

## DEMOCRACY

Richard Youngs, SENIOR RESEARCHER, FRIDE, MADRID AND UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

# Dicing with Democracy

President Barack Obama's Cairo speech has been hailed around the world. It struck just the positive tone needed to embark on a 'new beginning'. And against the predictions of many commentators he did not duck the 'democracy' issue. Of course, the president said little about how the United States will endeavour to support democratic reform in the Middle East. Having raised expectations, he will be conscious that failure to deliver will engender huge disappointment in the region. **Nevertheless, the speech has put the issue of international democracy back on the agenda.**



**m** ANY SCEPTICS ARE ready to argue that – however genuine and eloquently expressed United States President

Barack Obama's commitment – the 'democracy' agenda has run out of steam. The dice seem firmly loaded against democracy's further spread.

The doomsayers' arguments are many. There has been no increase in the number of democracies since 2000. Worse still, key states such as Russia, Nigeria, Venezuela and Thailand have suffered democratic reversals. Some cosmetic reforms have been forthcoming in the Middle East, but

there are few clear openings that a new US democracy strategy in the region could latch onto.

Few chinks have appeared in the world's most illiberal or closed political systems, such as Burma, Cuba, Turkmenistan, North Korea and Zimbabwe. Pessimists contend that the vast majority of states which can turn democratic have already done so; democracy, it seems, has plateaued.

## COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

On top of this, autocrats are learning to defend themselves against western democracy promotion, often cooperating amongst themselves to do so. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of Russia and Presidents Ismail Karimov of Uzbekistan, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela have clamped-down on the kind of low-level civil society support previously tolerated; all have benefited from collective learning.

The lesson these leaders took, in particular from Ukraine's 2004 Orange revolution, was that such support could threaten their own regimes if allowed to go unchecked. Fledgling movements have suffered recent intimidation in places as diverse as Venezuela, Angola and Tunisia.

And just when democracy is floundering, along comes the financial crisis to compound its woes. Europe's experience in the 1930s demonstrates that economic insecurity can provide fertile ground for the rise of values that give priority to stability and order over individual liberties. Economic tightening often puts new and fragile democracies in danger by sharpening domestic conflict.

The association of liberal democracy with prosperity has also taken a knock, with implications for its appeal. And, of course, the crisis is likely to push democracy promotion further down the agenda of political leaders in the west, as domestic constituencies compel governments to focus on domestic priorities and re-establishing international economic order. Or in the case of Britain, to deal with their own very personal crisis of democracy.

Many commentators are speculating that around thirty of the world's new democracies could be at risk over the next decade. So, the democracy agenda now would seem to



be more about trying to preserve gains made rather than spreading freedom further. Robert Kagan, among others, talks of creating 'a league of democracies' and battering down the hatches against a resurgent authoritarianism. Democracy appears to be ebbing from its high water mark.

## HIGH STAKES

The stakes are certainly high. A less democratic world would have major implications for western interests and cosmopolitan internationalism. A growing number of writers argue that the liberal agenda is declining and a more realist world outlook is required. The reasons for gloom are legion. But to see the advance of democracy as a lost cause is simplistic and dangerously defeatist.

On closer inspection the trends are far from entirely negative. Although democratic progress appears to have reached a plateau, this does not mean it is not still moving forward in some countries. Indonesia and Brazil, for example, have quietly been making impressive progress in consolidating and improving their democratic process. India's recent elections pay testament to democracy's success in the most complex of political environments. In Africa the degree of public contest is clearly greater than a decade ago. While the obstacles to democratising authoritarian regimes have become more prohibitive, most emerging democracies have gradually become less illiberal.

Twenty years on from Tiananmen Square, Chinese aspirations for political liberalisation continue to mount. At present these are couched not in terms of western-style liberal democracy, but rather of the 'national project'. However, increased accountability, private freedom, legal redress and political access for non-party members have together ensured that today's China is far freer than even a decade ago.

The harbingers of democratic doom too often look only at elections as the bellweathers of democracy. But as they bemoan the end of democratisation, they ignore deep reform in once totally authoritarian states.

Care should also be taken not to over-state the negative effect of the dip in US credibility engendered by former President George Bush. The evidence suggests ordinary people in the developing world are perfectly able to distinguish between the wrongs of US foreign policy and what democracy might mean for their own livelihoods. It is certainly true that Bush has left the democracy agenda in dire need of legitimacy. But it is perhaps easy to attribute too much – for good or ill – to the vicissitudes of US policies.

Many experts point to the emergence of successful ideological competitors and alternatives to democracy. However, it is not clear if these really exist. Before the global financial crisis, Russia and China may have offered a challenge in the sense of their strong economic performance, but not necessarily in representing a political aspiration widely shared by individual citizens around the world.

Many now speculate that the high tide of Russian 'soft power' may already have passed. The reaction by states such as Belarus in support of Georgia in last year's war with Russia highlights the growing willingness of post-Soviet nations to resist the Kremlin.

Political Islam is too diverse to represent a single coherent alternative to liberal democracy. Nationalism has certainly made a comeback; but while it can fuel anti-democratic impulses, this does not have to be the case. Just look at Ukraine where the Orange revolution went hand in hand with a reinstating of national independence.

As for the financial crisis, its impact remains uncertain. The more positive side is that financial turmoil and economic problems often trigger democratisation. Indeed, the most common pattern is one of medium-term growth with a gradual rise in expectations and independent economic activity, giving way to a

crisis that undermines the key economic legitimacy of the authoritarian regime.

In many cases – Indonesia, Serbia, Ukraine – analysts had been despairing that no possibility of democratisation existed in a particular country only a short time before a breakthrough did indeed occur.

## TEXTING TIME

And dynamics at the level below government point in a more positive direction still. While many regimes seek to clampdown, modern technology still enables citizens to communicate and organise better. Information flows are harder and harder for autocrats to control. These means offer citizen empowerment, bypassing overbearing states, within and across national borders.

Ukraine's Orange revolution was labelled the first 'internet' revolution. And the explosion of blogging and text messaging that has contributed to a wave of civic activity in Africa, the Middle East and China is a genie that will not easily be put back in the bottle.

Giving up on democracy or espousing the rise of an authoritarian axis may get people's attention but it totally ignores the more complex world we live in. Those pedalling greater 'realism' base their case on the argument that backing democracy now goes fundamentally against the grain of trends in international relations. Their defensiveness is exaggerated.

In western countries, democracy promotion now suffers from being associated with military intervention and American unilateralism. But a 2007 German Marshall Fund poll showed that 71 percent of the population in twelve European countries still wanted to see their governments do more to support democracy around the world.

It would be wrong to conclude that the world now stands on the threshold of a new reverse wave of democracy. We must take care not to think that all challenges to democracy are new. Many problems and concerns existed in the supposedly halcyon liberal decade of the 1990s.

Heightened challenges do not yet amount to a change of approach in international relations. Obama's challenge will be immense, but his idealism must not be summarily dismissed. Actions taken today could be decisive in determining whether the years ahead see the advance or retraction of the democratic community of nations.

