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Authoritarianism Goes Global

COUNTERING DEMOCRATIC NORMS

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Since the great financial meltdown of 2008, it has become commonplace to think of the West as being in normative retreat. The meltdown has undercut the perception that Western economic systems are superior, touched off an ongoing crisis in the Eurozone, and seen the sitting prime minister of an EU country (Hungary's Viktor Orbán) openly doubt whether liberal democracies can remain globally competitive. In parallel, revelations about NSA surveillance and the release of the U.S. Senate report on CIA torture have reinforced perceptions that the United States acts hypocritically and applies double standards when it comes to so-called values issues.

Beyond vocal criticism of the West as a problematic champion of democratic norms, a larger international backlash against liberal democracy has grown and gathered momentum. Over the past decade, authoritarians have experimented with and refined a number of new tools, practices, and institutions that are meant to shield their regimes from external criticism and to erode the norms that inform and underlie the liberal international political order. The important debate about whether there has been a democratic recession over the last decade—about how to understand these trends and how to classify stagnating polities and decaying institutions—also requires us to examine the broader global political changes and systemic shifts that have produced new counter-norms and counterpractices.¹

Policy makers and academics have been hesitant to acknowledge some of these recent cross-regional trends. Many deeply held and still highly influential assumptions about the nature of the liberal political order, the

normative fabric of global governance, and the diffusion of democratic norms are products of the years just after the Cold War. Back then, in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union had just collapsed and former communist countries had begun economic and political transitions, liberal-democratic values appeared triumphant and free of significant ideological competition. At the same time, U.S. power was unrivaled, U.S. control of global institutions was strong, and there was a broad perception that a U.S.-led liberal world order would continue to set the rules, standards, and norms for international interactions. In light of the “pushback” that authoritarian regimes are now carrying out, upbeat assumptions about liberal democracy’s effortless dominance require careful scrutiny.

The truth is that norms privileging state security, civilizational diversity, and traditional values over liberal democracy now enjoy significant backing, and they are reshaping the international environment. The effects are most visible in the narrower political space that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are facing, the shifting purposes that regional organizations are embracing, and the rising influence of non-Western powers as international patrons. Together, these effects reveal an international political climate that has made the work of spreading democratic norms far more difficult than it was two decades ago.

Perhaps most disturbingly, authoritarians have pursued these tactics and counterpractices because they are proving effective: The activities of NGOs can be successfully restricted; regional organizations can be repurposed to support the political agendas of authoritarian member states; and international investment and assistance can be procured from new donors without accompanying political conditions. Success breeds imitation, and more authoritarian regimes (plus some backsliding democracies) across Eurasia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa are beginning to emulate these practices.

Counternorms versus Liberal Democracy

Just as the backlash against liberal democracy spans different regions and countries, it also contains various alternative narratives and norms. The most commonly voiced critiques stress the primacy of state sovereignty and security, while charging that liberal-democratic governments and international organizations are too prone to meddle in the domestic affairs of other countries. Liberal democracy’s universalism—its claim to be the sole legitimate form of human governance—comes under challenge, with liberal-democratic discourse said to be serving as cover for U.S. and Western geopolitical interests. Counternorms are thus grounded in changing power balances, as the post-Cold War era of U.S. hegemony gives way to a more multipolar world—a shift often summed up (not without irony) as the “democratization of international relations.”

The single most powerful source of counternorms has been the post-

9/11 turn toward counterterrorism and security. Since the 2001 terror attacks, there has been a collective acceptance, stretching well beyond the confines of the United States, that the tradeoff between security and individual liberty should be rebalanced in favor of the former. As Kim Lane Scheppele has observed, this “international state of emergency” has empowered governments to expand executive authority, increase areas of secrecy and state privilege, set up exceptional legal procedures, expand domestic surveillance, bypass national asylum procedures, and establish forms of cooperation between security services that escape transnational oversight.² While the 1990s saw the steady expansion of global civil society and transnational networks, the 2000s witnessed the globalization of anticonstitutionalist measures for purposes of fighting terrorism and strengthening state security.

Among the most powerful counterterrorist norms to arise thus far has been the widespread acceptance of organized blacklisting of suspect terrorists and their supporters. The legal basis for this practice dates from almost two years before 9/11, when UN Security Council Resolution 1267 of October 1999 created a committee that became charged with compiling a sanctions list aimed at all al-Qaeda affiliates. Resolution 1373, adopted on 28 September 2001, required states to criminalize terrorist financing and authorized governments to establish their own domestic blacklists. According to scholars and legal advocates, international blacklisting has had ill effects on political rights worldwide.³ With no clear criteria for listing and no procedure for delisting, the “terrorist” designation has become a weapon that authoritarians can wield against political foes. It has also spawned the rise of “parallel” systems of administrative interventions that supplant the criminal-justice system and weaken the rule of law. Moreover, blacklisting appears to have generated a type of intergovernmental “logrolling” in which states do each other favors by readily accepting each other’s decisions to list this group or that as “terrorist.”⁴

A related concern, heightened by blacklisting, has been the growing abuse of the red-notice system that the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) uses to ask states to find, apprehend, and extradite individuals wanted for prosecution or the serving of a criminal sentence elsewhere. According to the legal watchdog Fair Trials, the governments of Belarus, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Venezuela have played a large role in driving up the number of red notices issued from 1,277 in 2002 to 8,132 a decade later.⁵

Appeals to “civilizational diversity” and the principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states form another class of emerging counternorms. The People’s Republic of China is the leading supporter of this manner of critiquing liberal democracy’s universalism as well the political conditionality that international institutions adopt to further universal democratic norms.

The “respect for civilizational diversity” counternorm is the operating principle of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional group founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Chinese official statements and commentary repeatedly refer to the group’s embodiment of the foundational “Shanghai Spirit,” a norm that enshrines respect for state sovereignty and noninterference, promotes the “democratization of international relations,” and rejects the imposition of political and economic conditionalities by global-governance institutions.⁶ As David Lewis has observed, in Central Asia the SCO’s norms have displaced the liberal-democratic principles that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has traditionally promoted across the former Soviet space, and have even prompted the OSCE to water down its regional projects that deal with “democratic values.”⁷

A third distinct group of counternorms concerns the defense of “traditional values.” Here, Russia is the main backer. Proponents of the “values” school of thought, which is rooted in strands of neo-Eurasianist thinking and fueled by Russia’s stand against what the Kremlin sees as Western encroachment, maintain that Western individualism has gone over the edge into a state of crisis and moral decay. This accounts for the challenge now being posed to Western decadence worldwide by a turn toward sources of national culture, heritage, and religion.

The Kremlin is pushing the traditional-values agenda as normative cement for the new economic and security architecture that it is seeking to build across Eurasia.⁸ As part of these efforts, LGBT communities and civil society representatives have found themselves targeted by stigmatization campaigns and legislative restrictions. Eurasian countries are introducing bans on “homosexual propaganda” similar to the one that Russia passed in 2011. Kyrgyzstan’s unicameral parliament, widely thought to be one of the region’s more pluralistic, in October 2014 overwhelmingly approved a bill criminalizing “propaganda for nontraditional sexual relations” and banned information alleged to promote “homosexual lifestyles.” The Senate of neighboring Kazakhstan passed a similar draft bill in February 2015. With Almaty a candidate city for the 2022 Winter Olympics, activists and athletes have intensively lobbied the International Olympic Committee to pressure the government of Kazakhstan to reject the legislation.

Outside the region, Russia has acquired partners willing to introduce the traditional-values agenda in international fora. On 27 September 2012, a resolution of the UN Human Rights Council cosponsored by Russia called for “a better understanding and appreciation of traditional values” to be applied in human-rights work. The vote was 25 for and 15 against, with 7 countries abstaining.⁹ In a sharp criticism of the text, the EU affirmed that human rights are “universal and inalienable” while warning that traditional values are “inherently subjective and specific

to a certain time and place.” The EU’s statement went on to worry that introducing “the concept of ‘traditional values’ into this discourse can result in a misleading interpretation of existing human rights norms, and undermine their universality.”¹⁰ Although emphasizing different goals, the counterterror, civilizational-diversity, and traditional-values agendas all question the feasibility or desirability of liberal democracy’s universal aspirations. Basic changes in the international order over the last two decades have powered the rise of each of these sources of counternorms.

Goodbye NGOs, Hello Zombies

Nowhere is the contrast between the relatively democratization-friendly world of twenty years ago and today’s harsher international environment more apparent than in the NGO realm. In the 1990s, academics and policy makers heralded the rise of NGOs. These independent actors in international politics, it was said, were achieving a new prominence and fueling a shift away from traditional state power. The most influential scholarly study of the topic claimed that NGOs regularly “boomeranged” around recalcitrant governments to effect positive change, exerting pressure via transnational networks that include other NGOs, international organizations, and like-minded states.¹¹ In hindsight, this celebratory account appears clearly premature. Such optimistic studies assumed that NGO campaigns and activities would enjoy a clear field indefinitely, while the severity and effectiveness of future state responses went unanticipated.

The turning point came after the so-called color revolutions that flared in the former USSR during the first half of the 2000s. In Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), street protests following flawed elections swept regimes from power. Experts still debate whether Western-funded NGOs played a decisive role. Whatever the case may be, a broad perception arose that Western democracy promoters were using NGOs as political weapons. “Color revolution” became a synonym for “foreign-sponsored regime change,” and governments began to treat democracy monitors as potential security threats. Within eighteen months of the March 2005 “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, all five former Soviet Central Asian republics enacted restrictive NGO-registration laws. In 2011, the Arab Spring drew more attention to the role that foreign-funded civil society groups (and social media) might play in political unrest. Three years after that, the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine brought down a Russian-backed president and again heightened the anxiety felt in certain quarters about the political weight of foreign-backed civil society groups.

In response, governments across the world have developed a “counterrevolutionary playbook” that targets NGOs and democracy moni-

tors. The common charge is that they act on behalf of outside interests eager to influence domestic political outcomes. New legal restrictions limit NGOs' access to foreign funds and even stigmatize the groups as

Even as they ramp up their repression of independent NGOs, governments have been promoting pseudo-NGOs and fake democracy monitors that emulate the form but not the substance of true civil society groups.

Trojan horses that covertly serve the West. In addition to the best-known cases in Eurasia and the Middle East, countries including Ecuador, Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Sudan, Venezuela, Vietnam, and even Canada have moved over the last ten years to put a squeeze on the activities of foreign-funded NGOs within their borders. Measures range from outright bans on foreign funding (Eritrea, Saudi Arabia), to restrictions on foreign funding of political work, to burdensome mandates

that force NGOs to secure government approval of any outside funding and to meet stringent reporting requirements.¹² Darin Christensen and Jeremy Weinstein's 2013 study of 98 countries found that 12 governments had prohibited the foreign funding of the third sector, while 38 had imposed restrictions on outside funding (20 of them since 2002).¹³ Another recent academic survey identified 45 countries that have imposed laws restricting foreign funding of domestic NGOs since 1993, noting that 38 of them have adopted these restrictions since 2003.¹⁴ Demonstration effects also seem to be important: Studies suggest that countries carefully pay attention to and emulate the normative practices of their neighbors.¹⁵ Far from being a temporary measure, the clamp-down on NGOs is a growing global trend.

Evidence from the latest crackdowns strongly suggests that these new restrictions are accomplishing their political objectives. In Russia, ground zero of the NGO backlash, a 2012 law required NGOs receiving outside funds to register as "foreign agents" on pain of fines. Few chose to register at first, so the law was amended to allow the Russian Justice Ministry to decree whether a group qualifies as independent or not. The ministry has since formally warned twenty groups that they must register, while at least six groups—including election watchdogs, legal societies, and LGBT organizations—chose to close rather than accept the stigmatizing label of "foreign agent."¹⁶

In the case of Ethiopia, a pioneering study exploring the effects of a restrictive 2009 NGO law found that 90 percent of domestic NGOs concerned with political or human-rights issues either folded or shifted to work in less contentious areas such as economic development or social services.¹⁷ Governments have learned that they will face few international consequences for cracking down on NGOs, and that such

“sovereignty-preserving” efforts have the encouragement of China, Russia, and other non-Western powers.

Even as they ramp up their repression of independent NGOs, governments have been promoting pseudo-NGOs and fake democracy monitors that emulate the form but not the substance of true civil society groups. The proliferation of government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) has been especially striking: Unhappy with a civil society that independently monitors and challenges them, authorities have been busy building their own tame simulacrum of it that collaborates with power rather than criticizing it. In like manner, governments have begun funding youth movements, such as the Russian group Nashi, that stress themes of national pride and sovereignty.

The rise of what I call “zombie” election monitors offers another dramatic case in point. Traditionally, election monitoring has been the mission of a few skilled NGOs and international organizations such as the OSCE, acting through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). These groups bring to their work extensive experience, technical expertise, and a code that lays out the best practices to be followed in observing and evaluating elections, including measures such as long-term monitoring. Over the last decade, many authoritarian governments and ruling parties have continued to avow their acceptance of external election observation as a norm, but have undercut it in practice by using “zombie” monitors. Zombie monitors try to look like democratic observers, but serve autocratic purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health.

Authoritarians have increasingly hired or deployed zombies on election days without regard to their expertise, competence, or credibility. Azerbaijan’s 9 October 2013 presidential election appears to have marked a watershed in the practice—of the 42 invited organizations that were there to observe the elections, many had never been heard of before. The process ended with incumbent president Ilham Aliyev claiming a third term (he has been free to run indefinitely since engineering a 2009 constitutional change that erased term limits) on the basis of almost 85 percent of the vote. The process began with the national election commission accidentally releasing a “result”—before voting had even started—that showed Aliyev as the winner with nearly 73 percent. Of the reports that observer groups issued on the electoral process, only the ODIHR’s was critical.¹⁸

It may be tempting to dismiss zombie monitors as laughably phony and hence powerless to undermine international standards with their bogus assessments, or to reverse general international impressions of an election’s poor quality. Yet, critically, zombies are not meant to function as perfect substitutes for Western democratic watchdogs. Instead, their role is less ambitious, and thus easier to play: Regimes use zombies to confuse and distract, to sow uncertainty by promoting progovernment

“narratives,” and to boost the plausibility of government complaints that critical foreign observers are biased.¹⁹ What is more, zombies are allowing authoritarians to attempt a gradual redefinition of the very purpose and role of outside election observation. Instead of being a neutral activity that evaluates the quality of electoral processes objectively and openly, even if this might “undermine” sovereignty, election observation becomes in authoritarian eyes a “sovereignty-enhancing” partnership between invited observers and the governments that summon them.

The New Authoritarian Regionalism

Another international development that has fostered the rise of counternorms involves various regional organizations and the new legal frameworks and activities that they have been fostering. As had been the case with NGOs, scholars who studied regional organizations in the wake of the Cold War believed that on the whole they would assist democratic consolidation.²⁰ The expansion of the EU and its adoption of the strict Copenhagen criteria for membership spread an impression that deeper regional integration would reinforce democratic consolidation and institutional transformation. The EU standards, for instance, gave democrats in such then-aspirants as Slovakia and Romania a basis for criticizing the democratic shortcomings of their own governments. There was scholarly criticism of this view, but it stopped short of questioning the basic idea that regional organizations would by and large promote the diffusion of democratic norms.²¹

Such optimism now seems less warranted. Across Eurasia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, new regional organizations are flourishing. Yet their political agendas seem to be drifting away from reaffirming democratic principles, and may even be veering toward new practices that serve to shield their authoritarian members from outside criticism of what they do at home. As Latin America expert Christopher Sabatini has observed regarding the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA, founded in 2004) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, founded in 2008), these new organizations rely on “anti-imperialist” sentiment plus what he calls “the vague basis of norms of regional solidarity.”²²

Of particular concern are the agreements and treaties that some regional organizations have been forging, often in the name of new norms of regional security, stability, or counterterrorism. These compacts are creating legal frameworks that could serve to institutionalize authoritarian and anticonstitutional practices. For instance, the SCO’s 2009 Anti-Terrorism Treaty and the 2012 Joint Security Agreement of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) give executive authorities and security services a number of extraterritorial powers that bypass traditional domestic legal checks and international norms. Each compact

provides for a common blacklist of suspected terrorists and “extremists,” and each allows any member state to extradite suspects to any other member state on the basis of a mere accusation, with no clear standards of evidence. The security services of member states, meanwhile, may conduct investigations on one another’s territory, with information about suspects and targeted individuals to be shared upon request.²³ Not surprisingly, human-rights watchdogs have criticized both of these treaties for undermining political rights in member countries.²⁴ Kuwait’s legislature delayed ratification of the GCC pact amid worries—voiced by lawmakers and civil society groups—that it would undermine the country’s constitutional principles. After Kuwait finally ratified the pact in 2015, these concerns appeared justified as three prominent Kuwait activists were reportedly detained at the request of Saudi authorities.²⁵

When not dreaming up agreements that embed authoritarian practices, regional organizations have been busy diluting democratic standards and incubating fresh “zombie monitors.” In Eurasia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Election Monitoring Observers (founded 2005) like to associate themselves with international standards and Western organizations such as the OSCE. In fact, however, the CIS observers have offered an assessment opposite to the ODIHR’s in every regional election that both have observed save one—the 2010 balloting that made Viktor Yanukovich president of Ukraine. In Latin America, UNASUR wants its monitors to “accompany” host governments throughout the electoral process and to reach accommodation with the results. It does not expect monitors to assess either the political environment that precedes the voting or the conduct of the election itself.²⁶ And even the African Union, which in other ways has embodied democratic principles—it has a policy against according recognition to coups, for instance—has proven too accommodating in its assessments. Thus its observation team was quick to declare the Democratic Republic of Congo’s November 2011 presidential election a success even as EU and U.S. observers were reporting chaotic conditions and irregularities that had damaged the quality of the vote.²⁷

Why do regional organizations so often fail to show firmness when upholding democratic standards? A major and perhaps surprising role in the failure is played by leading regional powers. States such as Brazil and South Africa are preoccupied with leveraging their newfound prominence in regional organizations to cement coveted status as regional bellwethers and “emerging” global powers. They seem to fear that criticizing neighboring governments will arouse unwanted resentment, while embattled authoritarians are practiced in the art of using appeals to regional solidarity to deflect international opprobrium. The 2015 assumption of the African Union’s rotating presidency by Zimbabwe, for example, has given that country’s nonagenarian strongman

Robert Mugabe a welcome new platform from which to repeat his denunciations of “imperialists and colonialists.”²⁸

None of this means that regional organizations are playing a solely negative role, of course. On the contrary, groups such as the African Union and ASEAN in Southeast Asia openly reflect on democratic issues and conduct regular outreach to civil society. And yet the broader analytical point remains: Regional groups themselves have become institutional arenas where democratic norms are contested and counter-norms introduced. Indeed, even the OSCE, long the embodiment of the 1975 Helsinki Accords’ normative “human values” agenda, has come under siege as a group of Eurasian states led by Russia has proposed to reduce the ODIHR’s budget and autonomy.

New Patrons and Providers

A third international trend that has reinforced the rise of counternorms is the advent of alternative providers of international public goods. Since the 2008 financial crisis, it has become commonplace to speak of the West’s economic retrenchment and the rise of emerging powers as major players in the world economy. Although obituaries of the Western-led liberal economic order seem premature—overall world trade recovered by 2010, and in 2013 U.S. dollars constituted more than 60 percent of global reserve holdings and over 80 percent of foreign exchange—the one area where Western economic hegemony has markedly waned is that of providing development aid, including project finance, stabilization assistance, and concessionary loans.

Emerging donors, especially China and the Gulf states, have transformed the dynamics of international development lending. China now has the world’s second-largest economy, smaller only than that of the United States (by some reckonings, China’s may even have recently nosed into first place). Beijing’s stock in trade is to offer packages that defy traditional distinctions between aid and investment, often accepting as security for its loans access to host-country energy resources, commodities, or other assets.

Whatever China’s intentions, its influence as a political model is linked unavoidably to its growing economic engagement and international patronage. The availability of alternative donors who demand fewer democratic conditions and good-governance guarantees, makes it easier for state recipients throughout the developing world to reject Western funding if the prodemocratic “strings” attached to it are considered too constricting. The prestige of these economically successful authoritarians gives other leaders who are bent on deviating from liberal-democratic norms a plausible alternative to having to submit to liberal values and Western criticism. Thus Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly brought up the idea of dropping talks with the EU in order to seek membership in the

SCO. That organization, he says, “is better and more powerful [than the EU], and we have common values with them.”²⁹

The rise of alternative patrons is transforming the development landscape. Over the last four years, China has lent more money in Latin America than have the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank combined. In Africa, China has doubled its development financing, going from US\$10 billion lent from 2009 through 2012 to twice that amount for the period from January 2013 to February 2015.³⁰ Beijing has also become the leading lender to Central Asia, and is playing a major role in the Caribbean as well as the island states of the Pacific. Together with this, a shift from grants to loans secured by concessions has raised further concerns about repayment terms, political conditions, and the demands that Beijing might make on its debtors in the future.

In other cases, emerging donors have stepped in to aid countries not serviced by the Western-led aid community. Since the instability of the Arab Spring, the oil-rich Gulf states have sent tens of billions of dollars abroad, and now provide the lion’s share of development aid to Egypt, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Yemen. Other cases suggest that in post-conflict settings, governments that have been shunned or sanctioned by the West can now readily find new patrons as alternatives to the liberal peace-building complex. After the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government launched its ruthless and successful 2009 military offensive against Tamil insurgents, it bypassed Western donors and their human-rights concerns by turning to China and India for postconflict assistance.³¹ Angola, Sudan, and Tajikistan can also be seen as part of this growing new “illiberal” peace-building complex.

In 2014, Beijing strongly backed and indeed capitalized two new lending organizations in order to challenge the West’s monopoly of control over official international financial institutions. The New Development Bank (or NDB, originally called the BRICS Development Bank) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are supposed to perform tasks resembling those of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, with an emphasis on financing large-scale infrastructure projects in developing countries. Interestingly, while U.S. officials were cautiously supportive of the NDB, they publicly campaigned against the AIIB to the point of lobbying allies such as Australia to forgo membership. Yet U.S. geopolitical influence now appears weak as 53 states have joined, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom as well as (after a change of mind) Australia. Whether these banks can truly devise workable lending practices without imposing Western-style oversight and conditions remains to be seen. Yet their political significance as alternative sources of international financing should not be underestimated.

Another former Western monopoly of the liberal order that has been broken is the field of global media. As the United States and other Western countries have continued to whittle down their presence in interna-

tional news-gathering (few U.S. newspapers maintain permanent foreign bureaus or correspondents anymore), Russia and China have been pouring state funds into news and broadcasting operations. As of 2013, according to one report, China Central Television (CCTV) had set up seventy international bureaus, including twenty in Africa and a dozen in Latin America, with a plan to broadcast (in local languages) to regions and countries where China has made big investments.³²

Russia has upped its international media presence by expanding the reach of its television channel Russia Today (now rebranded simply as RT), and by launching (in November 2014) a state-run multimedia outlet called Sputnik in 34 countries across five continents. Sputnik's stated goal is to counter "Western propaganda" worldwide.³³ Going forward alongside these efforts are the activities of global outlets such as Iran Press TV, the Venezuelan-run Telesur consortium, and several Gulf broadcasters. Together, they pose a serious, amply funded challenge across large swaths of the world in covering news, setting journalistic standards, and editorializing about political events.

In the 1990s, the West still had a near-exclusive role as *the* provider of international funding and information the world over. Emerging donors and alternative patrons have changed that. In development assistance, in project finance, and in global media, emerging powers are displacing the West. The upshot of these trends is more contention over the normative foundations of the international order (with nonliberal voices having a bigger say than before), more authority for counternorms such as noninterference in countries' internal affairs, and more influence for various authoritarian alternatives to liberal democracy.

Handling the Shock of the New

As we have seen, rising new counternorms are threatening to straitjacket liberal democracy's power even as they chip away at its status as the most influential source of norms for global governance. The appearance of these counternorms is not adventitious, but has a basis in fundamental changes that have been altering the post-Cold War international order. Changes in the legal status and role of NGOs, the conversion of regional organizations into arenas of contestation, and the rise of alternative patrons have turned a world that was once relatively favorable to the spread of democratic norms into one where authoritarians can push back—and have learned to do so in innovative ways. Whatever the exact extent of worldwide democratic regression, it is clear that counternorms to liberal democracy have taken root and are helping authoritarians to retain power.

What can democracy advocates and prodemocratic policy makers do about all this? A key challenge is to disentangle, as much as possible, the issue of perceived Western political decline from the fate of liberal democracy.

The first need is to combat the rise of counterdemocratic practices embodied in new regional frameworks or the proliferation of zombies. Here, policy makers should concentrate on benchmarking these new phenomena against existing international standards or introducing new standards against which the credibility of such practices and frameworks must be tested. For example, a code of standards governing election observation does exist, and longstanding UN principles undergird it. Similarly, new regional treaties and agreements should not be passively accepted, but should instead be actively scrutinized in light of international human-rights laws and countries' commitments to such standards. Identifying best practices in election observation, news coverage, legal development, blacklisting, and data-sharing will be critical to stopping the "anything goes" thinking that is too often assumed to be a natural concomitant of multipolarity.

Moreover, diplomats and foreign-policy officials should reconsider how emerging powers can gain status by adopting, rather than rejecting, standards that respect good governance and democracy. Recent scholarship has shown that political practices such as gender quotas for legislatures tend to spread not on principled grounds, but rather because countries get the impression that adopting them is the "high-status" thing to do.³⁴ In view of this, liberal democracies should do all they can to reinscribe principles such as good governance, transparency, and respect for the due autonomy of civil society in the honor roll of "things that enhance a country's standing in the world." Appeals to national pride and prestige are likely to have more effect on emerging powers than will lectures about democratic shortcomings.

Finally, Western representatives charged with public diplomacy and regional engagement must resist the urge to decouple normative from geopolitical issues. If the West were to reduce its support for liberal norms and a rule-based international order for the sake of political expediency, it would only hasten the erosion of its own normative standing and emphasize that we are now in world of competitive patronage dynamics where the highest bidder wins. Instead, the onset of multipolarity, when it truly emerges, should be embraced with a clear sense of liberal democracy's purpose and unique standing in the universe of competing norms and counternorms. Without confidence in its own values, the West not only will continue to lose its global appeal, but will lose itself.

NOTES

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