

# DEMOCRACY'S SOBERING STATE

"Democracy still occupies the high ground in the world.... Yet, just a few years into the new century, the grand hope that it will prove the age of democracy's global triumph appears far more tenuous than it seemed just 10 or 15 years ago."

THOMAS CAROTHERS

What Samuel Huntington called the "third wave" of democracy—the multitude of democratic openings that began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s and then spread during the next two decades throughout Latin America, Asia, the former Soviet bloc, and sub-Saharan Africa—has come to a standstill. According to Freedom House, an organization that tracks democratization around the world, there were 118 electoral democracies in 1996. Today, eight years later, there are 117. The relative proportions of countries that Freedom House rates as free, partly free, or not free have been largely static since the end of the 1990s.

## POLITICS

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Of course, good news about democracy around the globe can still be found. Indonesians, for example, are making impressive strides in building democracy in the world's most populous Muslim country and have just inaugurated their first democratically elected president. A year ago Georgians threw off the decaying rule of President Eduard Shevardnadze and embarked on a bold effort to breathe new life into their country's shaky democratic experiment. South Africans recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of their postapartheid democracy, a democracy that is holding together despite myriad challenges. Tens of millions of Central and Eastern Europeans are now citizens of both democratic states and the European Union. And millions of Afghans took part in successful presidential elections in Afghanistan in October. More generally, key prodemocratic values, like government accountability and citizen empowerment, continue to spark interest and activism on every continent. And the community of people, organizations, and governments committed to advancing democracy's fortunes worldwide continues to grow.

Still, the grand hopes that energized some of democracy's most ardent optimists in the heady peak years of the third wave have not been realized. The former Soviet Union has gone from democratic frontier to democratic wasteland in just over a decade. South America is facing a crisis of democracy marked by political instability, rising conflict, and declining public belief in democratic institutions. Significant parts of East Asia, including China, North Korea,

Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Singapore, remain under authoritarian rule, with little sign of change in sight. Dozens of African countries have seen once-promising democratic openings deliver only weak pluralism at best, or destructive civil conflict at worst. And, the US occupation of Iraq notwithstanding, the Arab world remains a democracy-free zone—despite increased international pressure for reform and some mild efforts by Arab rulers to move a few steps away from long-established patterns of autocracy.

Behind these signs of trouble in different regions lies a diverse set of factors that are coalescing in the first decade of this century to blunt democracy's global advance. No one of the factors is determinative in and of itself, but when combined they present a daunting new context. Understanding this context is vital to shaping an effective response.

## THE AUTHORITARIAN REBOUND

The first factor inhibiting democratization is the persistence and even rejuvenation of authoritarian forces and structures in many countries that appeared, at least for a short time, to be experiencing democratic openings. Authoritarian forces were able to lie low or become dormant during the initial period of political change, even as dictatorial regimes fell. The apparent democratic transitions often turned out to be relatively shallow, despite their grand early moments and the high hopes they spawned. Dramatic first-time elections were held, new constitutions written, civil society unleashed, and government reforms announced. But the process of change in many cases did not penetrate the resilient, adaptable institutions behind the day-to-day screen of pluralistic politics—institutions that often harbored authoritarian mindsets, legacies, and actors such as domestic security services, militaries, and crony-dominated, state-owned businesses. In an unfortunately large number of cases, nondemocratic forces have been able to reassert themselves, taking advantage of the often fractious or feckless character of fledgling democratic governments. The rising economic and personal insecurity that many nascent democracies have produced for average citizens has eased the task of resurgent authoritarians since these conditions render citizens susceptible to the argument that a strong hand can set daily life back on track.

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This phenomenon has been vividly present in the former Soviet Union as well as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Post-Soviet authoritarians have gained a grip throughout a region that in the early 1990s seemed to be opening itself to genuine political change. Pluralism is hanging on in a few former Soviet republics, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova. But most have become mired again in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule.

Russia's authoritarian slide under President Vladimir Putin has been especially damaging and dispiriting. Putin has methodically hollowed out or co-opted every major institution—including the national broadcast media, the Russian Duma, political parties, and regional governorships—that had achieved any real degree of independence. The systematic disassembling of his country's nascent democratic system has been a textbook case of dedemocratization that will be studied, unfortunately, by both political scientists and would-be autocrats for years to come. With Russia's democratic experiment at least alive, albeit troubled, throughout the 1990s, the overall political direction of the region appeared to be still up for grabs, despite bad news out of Central Asia and the Caucasus. But Russia's recent turn, although not necessarily permanent, throws the weight of regional political life firmly in the wrong corner, where it is likely to stay for years.

Adding to the disappointment of the post-Soviet political record is the fact that neither the United States nor Europe really has done much to try to slow or reverse the backsliding. Western governments are comfortable doing business with strongmen leaders as long as access to oil and gas continues uninterrupted, and because these leaders remain helpful on Western counterterrorism concerns.

Although sub-Saharan Africa generally has made substantial progress toward greater political pluralism and openness in the past 15 years, a discouraging number of countries continue to suffer persistent authoritarian rule, especially in francophone Africa, but in other parts of the region as well, including Sudan, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and Equatorial Guinea. In some cases, such as Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe, authoritarian rule has returned after what looked like an encouraging political opening. In most of the others, authoritarian leaders or parties that may have learned to say a few of the right things about democracy in the early 1990s have reverted fully to type.

## THE PERFORMANCE PROBLEM

Although a troubling number of countries that were initially counted as part of the third wave have experienced a reassertion of authoritarian forces, quite a few others have managed to go from initial democratic openings to the establishment of reasonably open pluralistic systems. Many of these countries, however, are facing a different challenge to the consolidation of

democracy: they are not succeeding in providing better lives for their citizens socially or economically. The economic reform measures that many new democracies adopt, though helping to reduce government deficits and stabilize currencies, have often produced only tepid growth. Citizens of these countries face higher prices for basic goods, an increased threat of unemployment, and stagnant incomes. Moreover, they are often beset with heightened social problems, especially rising crime and a breakdown of the traditional social safety net.

This overall problem, which has come to be known as the problem of democratic performance, can be debilitating to struggling democracies. It may not be fair in some philosophical sense for people to judge democracy on the basis of the socioeconomic performance of a given weak democratic regime. Democracy is in a strict sense about political values, choices, and processes; it does not per se provide answers to economic and social problems. Yet, fair or not, this is what citizens of new democracies (and for that matter, established ones as well) do. And when the performance is poor over time, the effects can be negative. In many new democracies, citizens are seriously disenchanted with their governments. This disenchantment is turning into a larger loss of belief in democracy itself and, in some more aggravated cases, into instability and political conflict.

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South America has been sharply afflicted with this problem, although the challenge of democratic performance has also dogged various countries in Central America, southeastern Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia as well. In South America, unlike in the former Soviet Union and some other regions, authoritarians were largely overcome or at least sent back to the barracks after democratic openings occurred. Almost all South American countries achieved flawed but real democratic systems, with most of the main institutional and procedural forms of democracy. Yet, in the past three or four years, the region has experienced what many South Americans and external observers increasingly view as a crisis of democracy. Argentina hit a frightening bump in its political road in 2001 when an economic crisis (itself partly caused by deficiencies in the political system, above all low levels of elite accountability) produced a period of vertiginous political instability; during one three-week spell the country went through five presidents. Venezuela has been suffering serious political polarization and conflict since the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez, a populist strongman with dubious fidelity to democratic norms who survived a recall referendum this year. Peru is undergoing a period of deep political malaise, marked by a hollow party system and the collapse of support for President Alejandro Toledo, whose election in 2001 was heralded as a rebirth of Peruvian democracy after the authoritarian reign of Alberto Fujimori. Bolivia and Ecuador have both experienced the ouster of presidents and the rise of serious new political fissures and tensions. Alongside these punishing developments are two

longstanding political problems: the deeply corrupted dominant-power rule by the Colorado Party in Paraguay and the continuing civil war in Colombia.

South America's democratic woes derive from many causes and vary in nature from place to place. They are discouraging precisely because they highlight that democracy can corrode in so many different ways. But the problem of democratic performance—rooted in weak state institutions, entrenched, corrupted political elites, and poor systems of political representation and accountability—plays a role in much of the region. Fifteen to twenty years after the return of democracy, many South Americans do not feel that greater political freedom and choice have improved their lives very much, or at all, especially in terms of economic well-being and personal security. Given the high expectations that many people in the region had for what the end of dictatorship would bring, frustration over poor democratic performance turns easily into bitterness. The result has been a rising tide of cynicism, anger, and hostile actions against political parties, legislatures, governments, and even democracy itself.

## DOING WELL UNDER DICTATORS

A third factor contributing to a newly challenging environment for global democracy is the sense that quite a few authoritarian countries have been doing well economically in recent years, giving new life to the old idea that dictatorship is better than democracy at producing socioeconomic development. This idea was popular in the 1960s and 1970s, both in the West and in developing countries. In the West it was an article of faith among economists worried about populist-oriented policy making and a convenient excuse by diplomats for supporting friendly tyrants who were useful on security issues. In developing countries, ruling elites found it a handy justification for their repressive grip on power. The idea lost some steam in the 1980s, weakened by the accumulated socioeconomic failures of dictatorial regimes in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Across the 1990s the opposite idea gained considerable ground in international development circles—that democracy and economic development go hand in hand—or even more strongly, that democracy, with its presumably better systems of representation and accountable governance, actually facilitates economic development. The experience in the 1990s of much of the postcommunist world—where for a time progress on political reform and economic growth correlated strongly—added weight to the new view.

China's extraordinary economic success has presented a serious problem for those arguing that democracy is necessary for development or that dictatorial regimes cannot produce sustained economic development. In the current context, in which citizens of many developing countries are dissatisfied with the socioeconomic performance of their new democratic regimes, China's continued very rapid growth and its increasing economic muscle on the world stage have made it an increasingly powerful example. Talk of the "China model" has become much more common around the developing world than 10 years ago, both among ruling elites and average citizens. Magnifying this effect in the past several years are other authoritarian or

semi-authoritarian countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Vietnam, that have also been turning in high growth rates. Indeed, of the ten fastest-growing economies in the developing world between 1999 and 2002, only one—Albania—was led by a (somewhat) democratic government. This trend can be explained in part by the high price of oil, which has buoyed the economies of a number of oil-rich autocracies. Nevertheless, the trend fuels the belief in the developing world that a strong hand is best for development. And it undercuts the efforts of the international development community to make the case for a democracy-development link.

## THE WAR ON TERRORISM

A fourth complicating element for democracy in today's international context is the US war on terrorism. The ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and of Saddam Hussein in Iraq have opened the possibility, still far from being realized, of establishing stable, peaceful, democratic rule in these countries. President George W. Bush has also made a declared push for democratic transformation of the Middle East a part of his antiterrorism campaign, although this has been problematic in implementation. Other elements of the war on terrorism, however, have hurt democracy's cause. The US government's strongly felt need for closer counterterrorism cooperation with governments in many parts of the world has led it to warm relations with various autocratic regimes, such as those in Pakistan and Uzbekistan, and to go easy on the democratic backsliding of others, such as Russia.

In addition, the war on terrorism has hurt America's status as a model of democracy and weakened America's credibility as a prodemocratic actor. The world has watched closely, and often with disappointment, America's troubled effort to balance heightened law enforcement concerns with domestic political and civil rights, above all for Muslim citizens or residents of the United States. And the abusive treatment of detainees in US-run prisons or detention facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo has badly tarnished America's standing as a defender of human rights. Americans may have largely moved on past the stories and images that emerged from the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, but in many other parts of the world the negative emotions produced by those events are still strongly felt. A further negative consequence of the war on terrorism for global democracy has been the tendency of governments in the Middle East and many parts of Asia to use the antiterrorism banner as an excuse to crack down on political opponents, a tendency the United States has protested too little.

## AND NOW FOR THE HARD PART

The most pressing as well as complex and difficult issue concerning the advance of democracy over the next decade and beyond is the question of whether the Middle East can make any significant democratic progress. Policy makers in Washington and other Western capitals advance the idea that the arrival of democracy in the Middle East is necessary to eliminate the roots

of radical Islamist terrorism. Although this proposition is badly oversimplified and potentially misleading as a policy credo, it has raised to an unprecedented degree the level of international attention paid to the Arab world's democratic deficit.

The Bush administration's push for democracy in the Middle East has consisted of both a massive military-led effort to reconstruct Iraqi politics on a democratic template and an interrelated series of much less intrusive measures in the rest of the region, including new aid programs, multilevel diplomatic steps like the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, and some high-level jawboning of Arab leaders by top US officials. The region's skeptical and recalcitrant response to the new push has demonstrated how hard a prodemocratic policy toward the Middle East will be in practice. The political reconstruction of Iraq has been much more difficult and costly (in financial, human, and diplomatic terms) than those in charge of the intervention ever thought it would be. Certainly, many of the political forces in post-Saddam Iraq support some kind of pluralistic outcome, yet the road to achieving it remains littered with daunting obstacles. And although Iraq is less repressive today than it was under Saddam, it has not yet proved a positive model for the region. Arabs largely view Iraq as a violent, chaotic, frightening place, one where thousands of Arabs have died as a direct or indirect result of a foreign invasion and occupation and whose political life is still controlled, deep down, by the United States.

The new international attention to the absence of democracy in the Arab world, including the various US and European initiatives to encourage or stimulate positive movement, has helped engender more discussion in Arab countries about the need for political reform and democracy. A few governments, most notably perhaps that of Morocco, have continued along paths of reform that have led to some real pluralism, albeit still within a monarchical framework. And some of the more authoritarian Arab governments, such as those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have announced minor new reform steps, both to respond to these internal debates and to win some international favor.

But in general the region remains stuck in deeply entrenched patterns of autocratic rule. Arab states are willing to engage in limited off-again, on-again political reforms, but more as a liberalizing strategy to avoid democracy rather than to achieve it. Arab ruling elites do not share the new Western view that democratic change is necessary to combat Islamist extremism. In fact, they hold the opposite view: that democracy would likely unleash radical forces that could be harmful to both the region and the West. Pressure from below for democratic change is weak at best throughout the region, despite the stepped-up activities of some civic groups and others speaking out on behalf of reform. Those who advocate for democracy (usually secular Western-oriented intellectuals) lack organized constituencies behind them. And the groups that do have mass-based constituencies—Islamist organizations—often do not frame their political objectives in terms of democracy and are placed under strict limits by regimes nervous about any mass-based processes of political change.

It is by no means impossible that the Arab world will over time make progress toward democracy. But the process is likely to be much slower than the current fervor for reform in Washington and other Western capitals might imply, not to mention more conflictive and unsettling to Western interests than the new policy credo suggests. Despite the rhetoric coming from the White House, in practice US and other Western policy makers are not at all sure that opening up Arab political systems to popular choice would actually serve Western economic and security interests overall. In some cases, dangerous instability or even civil conflict might result. Other Arab societies might choose Islamist leaders who are not inclined to be helpful on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or other important issues. There is a significant gap between the soaring rhetoric about freedom in the Middle East and actual Western policy in most of the region. Policies more cautious in deeds than in words are likely to persist.

## GETTING SERIOUS

The state of democracy in the world is sobering. Democracy still occupies the high ground across the world both as the only political ideology to command widespread legitimacy and as the political system of most of the world's wealthy or powerful countries. Yet, only a few years into the new century, the grand hope that it will prove the age of democracy's global triumph appears far more tenuous than it seemed just 10 or 15 years ago.

American policy makers determined to make democracy promotion a major element of US foreign policy will have to do better than rely on attractive but superficial slogans like "freedom is on the march." It is necessary to move away from the mindset that a democratic trend is advancing in the world and that US policy should aim to support it. The challenges now are more fundamental: how to stimulate democracy in regions where authoritarianism has bested the democratic trend, and how to support democracy where it is under siege because of poor performance. Responding to these challenges will require a greater willingness to pressure authoritarian leaders who offer short-term economic and security benefits to the United States but spell long-term trouble, especially in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. And it will require the United States to construct more effective partnerships with South America and other regions where democracy is under siege. Democracy promotion is a convenient, even easy rhetorical framework for a global policy, especially in the context of the war on terrorism. Making it work in practice is neither convenient nor easy, and the state of democracy in the world is only getting more complex and demanding with each passing year.

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