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Democracy’s Third Wave Today

LARRY DIAMOND

With the unprecedented explosion of movements for democratic change across the Arab world at the beginning of this year, many scholars and advocates of democracy began to speak excitedly of a “fourth wave” of democratic expansion. But within a few months, it became apparent that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt would not be repeated so easily elsewhere in the Arab world; that democracy remained a highly uncertain prospect in the near term for each of these countries, particularly Egypt; and that Arab autocracies were falling back on proven mixes of repression, co-optation, and limited or illusory “reform” in order to hang on.

The fall of three seemingly unassailable Arab autocrats—Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, and Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi—and the serious challenges to authoritarian rule in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, as well as the lesser but gathering opposition pressure in other countries such as Morocco and Jordan, are undeniable signs of the continued salience and attraction of the democratic ideal. Over time, popular movements are likely to lead to at least some new democracies in the Arab world. But this prospect of a burst of democratic change in the region raises a more global question: What has become of the third wave of democracy?

The period in global politics that began in 1974, which the Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington 20 years ago labeled the “third wave” of global democratization, has seen more sweeping transformation in the way that states are governed than any other time in the history of civilization.

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According to Huntington, the first long wave of democratization ran from 1828 through the early 1920s. The second wave began at the end of World War II and terminated in a second “reverse wave” starting in 1962.

During the third wave, democracy—meaning a political system in which people can choose and replace their leaders in regular, free, fair, and meaningful elections—has developed from a preserve of the West and a few odd developing countries into a truly global phenomenon. It is today the most common form of government in the world, and the type of political system in which the majority of humanity lives.

The proportion of states that are democracies increased (by my count, which over the last two decades is close to that of the international monitoring group Freedom House) from just slightly more than a quarter in 1973 to a third in 1980, about half in 1992, and three-fifths in the year 2000 (representing 115 democracies). The expansion of democracy in the third wave reached its high water mark in 2006—121 democracies, nearly 63 percent of all states (see the figure on page 301).

Democracy in this period became the only broadly legitimate form of government in the world, the principal form of government in several regions of the world, and a viable option in every region except the Middle East. Among major cultural zones, only the Arab world lacked a single democracy—which is why the Arab Spring is a development of such grand historical significance.

PREDOMINANT AND EXPECTED

Consider what has happened in regions where democracy was hardly present (if at all) when the third wave began in 1974. Latin America has gone from a region of scarce or chronically unstable democracy to one where democracy is the predominant and expected form of government. To

be sure, some worrisome erosion and stagnation has lately emerged—part of a recent global trend. But for the first time ever, democracy has deepened and become consolidated in Latin America's largest country, Brazil, where less than two decades ago political institutions looked to be mired in dysfunction and economic crisis was recurrent.

Meanwhile, Chile—after the severe political polarization of the Salvador Allende and Augusto Pinochet eras, and harsh repression under 16 years of military rule—has become one of the most liberal and durable democracies in what used to be called the “developing world.” (Chile is also an economic success story.) Argentina is more populist and prone to personalist government and crisis, but democracy as a system of government remains well entrenched there.

The fate of democracy totters some as one moves north from the Southern Cone. Venezuela's populist leader, Hugo Chávez, before winning the presidency through an election in 1999, had twice tried to seize power in military coups and has styled himself a modern-day socialist “Bolivarian” revolutionary. As president, he has gradually suffocated political pluralism and destroyed the independence and integrity of democratic institutions to the point that Venezuela has ceased to be a democracy.

To some extent, left-wing populist presidents in Bolivia and Ecuador, and more recently Nicaragua with the return to power of the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, have attempted the same thing as Chávez, mobilizing economic and social resentments to challenge democratic constitutional norms and restraints. It is an open question whether any of these three countries can still be called, by a strict definition, a democracy. But none of these leaders has succeeded in squelching the democratic process to the extent that Chávez has done. And Chávez himself is under growing pressure of popular protest against his excesses.

In Peru, the former rebel military officer Ollanta Humala, a supposed Chávez clone, won the 2011 presidential election by backing away from the pro-Chávez stance he had taken in the 2006 election campaign and running this time from the center-left. In fashioning a more pragmatic approach both during his campaign and in his initial months of governing, Humala has seemed intent on replicating the success of Brazil's transformative center-left president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the leader of the historically socialist Workers

Party, whose eight years in office (2003–2010) saw one of the greatest spurts of economic and social progress in Brazil's history.

If democracy has become more stressed and unsettled in Central America and Mexico because of intensifying criminal violence brought on by the drug trade, at least no alternative to democracy is being put forward. At the level of norms and expectations, democracy now appears to be consolidated in Mexico (Latin America's second-largest country), as well as in Colombia, which rebuffed an attempt by a strong and popular president (Álvaro Uribe) to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third time. Only Cuba rejects the model of electoral democracy altogether.

EUROPE'S VISION

With the end of the cold war and the subsequent expansion of the European Union, Europe has become whole and democratic as never before in its long history of bloody conflict. All 10 of the Central and East European countries that were admitted to the EU between 2004 and 2007 have become consolidated and for the most part liberal democracies, though corruption and weak rule of law remain serious challenges in a few countries, particularly Romania and Bulgaria. Croatia, with its accession negotiations already completed, will probably formally join the EU within a couple of years, and probably Serbia not long after that.

The completion of the vision of a Europe united by democratic values and institutions and by economic and social integration still confronts many challenges. The most urgent and profound of these is the growing fiscal disarray of the euro zone, as evidenced dramatically by the debt crisis that has torn apart Greece and threatens to engulf other southern European countries (Portugal, Italy, and Spain) as well as Ireland. In addition, democrats in Romania and Bulgaria have been discouraged by the persistence and in some respects resurgence of illiberal and corrupt political practices now that the “heat” of EU conditionality is long since off with the completion of accession agreements.

Still, from the standpoint of democracy, these problems pale in comparison to the situation Europe faced on the eve of the third wave. In the early 1970s, Greece was under a military dictatorship, Spain and Portugal were still ruled by long-term autocracies, and all of Central and Eastern Europe was behind the Iron Curtain of communist and ultimately Soviet domination.

Things remain somewhat bleak in the 12 states of the former Soviet Union outside the Baltics. In most of these countries, including Russia, authoritarian rule seems firmly entrenched. Ukraine and Moldova are the only democracies, and pro-democracy forces in Ukraine imploded in the run-up to the 2010 presidential election. After years of chronic internal division and ineffective governance since the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine has been slipping back in terms of press freedoms and the extent and health of democracy.

In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, since popular protests forced out the autocratic government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010 (following rigged elections in 2009), new possibilities of a return to democracy have arisen. Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian country with some recent democratic experience and promise. But political pluralism, if not quite democracy, remains alive in another former Soviet republic: Georgia.

DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

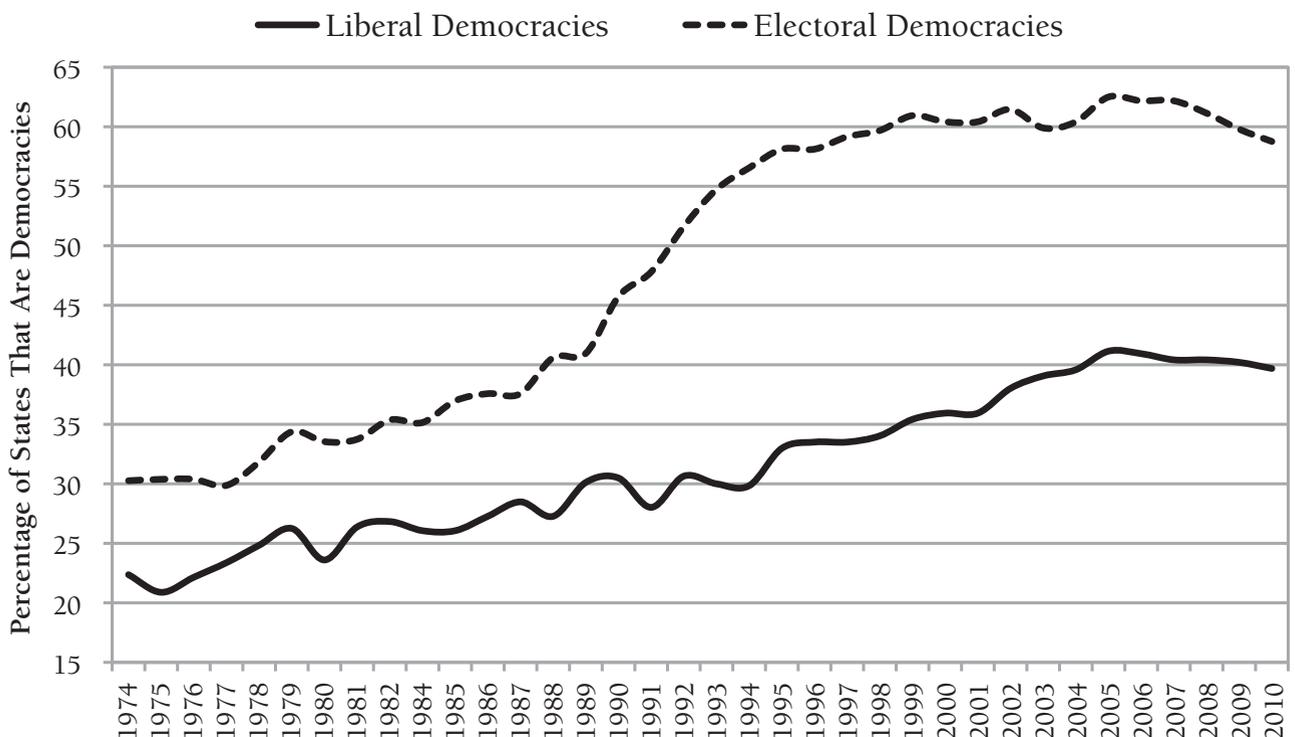
During the third wave, East Asia (including here Southeast Asia) has gone from being the cradle and locus of “developmental authoritarianism,” with Japan as the lone democracy (and a

longstanding one-party–dominated system at that) to becoming at least a mixed and progressing set of systems. Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea now all stand as liberal and consolidated democracies. They are hardly free of governance problems and serious citizen disenchantment, but that is true of the United States and many European democracies as well.

Mongolia is also a fairly liberal democracy according to Freedom House scores, and democracy seems well established, too, in Indonesia and (once again) the Philippines. But these countries, along with Thailand and East Timor, struggle with serious deficiencies in rule of law, and Thailand with debilitating political polarization as well.

Thailand has the advantage of a strong popular commitment to and desire for democracy in general, but it has yet to work out an accommodation between the urbanized, pro-monarchy establishment (whose ultimate guarantor is the military) and rising social and political forces, whose political base is in the countryside and whose hero is the exiled former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. The looming end of an era, with King Bhumibol Adulyadej growing frail after 65 years on the throne, could present an opportunity for a

The Growth of Democracy, 1974-2010



new political bargain or plunge the country into even deeper crisis.

At the same time, democratic pressures are clearly growing in Singapore and Malaysia as modernization proceeds (Singapore is the richest non-democracy, in terms of per capita income, in the history of the world). In Singapore, the long-ruling People's Action Party in May 2011 won its lowest vote percentage (60 percent) since becoming the dominant party when the nation gained its independence. In August the ruling party was dealt another blow when the prime minister's preferred candidate for the ceremonial post of president was elected by a razor-thin margin, winning only 35 percent of the vote.

In Malaysia, opposition political forces have made significant electoral inroads in recent years. A new opposition alliance, Pakatan Rakyat, is gaining momentum. A transition to democracy could happen in Malaysia at any time, via the same instrument that has brought it about in other competitive authoritarian regimes: the electoral process.

To be sure, authoritarianism is still well ensconced in China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and North Korea. But cracks are appearing in the edifices of many of these regimes as well—due to the pressures of rapid modernization in China and of deepening development failure in North Korea.

South Asia, long a region of democratic vibrancy, has experienced considerable oscillation during the third wave, in part because of Pakistan's repeated democratic failures and now a protracted descent into state decay caused by extremist mobilization, military domination, and the incurable corruption and fecklessness of the civilian political parties and politicians. Another sad story has been the steady decline of Sri Lanka—from a stable democracy to an illiberal one ravaged by civil war, and now to a highly corrupt and abusive electoral autocracy, with power increasingly concentrated in President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family.

However, democracy remains sturdy and vibrant in India, where recent civic mobilization against corruption revealed the tremendous democratic energy in the country's civil society. Bangladesh has returned to democracy after a brief interruption. Nepal also seems on the road to democratic

restoration, and the Maldives has recently entered the ranks of electoral democracies. Altogether another story, however, is Afghanistan, where efforts to build democracy are drowning in corruption, hapless leadership, state weakness, and insurgent terrorism and violence.

After Eastern Europe, the region that enjoyed the biggest democracy surge after the end of the cold war was sub-Saharan Africa. When the third wave began in 1974, there were only three democracies in Africa, and these were very small countries: Botswana, Mauritius, and Gambia. (Only the first two have survived as democracies.) Before 1991, a few other African countries had brief flings with democracy—especially Nigeria, Ghana, and Sudan, each of which attempted to make democracy work after a failed postcolonial experience. But in each case, democracy gave way to the familiar problems of ethnic divisiveness, corruption, and bad governance.

Once the cold war ended and great powers no longer fought for African states' allegiance with aid and arms, democracy flowered. By the middle

of the first decade of the current century, about half of Africa's 48 states were democracies. No development in modern history so challenged the social science theory of structural prerequisites for democ-

racy, such as economic development, widespread literacy, and a strong middle class. Moreover, by this point, many of the democracies in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere were countries with Muslim majorities, like Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mali, Senegal, and Niger.

FINALLY, THE MIDDLE EAST

The only region left essentially untouched by this grand historical process of global democratization was the Middle East—until this year. Many Muslim-majority countries had significant democratic experience, but—except for Turkey—not in the Middle East. Regimes' limited reforms and occasional stirrings of democratic protest seemed to be heading nowhere until an outraged street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, fed up with years of petty predation and humiliation by the state, set himself aflame on December 17, 2010, thereby igniting the Tunisian revolution.

Now at least a prospect of democratic change has emerged in a few Arab countries, and no Arab

The universe of stable and consolidated or relatively secure democracies seems to have expanded significantly.

authoritarian regime feels as secure as it did in November 2010. The crushing of Iran's Green Movement after the theft of an election in 2009 temporarily deflated hopes for democratic change in the region. But since then the proliferation of popular demands for democratic change throughout much of the Arab world, and the risks many citizens have taken to press for democratic change in countries like Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, have lifted the pall of political inertia and resignation that has hung over the Arab world for two generations.

In the Middle East and beyond, it is not difficult to draw hope and inspiration regarding the future of democracy when one considers the ways the third wave has transformed the world. First, about three of five states across the globe are now at least electoral democracies.

Second, about two-thirds of the world's democracies (77) are reasonably high-quality or "liberal" democracies, in the sense that electoral competition is institutionalized, fair, and open; civil liberties are better protected; and levels of political violence and abuses or impunity among state security services are low. (I count as liberal democracies all countries that score a 1 or a 2 on the Freedom House scales of political rights and civil liberties, where 1 means most free and 7 most repressive.)

Third, as the democratization expert Marc F. Plattner has noted, democracy has become consolidated or at least endures in most of the important emerging-market countries that have become members of the Group of 20 leading economies: India, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, and South Africa. Only China and Saudi Arabia among this group are authoritarian.

Fourth, no other type of political system in the world represents anything approaching a rival model, despite the supposed growing attraction of China's authoritarian development "miracle." Some elites and intellectuals in the developing world are interested in emulating Beijing's policies. But in most parts of the world, while ordinary people admire China's booming economy, they do not admire its suppression of free speech, its abuse of human rights, or its lack of political accountability and competition. Surveys in developing countries show that people want not just a better material life but a freer political life as well.

Fifth, the United Nations and a variety of regional organizations—not just the EU but also the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States, the

Latin American common market Mercosur, and to a much lesser extent the African Union—have become more explicitly supportive of democracy as a universal value.

And finally, annual spending to promote democracy internationally has grown significantly beyond the early considerable efforts of first Germany and then the United States. Today the UN Development Program and many bilateral aid programs of Europe, North America, and Australia spend significant portions of their overall budgets to monitor and support free and fair elections, assist political parties and civil society organizations, fight corruption, enhance independent media, and strengthen the rule of law and other processes and institutions of improved governance.

THE DEMOCRATIC RECESSION

That is the largely good news, but unfortunately it is not the whole news. For the past five years at least, the world has experienced a marked democratic recession. This is demonstrated by several statistics. To begin with, the number of democracies has been declining in the past several years. By my count, the number of electoral democracies dropped from a peak of 121 in 2006 to 114 in 2010, the lowest number since 1994. This also marked the lowest percentage since 1993 of states that are democracies (58.5 percent).

In addition, the world has witnessed a rising tide of breakdowns of democracy, via military coup, executive coup, or the gradual desecration of the democratic process. Nearly a third of all the democracies that have existed during the period associated with the third wave have broken down, with some countries like Thailand and Nigeria experiencing repeated breakdowns.

And the pace of breakdowns has accelerated since a 1999 coup toppled Pakistan's civilian democracy. If we divide the 37 years of the third wave into three roughly equal periods of about a dozen years, we find that 12 democracies experienced breakdowns during the years 1974 through 1985, 15 from 1986 to 1998, and 26 from 1999 to 2010. In other words, of the 53 breakdowns or reversals of democracy that have taken place since the third wave began in 1974, roughly half have occurred since 1999. And 15 of these have taken place just in the past five years, beginning in 2006, when the global democratic recession became more visible.

During these past five years, freedom levels also have steadily declined. The years 2006 through 2010 saw the longest period of deterioration in free-

doms, according to international rankings, since the great burst of democratic expansion after the cold war ended, and almost surely the longest period since the third wave began. In each of these five years, more countries declined than improved in their Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties, and the deterioration was particularly marked in the years 2007 through 2010, when in each year more than twice as many countries declined as improved in their freedom levels. The year 2007 was particularly bad, with nearly four times as many countries declining as improving.

Of course, the declines in democracy and in freedom are related; when democracy is lost, freedom levels decline. But, particularly since 1990 (around when Freedom House became more rigorous in scoring levels of freedom), democracy has generally broken down where it has been of lower quality. Since 1990, only 4 of the 39 democratic breakdowns have occurred in democracies whose average freedom scores (on the two scales of political rights and civil liberties) were 2.5 or better. In other words, breakdowns have occurred in illiberal democracies, and often in extremely illiberal ones: 18 of the 39 failed democracies since 1990 had average freedom scores of 4 or worse on the 7-point scale in the year before their reversal.

From this perspective, a number of current electoral democracies seem particularly at risk because of their relatively low (and in some cases, declining) freedom scores—around the midpoint on the 7-point scales of political rights and civil liberties—and because of their very bad governance scores as measured by the World Bank. None of the most vulnerable electoral democracies in the world (countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, East Timor, Senegal, Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Ukraine) are liberal democracies. And all of the democracies that have broken down since 1999 were illiberal—a number of them gradually growing more so over time. A significant correlation exists between the quality of countries' democracy and their governments' stability and legitimacy.

HARDY AUTHORITARIANS

The state of democracy in the world has another sobering aspect. A number of the countries that Freedom House classifies as electoral democracies should be removed from the list, according to the

political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, because their elections are so unfair, or the political playing field is so uneven, or civil liberties are so constrained, that the system is really better understood as “competitive authoritarian.” By a rigorous application of these more demanding standards for electoral democracy, the real number of democracies might be little more than 100, closer to half of the states of the world (though still comprising a majority of the world's population).

Worries about the resilience of the third wave of democracy also arise from less tangible or measurable factors. With China's continuing economic boom has come rising prestige and increased projection of its economic (and at least within parts of Asia, military) power. Fascination with the “China model” is growing—mainly among elites in Asia and Africa looking for a way to legitimate their authoritarian rule or aspirations, but also among a number of intellectuals and opinion leaders in some developing countries.

China's governing model, it is argued, can cut through the tedious delays and coalitional demands of democratic politics and allow economic decisions, budgetary allocations, and infrastructural investments to be made based simply on what will yield the greatest and most rapid national gains in development. It is hard to argue with success, and neo-communist China is booming (just as neo-communist Vietnam is starting to do as well).

Two other negative trends cast a shadow over current global democratic prospects. One is a backlash against civil society and international democracy assistance that has been building for the past six to seven years. Particularly since the “color revolutions,” authoritarian regimes such as those in Russia, Belarus, China, Iran, and throughout Central Asia have taken careful note of the positive contribution that international democracy assistance (including grants to civil society organizations and election monitoring) has made to democratic advances and breakthroughs. Consequently, they have sought to frustrate, close off, and even criminalize these flows. Some African autocracies like Ethiopia and Sudan have eagerly joined this backlash and appear to have (at least for now) consolidated or entrenched their authoritarian rule as a result.

The other negative trend, and in some ways the more deeply worrisome concern, is the mount-

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cease any time soon.*

ing fiscal disarray and political stalemate found in many advanced industrial democracies, including Greece, Portugal, and Italy—and most alarmingly, if it does not get its political and fiscal house in order, the United States. It is hard to imagine a bigger blow to the prospects for democracy worldwide than if the democracies of Europe and North America ceased to be models that appear to work and to be worth emulating. And it is hard to overstate the implications, for the fate of democracy globally, of how well these long-established democracies deal with their structural economic and social problems.

As the most powerful democracy in the world, the United States carries a special burden to put its own fiscal house in order, get its economy growing again, and overcome unseemly spectacles of deepening polarization, hyper-partisanship, and recurrent political brinkmanship and paralysis. Reducing the role of money in politics would also do much to restore the positive image of American democracy globally. Unfortunately, the trend in the 2012 electoral cycle is moving decisively in the opposite direction, in the wake of a Supreme Court decision that equates with free speech the right to spend money on political campaigns.

GROUNDS FOR HOPE

If we examine carefully the character and trends of democracy in the world, we detect, thus, grounds for acute concern. But sound bases for judicious optimism also can be found. While restlessness with democracy has grown in many places, authoritarian rule generally elicits greater unease if not disgust. Although we are still a long way from the arrival of democracy in a single Arab country, the diverse forms of popular protest that have already toppled three Arab dictators and challenged authoritarian rule in the face of often brutal repression in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria show the underlying insecurity and fragility of the world's remaining authoritarian regimes. No less, they affirm that the desire to live in dignity, with freedom and political choice, is as nearly universal a political value as we have in our time.

Even if democracy does not emerge soon in the Arab world, the old authoritarian models of rule have been exposed for their lack of legitimacy and adaptability in the face of generational and other social changes. This comes as no surprise to those who have examined results in recent years from the public opinion survey Arab Barometer, which show overwhelming proportions of Arabs in sev-

eral countries prefer a democratic system. In other regions where democracy actually predominates, majorities of publics in most countries continue to believe that democracy is the best form of government, or at least that all other known forms are worse. Even where (as in much of East Asia and Central and Eastern Europe) citizens have a low opinion of parties, politicians, and parliaments, they do not prefer to live either under authoritarianism in general or under any concrete authoritarian options that they can imagine.

For all of democracy's troubles over the past decade or so, no "reverse wave" of democratic breakdowns has occurred—certainly nothing on the scale of what ended the first wave of global democratization during the 1920s and 1930s (a reversal that began before but accelerated with the Great Depression), or ended the second wave during the heyday of military coups and socialist or developmental autocracies in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This is all the more remarkable given that the world has been living through the worst period of economic downturn and turmoil since the Great Depression. Further and yet worse financial crisis

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could be in store for the world, but so far, third-wave democracies have mainly responded to economic crisis and pain by replacing incumbent governments at the ballot box, rather than by replacing democratic regimes. Moreover, economic contraction does not seem to have been a significant cause of democratic breakdowns in the past decade or so (as some democracies fell despite quite good rates of aggregate economic growth).

To be sure, a number of very vulnerable democracies remain, including probably the majority of democracies in countries with low and lower-middle incomes and deep ethnic or religious divisions. What makes these countries vulnerable is not poverty per se but several other conditions that are especially hard to surmount at lower levels of economic development: rampant corruption, low state capacity and efficiency, weak rule of law, crime and insecurity, political and ethnic violence, and political polarization. It is not that middle-income (and even some upper-income) countries do not struggle with these problems, but the quality of governance simply tends to be poorer in lower-income countries, and this in itself makes democracy more vulnerable.

Even so, democracy has persisted now for more than a decade or even two in a surprising number of lower-income countries in Africa and Asia. And it remains the case that above a certain upper-middle threshold of per capita income (roughly \$10,000 in 2009 dollars measured by purchasing power parity), virtually no instance exists of a democracy breaking down. About 25 third-wave democracies—including not just Taiwan, South Korea, and the new EU entrants but also, perhaps surprisingly, Turkey, Brazil, and South Africa—are now above that minimum threshold, and Malaysia and Singapore would be well above it if they became democracies.

In short, the universe of stable and consolidated or relatively secure democracies seems to have expanded significantly, probably placing substantial limits on how far a democratic reverse wave could proceed.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

The current economic and political woes of Europe, Japan, and the United States have occasioned the emergence of a new rhetoric of skepticism if

not outright pessimism about the capacity of democratic institutions to solve the fundamental problems of aging populations and physical infrastructure, rising dependency ratios, spiraling debt burdens, and declining economic competitiveness.

The moment is not unlike the mid-1970s, when the Trilateral Commission produced a report on “The Crisis of Democracy” (the focus of which was heavily on “governability”). And to repeat, the global prestige of democracy will continue to depend heavily on how well it performs in the world’s richest regions. The health of the global economy itself depends in no small measure on American and European stabilization and revival. For that reason alone, much is at stake globally in these democracies’ performing more effectively.

But wealth and power are shifting away from Europe and North America to the developing regions of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, with Africa now also rising from its long developmental slumber. And polls show that people in these regions want democracy not so much be-

cause it is the governing formula of the West, but because it provides basic political goods—political freedom, voice, accountability, popular sovereignty, and rule of law—that authoritarian regimes cannot. So long as democracy can

indeed provide these political goods, and reasonable progress in economic development as well, it will continue to be valued and embraced, even if its performance in the old West disappoints.

As the locus of global economic growth and energy continues to shift away from advanced industrial democracies, it is notable that most of the large emerging-market economies are in fact democracies. And some of the big emerging-market authoritarian regimes, like Iran and Venezuela, are doing quite poorly economically, due to gross mismanagement and politicization of economic matters.

Indeed, for every emerging authoritarian developmental success story in the world today, like Ethiopia and Rwanda (for the time being), there are more cases of authoritarian stagnation or democratic progress. As the economist Steven Radelet has shown, for example, the striking thing about the 17 sub-Saharan African countries that are pulling away from the rest of the continent with more vigorous and sustained economic growth is that

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most of them are electoral democracies, or near-democracies.

One defect in the pessimistic line of analysis is the assumption that while Europe and the United States will thrash about in political frustration and economic decline, China will continue to boom, with the Communist Party in the driver's seat. This assumption is deeply flawed for two reasons. First, China is facing its own looming developmental challenges, including an overheated real estate market, a potentially vulnerable banking sector, the prospect of a severe labor shortage, and massive unaddressed environmental stresses. It is very unlikely that China can continue for much longer the torrid pace of 8 to 10 percent economic growth that it has sustained for the past two decades. Second, it is not yet clear how (or how well) the Communist Party will manage the frustrations of slowed growth and other vulnerabilities.

In terms of per capita GNP, China has long since entered the "political zone of transition" that Huntington identified in his 1991 book, *The Third Wave*, as the likeliest developmental moment for democratic transitions. Within a decade or two at most, China will have the per capita GNP level that South Korea had in 1987. One does not need to be a modernization theorist to have difficulty imagining that a China with as large a middle class, in proportional terms, as South Korea had in 1987—and in an era of increasing access to independent means of information and communication through the internet and social media—will continue to accept the unaccountable one-party hegemony of Communist rule.

One way or another, through continued rapid development or a sudden bursting of the development bubble, through incremental political reform or another eruption of mass protest from below, China is headed for a whopping political transformation in the next generation. Democracy is not the inevitable outcome, but it will inevitably be

widely demanded. In fact, there is a much greater prospect that China will become a democracy than that India, Brazil, or South Korea will cease to be a democracy, much less that democracy in Europe or the United States will somehow fall apart.

A BETTER BET

The current moment is a difficult one for democracy. In recent years the momentum clearly swung in favor of authoritarian retrenchment. This may continue for a few more years, or longer if the established democracies lose their vision, commitment, and capacity to continue fostering and encouraging democracy globally.

However, the long-term prospects for democracy remain encouraging. Unless there is another global economic depression on the order of the 1930s, or the established democracies completely lose interest, we are unlikely to see a full-blown reverse wave of democratic breakdowns. And new transitions to democracy (if not necessarily a "fourth wave") are discernible on the horizon.

The mobilization of Arab societies for democratic change will not cease any time soon, and eventually some of them will get it. Even if some Arab countries enter the political cul-de-sac of Islamist authoritarianism, that regime form will eventually grow discredited, as it has in Iran. The inspiration for leftist populism in Latin America, the "Bolivarian" revolution in Venezuela, is in the process of a gradual crash and burn. Indeed, the only thing that is sustaining autocracy in Venezuela, as well as in Russia and much of the Middle East, is oil. Sooner or later, the contradictions inherent in such political systems will swallow them.

For all their sluggishness and sleaziness, democracies retain one massive advantage over authoritarian regimes: the capacity for self-correction, and thus the flexibility to adapt rather than snap and break. Anyone who wants to wager on the comparative viability of regimes in the world would be wise to bet on democracy. ■