

Democracy's Decline and the Case of Kenya

Author: [Joshua Kurlantzick](#), Fellow for Southeast Asia
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Ten years ago, Kenya, which holds national elections on March 4, seemed like one of the brightest stars of a new wave of global democratization. After longtime dictator Daniel arap Moi gave way to contested elections in 2002, Kenyans voted for longtime opposition MP Mwai Kibaki as president. Kibaki, considered a reformist, defeated arap Moi's selected heir. Kenya already had the most boisterous media and vibrant entrepreneurial sector in East Africa, and exploded in joy at Kibaki's election.

But Kenya has not become a democratic success story. Kibaki has used his office to enrich and empower tribal allies while trying to destroy the opposition and make the presidency even more powerful. Graft has become worse since 2002. Public anger at the failings of the democratic period has led to spasms of violence. In the 2007 elections, when Kibaki was reelected in a disputed vote, more than 1,000 Kenyans were killed in vote-related violence.

As the new election nears, and even as civil society and democracy activists try to cool tensions, violence has erupted again. And one of the lead candidates for this election, Uhuru Kenyatta, is under indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for [crimes he allegedly committed during the 2007 elections](#).

The 'Fourth Wave' Weakens

Kenya's turbulence is hardly unique. Though the Arab Spring, the changes in Myanmar, and the tumult in many African countries have captured the world's attention in the past two years, in reality democracy is going into reverse worldwide. In its [annual international survey](#), the most comprehensive analysis of freedom around the globe, Freedom House found that global freedom plummeted in 2012 for the seventh year in a row.

Nations like Kenya that were supposed to be part of a global "Fourth Wave" of democracy following the Third Wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s have regressed badly. This fourth wave, concentrated in

Africa, Asia, and now the Middle East, has instead produced many dysfunctional democracies or, like Kenya, countries that have turned into a kind of elected autocracy. In these nations, political parties that win an election then use every opportunity between elections to eliminate other checks to political power. The idea of a loyal opposition ceases to exist, and elected autocrats like Kibaki or Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra, who served as prime minister for the first half of the 2000s, undermine the authority of courts, attack the media, and generally eviscerate the bureaucracy, anti-corruption investigators, and other institutions.

Add to this the data from opinion polling in many developing nations, in the Barometer series and my own polls, showing that public views of democracy are deteriorating as well. Before Kenya's disastrous 2007 election, Kenyans' satisfaction with the way democracy works had plummeted, and a study released last year showed that [Kenyans are sharply losing confidence \(PDF\)](#) in multiparty politics.

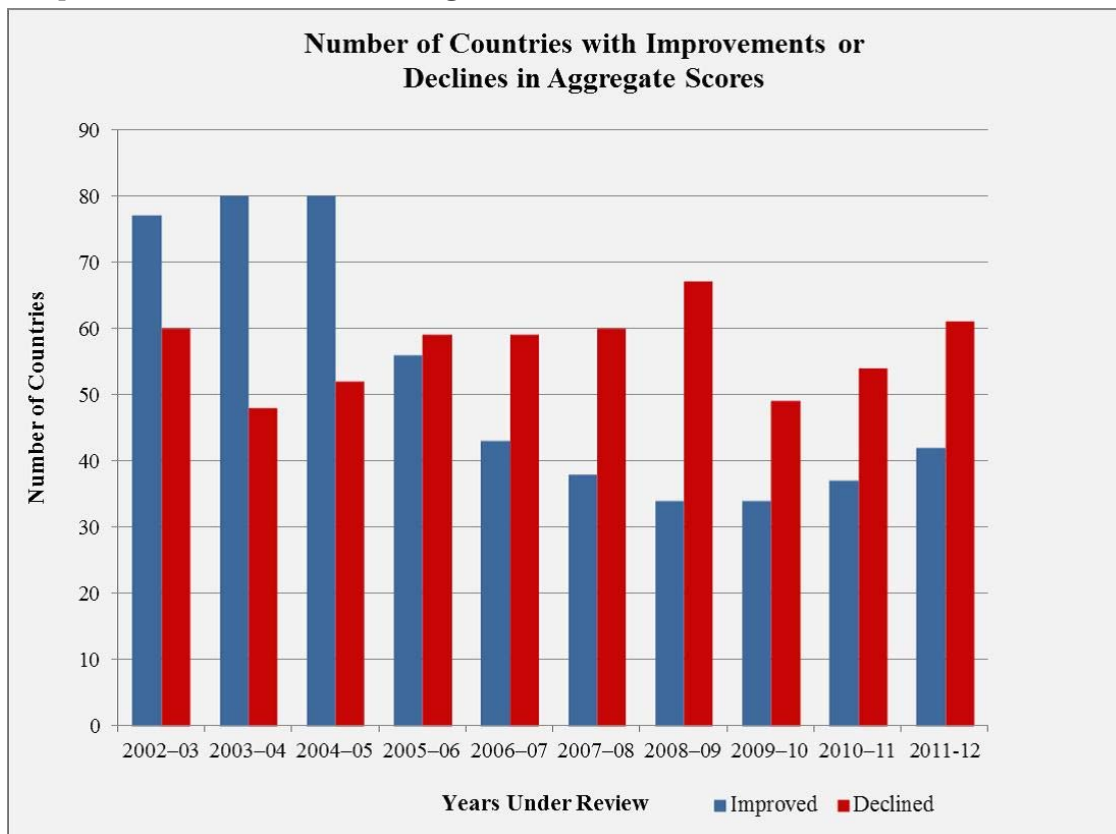
The Response

Reversing this decline in Kenya and many other once-promising states will fall primarily on the shoulders of their leaders and citizens. They should consider the following:

- **Prevent Growth From Stagnating.** Probably the most important job for developing world democrats is to prevent growth rates from stagnating or declining. In Thailand, for instance, Thaksin Shinawatra won his first national election as prime minister in 2001. He won in part because many Thais linked the government that preceded him, which had a far better record on human rights and democratization than Thaksin, with the Asian financial crisis. The crisis led Thailand, one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, into economic decline, worsened inequality, and destroyed massive amounts of Thai wealth.
- **Keep the Middle Classes on Board.** Although economic stagnation affects all classes in a developing nation, middle classes worry that democracy will produce leaders elected by the poor who will trample on private property rights and undermine the economic and social power that the middle class had accrued over time. In Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and many other countries, these middle classes have become so disillusioned with democracy that they have supported extra-constitutional efforts to overthrow elected, if flawed, leaders.
- **Create Mechanisms to Foil Elected Autocrats.** Some possible ways to forestall elected autocracy would be to create high-level courts, enshrined in a national constitution that is nearly impossible to change, that would be tasked with adjudicating major election fraud, graft among senior government leaders, and other government-related crimes.

- Declare War on Graft.** Of all the problems that emerge in democratic transitions, the decentralization of graft often is the most corrosive both to business confidence and to popular support for democracy. In addition, more competitive elections actually can lead to more vote buying, which can then alienate citizens, as one Afrobarometer study showed after the 2007 Kenyan election. One strategy may be to pay higher salaries to senior ministers and civil servants. This reward for senior ministers and civil servants could be combined with an independent anti-corruption watchdog that is constitutionally protected from political meddling, something few emerging democracies have been willing to try.

Graphic: Freedom House ranking of declines or advances in democratic freedoms:



Source: Freedom House

The United States also will have a role to play in stopping the democratic decline in the developing world. In the case of Kenya, for instance, expert Joel D. Barkan has written in a recent CFR report that Washington should help lead a multilateral effort [to press for free and fair elections](#).

Here are some guideposts for U.S. policymakers:

- Focus Spending on the Best Prospects.** To be effective, U.S. democracy promotion must become more concentrated. Specifically, it must focus more clearly on countries where the United States can make the largest impact with limited democracy promotion dollars. The

United States should be consistent in rhetorically upholding democracy and human rights, but Washington could, due to necessity, focus its democracy promotion aid on a certain spectrum of countries where democratic consolidation seems most feasible, where U.S. assistance can make a greater difference, and where U.S. aid can be packaged with multilateral assistance from other donors.

- **Move Beyond the Big Men.** U.S. administrations, whether Democratic or Republican, too often tend to associate reform with one supposedly groundbreaking leader in a developing nation, a supposedly democratic "big man." In rare cases, such a leader exists, someone like Nelson Mandela who is not only dedicated to reform but also possesses such moral authority and control of his political party and allies that he or she really can, almost single-handedly, push a country through transition. In worse cases, like Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo or Kenya's Kibaki, "big man" leaders who initially look like reformers, perhaps because they spent years in opposition fighting authoritarian rulers, turn out, in power, to be as corrupt or autocratic as the men and women they replaced.
- **Respect Election Winners—If They Play Fair.** The United States and other leading democracies also will have to make a habit of respecting the winners of elections, as long as those winners adhere to guidelines of a democratic society. This commitment will probably mean dealing with political parties, such as Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party, that legitimately win elections though they may exhibit noxious behavior while in office. In 2006, a military coup ousted Thaksin, but the United States went ahead with joint exercises with the Thai military. Unfortunately, many Thai military officers—and army officials in other parts of Southeast Asia—interpreted the United States' reaction to the 2006 coup as a potential signal that the United States still does not condemn military takeovers.
- **Realize That Elections Are Only One Step.** As seen in Cambodia, Russia, Kenya, and many other nations, simply holding elections does not make a democracy. One governance step donors should also consider is pushing aid-recipient developing nations to adopt some of the decentralization strategies used by Indonesia over the past decade. By decentralizing political and economic power, Indonesia involved more citizens in the political process, and reduced threats of separatism.
- **Be Flexible in Programming.** Study after study by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and independent experts have noted that democracy assistance programs tended to be developed in Washington and then put into place, with little flexibility, in various countries, and with little demonstrable effect. Like companies thinking about entering a new market, USAID and its contractors should use a small amount of their funding to first conduct extensive surveys of the countries they are planning to launch programs.

*Joshua Kurlantzick, a Fellow for Southeast Asia, is author of the new book **Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government** (CFR and Yale University Press), from which this brief is adapted.*