



REVIVING THE GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC MOMENTUM

By Larry Diamond



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I want to begin by thanking Amb. Adrian Basora and the Foreign Policy Research Institute for organizing this meeting. Thanks also to the Kennan Institute for cosponsoring and hosting us here today. This is an important and volatile time for democracy in the world. Many people are questioning the viability of democracy, and the wisdom of trying to promote it. The fashionable mood these days is skepticism, if not downright pessimism, about the near-term prospects for democracy. We tried to do too much, one argument goes, and we should scale back our expectations. It's still popular to think that these people in Africa, the Arab world, or Russia, weren't ready for democracy, don't value it culturally, and don't have the social conditions to make it work. Some believe democracy promotion was always a fool's errand. Others contend that we did what we could and should now pull back. Or that after 30 years of intensive democracy promotion, we still don't know how to do it effectively, except in places where democratic progress would have happened anyway. And finally (for now) there is the view that we have more important issues to deal with, like ISIS, Ebola, a rising China, a marauding Putin, a nuclear-weapons chasing Iran, drug violence in Mexico, child mortality among the bottom billion, and so on.

I wish I had an hour just to rebut all these currents of pessimism, determinism, and despair. But since I don't, let me begin by trying to set the record straight on where we are and where I think we have come in terms of global democracy. My analysis is not rosy, but I don't think anything close to despair is warranted either. Then I'll come to some of the challenges and opportunities for democracy promotion, especially by the United States, at this critical juncture for democracy globally. Throughout, I'll have to be brief, but I hope we can delve deeper into these issues in the exchange to follow.

Yes, it's a difficult and messy time for democracy and freedom around the world. We have been in a global democratic recession, for something like a decade. In each one of the last eight years, as Freedom House has documented, the number of countries declining in political rights or civil liberties has outpaced (by at least two to one) the number of countries gaining in freedom. And this has come after 15 post-Cold War years when precisely the reverse was true.

There have been a lot of democratic breakdowns in this new century. In fact, the rate of democratic breakdown in these last thirteen years has been 50 percent higher than in the preceding period. Since the third wave of global democratic expansion began forty years ago, one-third of all the democratic regimes have failed. And half of these

failures have been just in the last thirteen years.

Many of these breakdowns have come in big and strategically important states, like Russia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Venezuela. In some cases, like the Philippines, democracy has been restored. In others, like Thailand, which recently suffered its second military coup in a decade, democracy has broken down repeatedly. In others, like Pakistan and Kenya and Turkey, the regime seems to occupy a gray zone somewhere in between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism. But in countries like Turkey, the authoritarian drift has been so steady, so serious and so prolonged that an authoritarian threshold appears to have been crossed. This has long since happened in Sri Lanka and Nicaragua, and it seems to be approaching in Bolivia and Ecuador as well. Moreover, instead of confronting or at least condemning the godfather regime of creeping authoritarianism in the Andes, Venezuela, most Latin American democracies have turned a blind eye toward its abuses, even supporting it to obtain a seat on the UN Security Council.

Democracy has also eroded quite significantly in Africa, where many elected leaders think China's booming aid and investment gives them an alternative to Western conditionality, while the new war on terror gives them additional leverage as well. There is also the crushing implosion of the Arab Spring; the growing self-confidence, assertiveness, and cooperation of authoritarian states like China, Russia, and their club of fellow autocracies, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the mounting legal assaults and constraints on civil society; the sharing and development of tools of Internet censorship and suppression; and the poor performance of many of the most advanced democracies, beginning with the United States.

If you care about democracy in the world, we are in trouble.

But this is not the whole story. We are in a prolonged political recession, not a depression. We have not yet seen the onset of "a third reverse wave." The extraordinary expansion in the number of democracies essentially halted around 2005. Since then, it has not significantly increased, but neither has it substantially diminished. Globally, average levels of freedom have ebbed a little bit, but not calamitously. Most importantly, there has not been significant erosion in public support for democracy. In fact, what the Afrobarometer has consistently showed is a gap—in some African countries, a chasm—between the popular demand for democracy and the regime supply of it. And this is not just some shallow, vague notion that democracy is a good thing. Many Africans understand political accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and restraint of power. And they would like to see their government manifest these virtues.

One problem is that the pace of decay in democratic institutions is not always clearly visible. A number of countries we take 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, the way it is, for example, in some third-wave democracies such as Korea, or Poland, or Chile. Add new oil wealth to the mix, as in Ghana, and you have a major new challenge to the quality of governance. In the global democracy promotion community, few actors are paying attention to the growing signs of fragility in the more liberal developing democracies, not to mention the more illiberal ones.

Broadly, we know why democracy and freedom are slipping back. What Frank Fukuyama calls "neo-patrimonial" tendencies are resurgent. Leaders who think they can get away with it are eroding democratic checks and balances, hollowing out accountability institutions, overriding term limits and normative restraints, and accumulating power and wealth for themselves and their families, cronies, clients, and parties. Space for opposition parties, civil society and the media is shrinking, and international support for them is drying up. Ethnic, religious, and other identity cleavages polarize many societies that lack well designed democratic institutions to manage those cleavages. State structures are too often weak and porous, unable to secure order, protect rights, meet the most basic social needs, or rise above corrupt, clientelistic and predatory impulses. Democratic institutions—parties and parliaments—are often poorly developed, and the bureaucracy lacks the policy expertise, and even more so the independence, neutrality, and authority, to effectively manage the economy. So weak economic performance, and certainly rising inequality, is added to the mix.

It isn't easy to develop democracy in poor countries and weak states. And there is a significant failure rate even in middle-income countries. But if we don't become more focused, more creative, more determined, more resourceful, and less apologetic in promoting democracy, the democratic recession is going to mutate into a wave of democratic

regression, a bleak period for freedom, political stability, and the American national interest.

So what is to be done?

We need to begin by disaggregating the problem. Let's start at the top of the hierarchy of democratic development and work down. I used to add at the end of this kind of lecture a reflective caveat, "Physician, heal thyself." In other words, we can't be credible and effective in promoting democracy abroad if we don't reform and improve its functioning at home. That was usually the last imperative I mentioned. Now it needs to be the first. Like many of you who travel widely, I am increasingly alarmed by how pervasive and corrosive is the worldwide perception—in both autocracies and democracies—that American democracy has become dysfunctional and is no longer a model worth emulating. Fortunately, there are many possible models, and most American political scientists never recommended that emerging democracies copy our own excessively veto-ridden institutions. Nevertheless the prestige, the desirability, and the momentum of democracy globally are heavily influenced by perceptions of how it is performing in its leading examples. If we do not mobilize institutional reforms and operational innovations to reduce partisan polarization, encourage moderation and compromise, energize executive functioning, and reduce the outsized influence of money and special interests in our own politics, how are we going to be effective in tackling these kinds of challenges abroad?

Second, we need to be absolutely sure that we have harvested and preserved the low-hanging fruit. That is, we must truly help to consolidate incipient or assumed success stories. One of the biggest mistakes the global democracy promotion community has made over the last thirty years is to cross too many countries off the list of democracy assistance recipients, because once the transition is completed and the new democracy lifts off in a middle-income country, we assume it can take care of itself. Or we believe that ten or twenty years of democratic assistance and engagement should be enough. This is all summed up in the term, "graduation." In my profession, we prefer the term "commencement" to "graduation." Sometimes our graduates still need and deserve our help in certain areas.

A strong and capable state; a genuine rule of law, buttressed by a neutral and capable judiciary; effective institutions of horizontal accountability; competent and honest local administration; a pluralistic and resourceful civil society; a culture of tolerance, vigilance, and civic responsibility—these and other foundations of a secure liberal democracy do not get constructed overnight. Many of them emerge gradually with economic development. In more mature economies, they can develop more quickly. But even many of the countries listed as "upper middle income" by the World Bank remain well within the danger zone of democratic decay—as were Russia and Venezuela a decade and a half ago.

The list of upper middle income countries includes Argentina, which is going through a profound economic and political crisis; Turkey, where the AKP has become a hegemonic party, the press functions in a state of fear, and the opposition parties are in disarray; Romania, an EU country where endemic corruption continues to undermine the health of democracy and governance; South Africa, where a corrupt leadership exhibits visibly declining commitment to the rule of law and liberal values; Thailand, which is now in the grip of a nasty military dictatorship that is not at the moment behaving as if it is transitional; Libya, which had a revolutionary uprising against Qaddafi, and then a state collapse; and Tunisia, which could become the one success story of the Arab Spring, but still faces serious political, economic, and security challenges.

A long-term strategic approach to promoting democracy would make the following resolution: once a country (and especially a middle-income country) achieves or renews democracy, we are going to do everything possible to help lock it into place for the long run, to consolidate it. That means that when a new, fragile Libyan transitional government appeals to us for security assistance (assistance, not occupying troops) we don't say, "sorry pals, we helped you get there, now let somebody else help you stay there." It means that we need to go to the new democratically elected Tunisian government after these approaching elections and ask them what it needs. What can we do to help revive the economy and rejuvenate flows of tourism and investment? Beyond our existing programs of party training, election observation, and other assistance, what can we do to support new civil society monitoring and training initiatives, to strengthen independent journalism and policy think tanks, to advance democratic civic education in the schools and the media, to support women's groups, student groups, human rights groups, and many other initiatives to build a culture and civic infrastructure to sustain democracy?

If we want to promote democracy in the Arab world for the long run, we should invest very heavily in Tunisia in every possible way, because what the Arab world most needs now is one example of a decent, functioning democracy that can serve as a lesson, an inspiration, and a point of diffusion for the region.

The same goes for Ukraine, though it is not as economically advanced. Ukraine is at a pivotal point in its history. It cannot afford another democratic regression, or an authoritarian, xenophobic Russia may swallow up the rest of it. It is struggling mightily with entrenched patterns of corruption, bad governance, and weak institutions. But it has some remarkable actors in the party system, the mass media, and civil society organizations. We need to invest heavily in these people and institutions, and in economic reform, revival, and integration with the West. It should be one of the major priorities for democracy assistance for the next decade or two. And we need to sustain these investments over an extended period of time in all three critical sectors: the state, the party and representative institutions, and civil society.

It's worth pondering the recent death of the historic democracy NGO in South Africa, Idasa. This was one of the trailblazing organizations that came out of the white minority community to resist apartheid and help create the climate and culture for a peaceful, negotiated transition. And then it worked to promote democratic civic education and citizen monitoring of parliament and government. Some years after Nelson Mandela was elected president and South Africa seemed to have entrenched a liberal democracy with a remarkably rights-affirming constitution, the international democracy promotion community said, "Well, South Africa is a success story, and a relatively rich country. They don't really need democracy help any more themselves, so we'll fund Idasa to help foster democracy in other parts of Africa."

It's a very good thing to get the civil societies of emerging democracies involved in cross-border work to build democratic institutions and norms in their regions, but it's a very bad thing to ignore the problems in their own societies. I am not going to litigate here all the accomplishments and challenges that Idasa faced organizationally, or suggest it had no responsibility in its own demise. But I would like to know: how is a civil society organization that is monitoring and sometimes challenging the incumbent government supposed to raise the resources from within its own society when most of those material resources lie in the hands of businessmen and corporations who feel extremely vulnerable to political punishment if they support "anti-government" activity.

The dilemma is repeated over and over in countries that are seen as too rich, or too long in democratic experience, to justify continued flows of support to civil society organizations. These CSOs, critics say, need to be weaned off the mother's milk of international democracy funding. They need to develop their own sources of revenue. Typically, that is another way of saying they either need to go commercial, maybe by doing surveys or consulting, or they need to seek contracts from agencies of the same government they are supposed to be monitoring, or they need to seek grants to do more mainstream economic and social development work. None of these kinds of activities are intrinsically inappropriate, but they take the organization away from its original mission, which is to build and monitor democracy. If there are no organizations working mainly or exclusively for that, then democracy is in danger. This problem of a shrinking civil society is a big part of the story of democratic fragility or decay in key emerging democracies, and it is not adequately appreciated by democracy promoters.

I know the counter-argument. There is only so much money. How are we going to help people who have nothing—no financial resources, no protection for their human rights, and little or no democracy—if we dilute the available democracy assistance resources by devoting some of them to countries that are, comparatively, much better off. Here are my answers:

First, I dispute the notion that we must view the pool of democracy promotion resources as fixed. It may be that total resources for international engagement or international development are fixed. But we need to rethink where the greatest leverage to advance and secure transformative development will lie. We need to set the clear goal of achieving and locking in development success stories. And that requires good governance, and ultimately democratic governance.

Second, we need to take a fresh look at the allocation of democracy and governance assistance resources across our different country programs, instruments and organizations. Some are more cost-effective than others. What are the most effective instruments for developing state institutions, or by contrast civil society organizations? Do we have sufficient instruments to assist the birth of new independent media, which can often involve large start-up costs?

What is the proper role of for-profit implementing partners? Why can't we transfer resources from wasteful, pointless, and even counterproductive democracy and governance programs—like the ones Melinda Haring has identified in Azerbaijan—to more promising countries and sectors.

Third, the issue is not just the countries we work in, but the constraints and mentalities we bring. We should always monitor and evaluate flows of assistance. But where democratic civil society organizations have accumulated a long track record of effective monitoring, civic education, issue analysis, policy reform and civic advocacy, they should become candidates to receive new forms and levels of funding that are not tied to endless cycles of project grants. Rather, they should become candidates for block grants to cover their core operations and work to fight corruption and defend and improve democracy. Too many civil society organizations spend inordinate amounts of time constantly writing grant proposals for specific projects even when their work, their judgment, and their capacity to deliver are well known.

I would like to briefly address three other issues. One is the global struggle against corruption. The second is the global struggle to defend freedom. And the third is the need to promote universal liberal values.

It is hard to find an instance of the breakdown of democracy in which corruption did not play a leading or at least prominent role. To some extent, expanding access to corruption is a natural concomitant of the early stages of democratization. The total amount of corruption may not increase, but more people get in on the game, and more cash is needed to fund the electoral contest for power. But the resources for petty corruption are never enough, and they can never be enough to make everyone feel included and better off. Moreover, corruption has no natural limiting point. When the norms break down, the grabbing gets going and the competition intensifies, corruption always tends to descend into predation.

Any long-term campaign to advance and consolidate global democratic progress must have as one of its key elements a war on corruption. This requires bold, comprehensive efforts to work at every level: to transform public norms, consciousness, and capacities to monitor and organize; to help build a capable, well paid, and meritocratic civil service and police; to help construct and train and resource official accountability institutions to monitor and audit government expenditures and operations as well as the personal assets of public officials; and to diffuse the norms, digital tools, and best practices of open government, right to information, and budget transparency. Beyond this, we need to do much more to track the locations and flows of assets by corrupt government officials; to set new standards of international banking practice, and to marginalize banks that eagerly offer themselves as havens for all sorts of dirty money, whether from corrupt politicians, drug traffickers, or terrorists.

Second, we cannot win the struggle for democracy unless we also wage a vigorous struggle for liberty and human rights. Too many governments in the world—not just blatant autocracies but electoral authoritarian regimes, illiberal democracies, and even some democracies we think of as liberal—are moving backwards to constrain and punish freedom of speech, freedom online, freedom to organize and assemble, and freedom to receive funding from and form partnerships with international democratic actors. We need to use our tools of conventional diplomacy, public diplomacy, aid and trade relations, and other forms of leverage to call out and condemn these regressions, and to try to defend the individuals and organizations that are bravely working to make their societies freer and more accountable. This is not only a moral but a geopolitical imperative if we are to keep the democratic recession from spiraling down into a depression. Autocrats must know that repression is not cost free, that even while we pursue common interests, we are going to speak up for our values and take them into account as we weigh our bilateral relations.

It is a completely false and self-defeating notion to think that, in the era of China's rise and Russia's belligerence, we have no more leverage in the world. There is a lot of societal pushback in many countries against the growing presence on the ground of autocratic and corrupt foreign powers. And particularly in Asia, there is a great deal of anxiety about China's rise. There is no way to understand Burma's political opening except in this context. In Africa and Asia, we have a lot of scope to help civil societies and even governments balance off against a China that is coming on too strong, and the quest for democratic reform can provide common ground in this effort.

Finally, let us always remember one thing, above all else. We have the better set of ideas. Democracy may be receding in practice, but it is still ascendant in peoples' values and aspirations. Some people may accept authoritarian rule as a useful or necessary political order at a certain historical moment or phase of development.

But aside from some self-serving rulers and ruling establishments, few people in the world today celebrate authoritarianism as a superior moral system, the ultimate destination, the best form of government.

Democracy remains the only broadly legitimate form of government in the world, and there is a growing hunger—including in authoritarian regimes like China, Iran, Cuba, and Vietnam—to understand what democracy is, and how it can be structured to operate effectively. We need to respond to and stimulate this appetite for democratic understanding. We need a comprehensive effort to translate into a number of critical languages a wide range of philosophical, historical and analytical works on the meaning and forms of democracy, democratic culture, democratic transitions, democratic constitutional designs, electoral systems, political parties, civil society, systems of horizontal accountability, civil-military relations, and so on. We should be arranging to distribute these translated works for free on the Internet, to develop different levels of instruction in democracy for citizens at different levels of knowledge and need, and to offer a wide range of massive, open online courses on various topics and issues related to democracy. Let's also think about how we can make the mobile phone a key platform for the distribution of this knowledge; how we can make learning about democracy interesting and fun for young people in different cultures; how we can enable more citizens to circumvent Internet censorship to get at this knowledge; and how we can use our international broadcasting instruments more abundantly and effectively to counter authoritarian propaganda and widen the flow of democratic news, information, and ideas.

We should bet heavily on this battle of information and ideas. It is a battle we can win. The one ultimate trump card we have is the diffuse global recognition that democracy is the ideal form of government, the only permanent basis of ruling legitimacy. This leaves authoritarian regimes in a dual dilemma. If they remain frozen in archaic institutions of centralized personal or one-party rule, they sit atop a fragile and brittle regime that could fall at any time. If they adopt the superficial outward form of democracy—multiple parties, elected parliaments and presidents, constitutions that in theory check and balance power—they have already conceded the point that democracy is the best system, and then some movement or event may show that they are a fraud. If they keep generating miraculous economic growth, they will produce—as China is now doing—a vibrant and pluralistic middle class that wants more freedom and self-determination. If they stop producing rapid economic growth, then the rising new classes will see their dreams shattered and will angrily demand more political voice.

A lot in global politics turns on perceptions of dynamism and momentum. This is part of what is meant by the term “zeitgeist,” the spirit of the times. But the authoritarian spirit cannot speak to the fundamental human aspiration for freedom, dignity, and self-determination. We need to find new ways, new energy, and new self-confidence to turn that to our advantage. Most of all, we need to promote the spirit of democracy.