree to international election monitoring.

The most historic changes occurred in Europe. Decades of bipartisan U.S. containment of the Soviet Union, from Harry Truman to George H.W. Bush, had helped to produce an internal reform movement that came to be led by Mikhail Gorbachev. Unlike his predecessors, who crushed Hungary's 1956 uprising and Czechoslovakia's 1968 "Prague Spring," Mr. Gorbachev let democratization sweep across the region, with Soviet puppet states falling from East Germany to Romania. In 1991, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

That produced global shock waves. In Africa, opposition parties were legalized, personal freedoms were widened, and multiparty elections were held. In 1994, the white-supremacist minority regime in South Africa gave way to a robust democracy led by a freely elected President Nelson Mandela. In the early years of the 21st century, three so-called color revolutions brought freedom to Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. For the first time in history, most of the countries on Earth were democracies. Every region on the planet, except the Middle East, had a critical mass of democracies.

It was inevitable that democracy's rapid march during the 1980s and '90s would slow. By 2000, most of the countries with the socioeconomic conditions favorable for democracy had already adopted it. But the world's sole superpower, the U.S., was joined with Europe in promoting democracy as the only legitimate form of government. There seemed no reason to believe that a third reverse wave was likely. Even in the five years after the shock of 9/11, the world added seven more democracies.

But after 2006, three decades of progress ground to a halt—and began to reverse. The key elements of this alarming deterioration have been the rise of illiberal, anti-immigrant populist movements in Europe and the U.S.; the steady decline in the quality of American democracy; and the surge in global power of Russia and China, which are avidly undermining democratic and liberal values around the world.

In earlier reverse waves, military coups were the main method of the democratic recession. Not today. The death of democracy is now typically administered in a thousand cuts. In one country after another, elected leaders have gradually attacked the deep tissues of democracy—the independence of the courts, the business community, the media, civil society, universities and sensitive state institutions like the civil service, the intelligence agencies and the police. Whether the agent of destruction is a right-wing nationalist like Vladimir Putin in Russia or a left-wing "Bolivarian" socialist like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the effect is the same: The structures and norms of democracy are eviscerated, one by one, until all that is left is a hollow shell.

The global trend is sour. Religious intolerance is on the rise in the huge democracies of Indonesia and India. Surveys show that most Africans still passionately want democratic and accountable government, but the combination of Chinese boldness, European distraction and American retreat are increasingly enabling African

autocrats to have their way. In the Middle East, Tunisia—the lone Arab democracy still standing after the 2011 Arab Spring—is facing a reeling economy, powerful Gulf autocrats who want democracy to wither and opportunistic survivors from the old dictatorship.

The problem is not just that democracies are declining; it is that autocracies are becoming steadily more repressive and aggressive. When the Cold War ended, authoritarians like Hun Sen in Cambodia and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda felt compelled—even as they rigged elections and arrested critics—to tolerate opposition parties, presidential challengers, a nettlesome press and a vigilant civil society. But as the global climate has changed, those restraints have evaporated. Inspired by the new swagger of Xi Jinping's China and Vladimir Putin's Russia, and emboldened by the silence from Mr. Trump's America, today's autocrats tyrannize their opponents openly and without apology.

Slow descents have a way of lulling us into complacency. Things aren't so bad, we tell ourselves; they're just slipping a bit. In Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," the freewheeling, hard-drinking Mike Campbell is asked how he went bankrupt. "Two ways," he says. "Gradually and then suddenly." The demise of democracy is often like that too.

We can still reverse these ill winds. We can even help generate a new burst of freedom in the world. But it will not happen without vigorous American leadership—to support democrats, pressure autocrats and counter the malign expansion of Russian and Chinese power.

—Prof. Diamond is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book "Ill Winds: Saving Democracy From Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency," which will be published June 11 by Penguin Press.

Credit: By Larry Diamond

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