

FACING UP TO THE DEMOCRATIC RECESSION

Larry Diamond

Larry Diamond is founding coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy*, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, and director of Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law.

The year 2014 marked the fortieth anniversary of Portugal's Revolution of the Carnations, which inaugurated what Samuel P. Huntington dubbed the "third wave" of global democratization. Any assessment of the state of global democracy today must begin by recognizing—even marveling at—the durability of this historic transformation. When the third wave began in 1974, only about 30 percent of the world's independent states met the criteria of electoral democracy—a system in which citizens, through universal suffrage, can choose and replace their leaders in regular, free, fair, and meaningful elections.¹ At that time, there were only about 46 democracies in the world. Most of those were the liberal democracies of the rich West, along with a number of small island states that had been British colonies. Only a few other developing democracies existed—principally, India, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Israel, and Turkey.

In the subsequent three decades, democracy had a remarkable global run, as the number of democracies essentially held steady or expanded every year from 1975 until 2007. Nothing like this continuous growth in democracy had ever been seen before in the history of the world. While a number of these new "democracies" were quite illiberal—in some cases, so much so that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way regard them as "competitive authoritarian" regimes²—the positive three-decade trend was paralleled by a similarly steady and significant expansion in levels of freedom (political rights and civil liberties, as measured annually by Freedom House). In 1974, the average level of freedom in the world stood at 4.38 (on the two seven-point scales, where 1 is most free and 7 is most repressive). It then gradually improved during the 1970s and

1980s, though it did not cross below the 4.0 midpoint until the fall of the Berlin Wall, after which it improved to 3.85 in 1990. In 25 of the 32 years between 1974 and 2005, average freedom levels improved in the world, peaking at 3.22 in 2005.

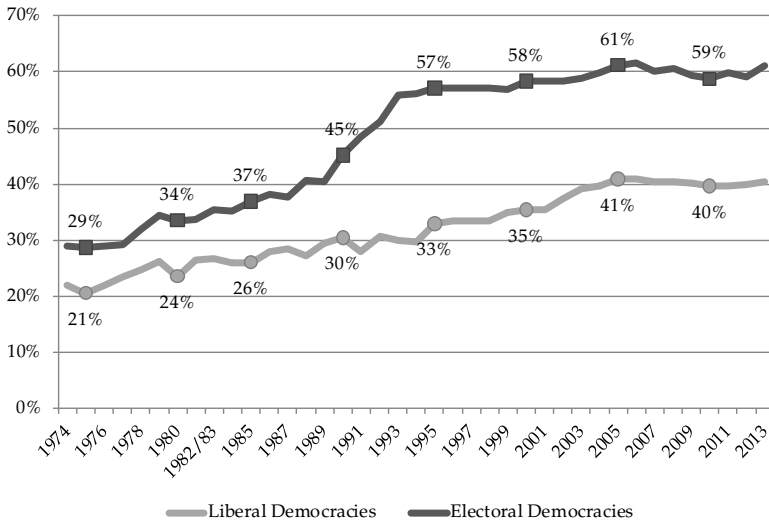
And then, around 2006, the expansion of freedom and democracy in the world came to a prolonged halt. Since 2006, there has been no net expansion in the number of electoral democracies, which has oscillated between 114 and 119 (about 60 percent of the world's states). As we see in Figure 1, the number of both electoral and liberal democracies began to decline after 2006 and then flattened out.³ Since 2006, the average level of freedom in the world has also deteriorated slightly, leveling off at about 3.30.

There are two ways to view these empirical trends. One is to see them as constituting a period of equilibrium—freedom and democracy have not continued gaining, but neither have they experienced net declines. One could even celebrate this as an expression of the remarkable and unexpected durability of the democratic wave. Given that democracy expanded to a number of countries where the objective conditions for sustaining it are unfavorable, due either to poverty (for example, in Liberia, Malawi, and Sierra Leone) or to strategic pressures (for example, in Georgia and Mongolia), it is impressive that reasonably open and competitive political systems have survived (or revived) in so many places. As a variant of this more benign interpretation, Levitsky and Way argue in this issue of the *Journal* that democracy never actually expanded as widely as Freedom House perceived in the first place. Thus, they contend, many of the seeming failures or hardenings of what had been from the beginning authoritarian regimes, however competitive.

Alternatively, one can view the last decade as a period of at least incipient decline in democracy. To make this case, we need to examine not only the instability and stagnation of democracies, but also the incremental decline of democracy in what Thomas Carothers has termed the “gray zone” countries (which defy easy classification as to whether or not they are democracies),⁴ the deepening authoritarianism in the non-democracies, and the decline in the functioning and self-confidence of the world's established, rich democracies. This will be my approach in what follows.

The debate about whether there has been a decline in democracy turns to some extent on how we count it. It is one of the great and probably inescapable ironies of scholarly research that the boom in comparative democratic studies has been accompanied by significant disagreement over how to define and measure democracy. I have never felt that there was—or could be—one right and consensual answer to this eternal conceptual challenge. Most scholars of democracy have agreed that it

FIGURE 1—THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACIES IN THE WORLD, 1974–2013



makes sense to classify regimes categorically—and thus to determine which regimes are democracies and which are not. But democracy is in many ways a continuous variable. Its key components—such as freedom of multiple parties and candidates to campaign and contest; opposition access to mass media and campaign finance; inclusiveness of suffrage; fairness and neutrality of electoral administration; and the extent to which electoral victors have meaningful power to rule—vary on a continuum (as do other dimensions of the quality of democracy, such as civil liberties, rule of law, control of corruption, vigor of civil society, and so on). This continuous variation forces coders to make difficult judgments about how to classify regimes that fall into the gray zone of ambiguity, where multiparty electoral competition is genuine and vigorous but flawed in some notable ways. No system of multiparty competition is perfectly fair and open. Some multiparty electoral systems clearly do not meet the test of democracy. Others have serious defects that nevertheless do not negate their overall democratic character. Thus hard decisions must often be made about how to weight imperfections and where to draw the line.

Most approaches to classifying regimes (as democracies or not) rely on continuous measurement of key variables (such as political rights, in the case of the Polity scale, or both political rights and civil liberties, in the case of Freedom House), along with a somewhat arbitrary cutoff point for separating democracies from nondemocracies.⁵ My own method has been to accept the Freedom House coding decisions except where I find persuasive contradictory evidence. This has led to my counting two to five fewer democracies than Freedom House does

for most years since 1989; for some years, the discrepancy is much larger.⁶

The Democratic Recession: Breakdowns and Erosions

The world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006. Beyond the lack of improvement or modest erosion of global levels of democracy and freedom, there have been several other causes for concern. First, there has been a significant and, in fact, accelerating rate of democratic breakdown. Second, the quality or stability of democracy has been declining in a number of large and strategically important emerging-market countries, which I call “swing states.” Third, authoritarianism has been deepening, including in big and strategically important countries. And fourth, the established democracies, beginning with the United States, increasingly seem to be performing poorly and to lack the will and self-confidence to promote democracy effectively abroad. I explore each of these in turn.

First, let us look at rates of democratic breakdown. Between 1974 and the end of 2014, 29 percent of all the democracies in the world broke down (among non-Western democracies, the rate was 35 percent). In the first decade and a half of this new century, the failure rate (17.6 percent) has been substantially higher than in the preceding fifteen-year period (12.7 percent). Alternatively, if we break the third wave up into its four component decades, we see a rising incidence of democratic failure per decade since the mid-1980s. The rate of democratic failure, which had been 16 percent in the first decade of the third wave (1974–83), fell to 8 percent in the second decade (1984–93), but then climbed to 11 percent in the third decade (1994–2003), and most recently to 14 percent (2004–13). (If we include the three failures of 2014, the rate rises to over 16 percent.)

Since 2000, I count 25 breakdowns of democracy in the world—not only through blatant military or executive coups, but also through subtle and incremental degradations of democratic rights and procedures that finally push a democratic system over the threshold into competitive authoritarianism (see Table). Some of these breakdowns occurred in quite low-quality democracies; yet in each case, a system of reasonably free and fair multiparty electoral competition was either displaced or degraded to a point well below the minimal standards of democracy.

One methodological challenge in tracking democratic breakdowns is to determine a precise date or year for a democratic failure that results from a long secular process of systemic deterioration and executive strangulation of political rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law. No serious scholar would consider Russia today a democracy. But many believe that it was an electoral democracy (however rough and illiberal) under Boris Yeltsin. If we score 1993 as the year when democ-

TABLE—BREAKDOWNS OF DEMOCRACY, 2000–2014

| Year of Breakdown | Country | Year of Return | Type of Breakdown |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|--|
| 2000 | Fiji | – | Military coup |
| 2000 | Russia | – | Executive degradation, violation of opposition rights |
| 2001 | Central Af. Rep. | – | Military rebellion, violence, human rights abuses |
| 2002 | Guinea-Bissau | 2005 | Executive degradation, violation of opposition rights (military coup the following year) |
| 2002 | Nepal | 2013 | Rising political instability, monarchical coup |
| 2004 | Venezuela | – | Executive degradation, violation of opposition rights |
| 2005 | Thailand | 2011 | Military coup, then military constraint |
| 2006 | Solomon Islands | – | Decline of democratic process |
| 2007 | Bangladesh | 2008 | Military “soft coup” |
| 2007 | Philippines | 2010 | Executive degradation |
| 2007 | Kenya | – | Electoral fraud and executive abuse |
| 2008 | Georgia | 2012 | Electoral fraud and executive abuse |
| 2009 | Honduras | 2013 | Military intervention |
| 2009 | Madagascar | – | Unconstitutional assumption of power by opposition; suspension of elected parliament |
| 2009 | Niger | 2011 | Presidential dissolution of Constitutional Court and National Assembly to extend presidential rule |
| 2010 | Burundi | – | Electoral fraud, opposition boycott, political closure |
| 2010 | Sri Lanka | – | Executive degradation |
| 2010 | Guinea-Bissau | – | Military intervention, weakening civilian control, deteriorating rule of law |
| 2012 | Maldives | – | Forcible removal of democratically elected president |
| 2012 | Mali | 2014 | Military coup |
| 2011 | Nicaragua | – | Executive degradation |
| 2012 | Ukraine | 2014 | Electoral fraud (parliamentary elections), executive abuse |
| 2014 | Turkey | – | Executive degradation, violation of opposition rights |
| 2014 | Bangladesh | – | Breakdown of electoral process |
| 2014 | Thailand | – | Military coup |

racy emerged in Russia (as Freedom House does), then what year do we identify as marking the end of democracy? In this case (and many others), there is no single obvious event—like Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori’s 1992 *autogolpe*, dissolving Congress and seizing unconstitutional powers—to guide the scoring decision. I postulate that Russia’s political system fell below the minimum conditions of electoral democracy during the year 2000, as signaled by the electoral fraud that gave Vladimir Putin a dubious first-ballot victory and the executive degradation of political and civic pluralism that quickly followed. (Freedom House dates the failure to 2005.)

The problem has continuing and quite contemporary relevance. For a number of years now, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been gradually eroding democratic pluralism and freedom in the country. The overall political trends have been hard to characterize, because some of the AKP’s changes have made Turkey more democratic by removing the military as an autonomous veto player in politics, ex-

tending civilian control over the military, and making it harder to ban political parties that offend the “deep state” structures associated with the intensely secularist legacy of Kemal Atatürk. But the AKP has gradually entrenched its own political hegemony, extending partisan control over the judiciary and the bureaucracy, arresting journalists and intimidating dissenters in the press and academia, threatening businesses with retaliation if they fund opposition parties, and using arrests and prosecutions in cases connected to alleged coup plots to jail and remove from public life an implausibly large number of accused plotters.

This has coincided with a stunning and increasingly audacious concentration of personal power by Turkey’s longtime prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was elected president in August 2014. The abuse and personalization of power and the constriction of competitive space and freedom in Turkey have been subtle and incremental, moving with nothing like the speed of Putin in the early 2000s. But by now, these trends appear to have crossed a threshold, pushing the country below the minimum standards of democracy. If this has happened, when did it happen? Was it in 2014, when the AKP further consolidated its hegemonic grip on power in the March local-government elections and the August presidential election? Or was it, as some liberal Turks insist, several years before, as media freedoms were visibly diminishing and an ever-wider circle of alleged coup plotters was being targeted in the highly politicized Ergenekon trials?

A similar problem exists for Botswana, where a president (Ian Khama) with a career military background evinces an intolerance of opposition and distaste for civil society beyond anything seen previously from the long-ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Increasing political violence and intimidation—including assaults on opposition politicians, the possible murder of a leading opposition candidate three months before the October 2014 parliamentary elections, and the apparent involvement of the intelligence apparatus in the bullying and coercion of the political opposition—have been moving the political system in a more authoritarian direction. Escalating pressure on the independent media, the brazen misuse of state television by the BDP, and the growing personalization and centralization of power by President Khama (as he advances his own narrow circle of family and friends while splitting the ruling party) are further signs of the deterioration, if not crisis, of democracy in Botswana.⁷ Again, Levitsky and Way had argued a number of years ago that Botswana was not a genuine democracy in the first place.⁸ Nevertheless, whatever kind of system it has been in recent decades, “respect for the rule of law and for established institutions and processes” began to diminish in 1998, when Khama ascended to the vice-presidency, and it has continued to decline since 2008, when the former military commander “automatically succeeded to the presidency.”⁹

There are no easy and obvious answers to the conundrum of how to

classify regimes in the gray zone. One can argue about whether these ambiguous regimes are still democracies—or even if they ever really were. Those who accept that a democratic breakdown has occurred can argue about when it took place. But what is beyond argument is that there is a class of regimes that in the last decade or so have experienced significant erosion in electoral fairness, political pluralism, and civic space for opposition and dissent, typically as a result of abusive executives intent upon concentrating their personal power and entrenching ruling-party hegemony. The best-known cases of this since 1999 have been Russia and Venezuela, where populist former military officer Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) gradually suffocated democratic pluralism during the first decade of this century. After Daniel Ortega returned to the presidency in Nicaragua in 2007, he borrowed many pages from Chávez’s authoritarian playbook, and left-populist authoritarian presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Correa of Ecuador have been moving in a similar direction. In their contribution to this issue, Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán assert that democratic erosion has occurred since 2000 in all four of these Latin American countries (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador) as well as in Honduras, with Bolivia, Ecuador, and Honduras now limping along as “semidemocracies.”

Of the 25 breakdowns since 2000 listed in the Table, eighteen have occurred after 2005. Only eight of these 25 breakdowns came as a result of military intervention (and of those eight, only four took the form of a conventional, blatant military coup, as happened twice in Thailand). Two other cases (Nepal and Madagascar) saw democratically elected rulers pushed out of power by other nondemocratic forces (the monarch and the political opposition, respectively). The majority of the breakdowns—thirteen—resulted from the abuse of power and the desecration of democratic institutions and practices by democratically elected rulers. Four of these took the form of widespread electoral fraud or, in the recent case of Bangladesh, a unilateral change in the rules of electoral administration (the elimination of the practice of a caretaker government before the election) that tilted the electoral playing field and triggered an opposition boycott. The other nine failures by executive abuse involved the more gradual suffocation of democracy by democratically elected executives (though that too was occurring in several of the instances of electoral fraud, such as Ukraine under President Viktor Yanukovich [2010–14]). Overall, nearly one in every five democracies since the turn of this century has failed.

The Decline of Freedom and the Rule of Law

Separate and apart from democratic failure, there has also been a trend of declining freedom in a number of countries and regions since 2005. The most often cited statistic in this regard is the Freedom House

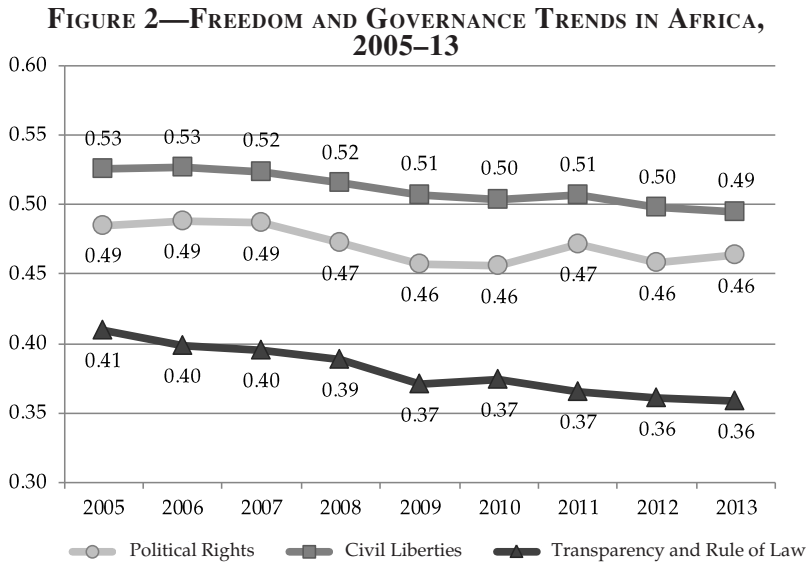
finding that in each of the eight consecutive years from 2006 through 2013 more countries declined in freedom than improved. In fact, after a post-Cold War period in which the balance was almost always highly favorable—with improvers outstripping the decliners by a ratio of two to one (or greater)—the balance simply inverted beginning in 2006. But this does not tell the whole story.

Two important elements are noteworthy, and they are both especially visible in Africa. First, the declines have tended to crystallize over time. Thus, if we compare freedom scores at the end of 2005 and the end of 2013, we see that 29 of the 49 sub-Saharan African states (almost 60 percent) declined in freedom, while only fifteen (30 percent) improved and five remained unchanged. Moreover, twenty states in the region saw a decline in political rights, civil liberties, or both that was substantial enough to register a change on the seven-point scales (while only eleven states saw such a visible improvement). The larger states in sub-Saharan Africa (those with a population of more than ten million) did a bit better, but not much: Freedom deteriorated in thirteen of the 25 of them, and improved in only eight.

Another problem is that the pace of decay in democratic institutions is not always evident to outside observers. In a number of countries where we take democracy 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 such third-wave democracies as South Korea, Poland, and Chile. 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.

Why have freedom and democracy been regressing in many countries? The most important and pervasive answer is, in brief, bad governance. The Freedom House measures of political rights and civil liberties both include subcategories that directly relate to the rule of law and transparency (including corruption). If we remove these subcategories from the Freedom House political-rights and civil-liberties scores and create a third distinct scale with the rule-of-law and transparency scores, the problems become more apparent. African states (like most others in the world) perform considerably worse on the rule of law and transparency than on political rights and civil liberties.¹⁰ Moreover, rule of law and political rights have both declined perceptibly across sub-Saharan Africa since 2005, while civil liberties have oscillated somewhat more. These empirical trends are shown in Figure 2, which presents the Freedom House data for these three reconfigured scales as standardized scores, ranging from 0 to 1.¹¹

The biggest problem for democracy in Africa is controlling corruption and abuse of power. The decay in governance has been visible even in the best-governed African countries, such as South Africa, which suf-

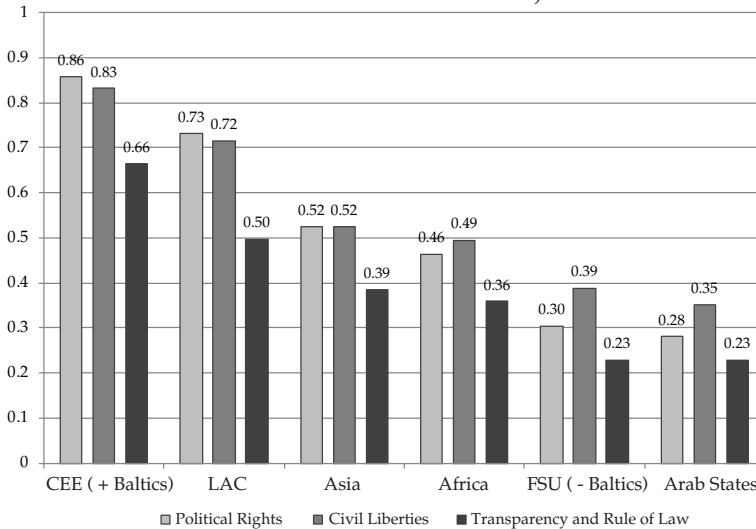


ferred a steady decline in its score on rule of law and transparency (from .79 to .63) between 2005 and 2013. And as more and more African states become resource-rich with the onset of a second African oil boom, the quality of governance will deteriorate further. This has already begun to happen in one of Africa's most liberal and important democracies, Ghana.

The problem is not unique to Africa. Every region of the world scores worse on the standardized scale of transparency and the rule of law than it does on either political rights or civil liberties. In fact, transparency and the rule of law trail the other two scales even more dramatically in Latin America, postcommunist Europe, and Asia than they do in Africa (Figure 3). Many democracies in lower-income and even middle- or upper-middle-income countries (notably, Argentina) struggle with the resurgence of what Francis Fukuyama calls “neo-patrimonial” tendencies.¹² Leaders who think that they can get away with it are eroding democratic checks and balances, hollowing out institutions of accountability, overriding term limits and normative restraints, and accumulating power and wealth for themselves and their families, cronies, clients, and parties.

In the process, they demonize, intimidate, and victimize (and occasionally even jail or murder) opponents who get in their way. 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 im-

**FIGURE 3—POLITICAL RIGHTS, CIVIL LIBERTIES, AND
TRANSPARENCY/RULE OF LAW, 2013**



Source: Freedom House raw data for *Freedom in the World*, 2013.

pulses. Democratic institutions such as 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. Weak economic performance and rising inequality exacerbate the problems of abuse of power, rigging of elections, and violation of the democratic rules of the game.

The Strategic Swing States

A different perspective on the global state of democracy can be gleaned from a focus not on regional or global trends, but on the weightiest emerging-market countries. These are the ones with large populations (say, more than fifty million) or large economies (more than US\$200 billion). I count 27 of these (including Ukraine, which does not quite reach either measure, but is of immense strategic importance). Twelve of these 27 swing states had worse average freedom scores at the end of 2013 than they did at the end of 2005. These declines took place across the board: in fairly liberal democracies (South Korea, Taiwan, and South Africa); in less liberal democracies (Colombia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, and Thailand before the 2014 military coup); and in authoritarian regimes (Ethiopia, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia). In addition, I think three other countries are also less free today than they were in 2005: Russia, where the noose of repressive authoritarianism has clearly been tightening since Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in early 2012; Egypt, where the new military-dominated gov-

ernment under former general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is more murderous, controlling, and intolerant than even the Mubarak regime (1981–2011); and Bangladesh, where (as noted above) democracy broke down early in 2014. Only two countries (Singapore and Pakistan) are freer today (and only modestly so) than in 2005. Some other countries have at least remained stable. Chile continues to be a liberal-democratic success story; the Philippines has returned to robust democracy after an authoritarian interlude under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001–10); and Brazil and India have preserved robust democracy, albeit with continuing challenges. But overall, among the 27 (which also include China, Malaysia, Nigeria, and the United Arab Emirates) there has been scant evidence of democratic progress. In terms of democracy, the most important countries outside the stable democratic West have been either stagnating or slipping backward.

The Authoritarian Resurgence

An important part of the story of global democratic recession has been the deepening of authoritarianism. This has taken a number of forms. In Russia, space for political opposition, principled dissent, and civil society activity outside the control of the ruling authorities has been shrinking.¹³ In China, human-rights defenders and civil society activists have faced increasing harassment and victimization.

The (mainly) postcommunist autocracies of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, centered on the axis of cynical cooperation between Russia and China, have become much more coordinated and assertive. Both countries have both been aggressively flexing their muscles in dealing with their neighbors on territorial questions. And increasingly they are pushing back against democratic norms by also using instruments of soft power—international media (such as RT, Russia’s slick 24/7 global television “news” channel), China’s Confucius Institutes, lavish conferences, and exchange programs—to try to discredit Western democracies and democracy in general, while promoting their own models and norms.¹⁴ This is part of a broader trend of renewed authoritarian skill and energy in using state-run media (both traditional and digital) to air an eclectic mix of proregime narratives, demonized images of dissenters, and illiberal, nationalist, and anti-American diatribes.¹⁵

African autocrats have increasingly used China’s booming aid and investment (and the new regional war on Islamist terrorism) as a counterweight to Western pressure for democracy and good governance. And they have been only too happy to point to China’s formula of rapid state-led development without democracy to justify their own deepening authoritarianism. In Venezuela, the vise of authoritarian populism has tightened and the government’s toleration (or even organization) of criminal violence to demobilize middle-class opposition has risen. The

“Arab Spring” has imploded in almost every country that it touched save Tunisia, leaving in most cases even more repressive states or, as in the case of Libya, hardly a state at all.

The resurgence of authoritarianism over the past eight years has been quickened by the diffusion of common tools and approaches. Prominent among these have been laws to criminalize international flows of financial and technical assistance from democracies to democratic parties, movements, media, election monitors, and civil society organizations in authoritarian regimes, as well as broader restrictions on the ability of NGOs to form and operate and the creation of pseudo-NGOs to do the bidding (domestically and internationally) of autocrats.¹⁶ One recent study of 98 countries outside the West found that 51 of them either prohibit or restrict foreign funding of civil society, with a clear global trend toward tightening control; as a result, international democracy-assistance flows are dropping precipitously where they are needed most.¹⁷ In addition, authoritarian (and even some democratic) states are becoming more resourceful, sophisticated, and unapologetic in suppressing Internet freedom and using cyberspace to frustrate, subvert, and control civil society.¹⁸

Western Democracy in Retreat

Perhaps the most worrisome dimension of the democratic recession has been the decline of democratic efficacy, energy, and self-confidence in the West, including the United States. There is a growing sense, both domestically and internationally, that democracy in the United States has not been functioning effectively enough to address the major challenges of governance. The diminished pace of legislation, the vanishing ability of Congress to pass a budget, and the 2013 shutdown of the federal government are only some of the indications of a political system (and a broader body politic) that appears increasingly polarized and deadlocked. As a result, both public approval of Congress and public trust in government are at historic lows. The ever-mounting cost of election campaigns, the surging role of nontransparent money in politics, and low rates of voter participation are additional signs of democratic ill health. Internationally, promoting democracy abroad scores close to the bottom of the public’s foreign-policy priorities. And the international perception is that democracy promotion has already receded as an actual priority of U.S. foreign policy.

The world takes note of all this. Authoritarian state media gleefully publicize these travails of American democracy in order to discredit democracy in general and immunize authoritarian rule against U.S. pressure. Even in weak states, autocrats perceive that the pressure is now off: They can pretty much do whatever they want to censor the media, crush the opposition, and perpetuate their rule, and Europe and the Unit-

ed States will swallow it. Meek verbal protests may ensue, but the aid will still flow and the dictators will still be welcome at the White House and the Elysée Palace.

It is hard to overstate how important the vitality and self-confidence of U.S. democracy has been to the global expansion of democracy during the third wave. While each democratizing country made its own transition, pressure and solidarity from the United State and Europe often generated a significant and even crucial enabling environment that helped to tip finely balanced situations toward democratic change, and then in some cases gradually toward democratic consolidation. If this solidarity is now greatly diminished, so will be the near-term global prospects for reviving and sustaining democratic progress.

A Brighter Horizon?

Democracy has been in a global recession for most of the last decade, and there is a growing danger that the recession could deepen and tip over into something much worse. Many more democracies could fail, not only in poor countries of marginal strategic significance, but also in big swing states such as Indonesia and Ukraine (again). There is little external recognition yet of the grim state of democracy in Turkey, and there is no guarantee that democracy will return any time soon to Thailand or Bangladesh. Apathy and inertia in Europe and the United States could significantly lower the barriers to new democratic reversals and to authoritarian entrenchments in many more states.

Yet the picture is not entirely bleak. We have not seen “a third reverse wave.” Globally, average levels of freedom have ebbed a little bit, but not calamitously. Most important, there has not been significant erosion in public support for democracy. In fact, what the Afrobarometer has consistently shown is a gap—in some African countries, a chasm—between the popular demand for democracy and the supply of it provided by the regime. This is not based just on some shallow, vague notion that democracy is a good thing. Many Africans understand the importance of political accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and restraint of power, and they would like to see their governments manifest these virtues.

While the performance of democracy is failing to inspire, authoritarianism faces its own steep challenges. There is hardly a dictatorship in the world that looks stable for the long run. The only truly reliable source of regime stability is legitimacy, and the number of people in the world who believe in the intrinsic legitimacy of any form of authoritarianism is rapidly diminishing. Economic development, globalization, and the information revolution are undermining all forms of authority and empowering individuals. Values are changing, and while we should not assume any teleological path toward a global “enlightenment,” generally the movement is toward greater distrust of authority and more

desire for accountability, freedom, and political choice. In the coming two decades, these trends will challenge the nature of rule in China, Vietnam, Iran, and the Arab states much more than they will in India, not to mention Europe and the United States. Already, democratization is visible on the horizon of Malaysia's increasingly competitive electoral politics, and it will come in the next generation to Singapore as well.

The key imperative in the near term is to work to reform and consolidate the democracies that have emerged during the third wave—the majority of which remain illiberal and unstable, if they remain democratic at all. With more focused, committed, and resourceful international engagement, it should be possible to help democracy sink deeper and more enduring roots in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Ghana. It is possible and urgently important to help stabilize the new democracies in Ukraine and Tunisia (whose success could gradually generate significant diffusion effects throughout the Arab world). It might be possible to nudge Thailand and Bangladesh back toward electoral democracy, though ways must be found to temper the awful levels of party polarization in each country. With time, the electoral authoritarian project in Turkey will discredit itself in the face of mounting corruption and abuse of power, which are already growing quite serious. And the oil-based autocracies in Iran and Venezuela will face increasingly severe crises of economic performance and political legitimacy.

It is vital that democrats in the established democracies not lose faith. Democrats have the better set of ideas. Democracy may be receding somewhat in practice, but it is still globally ascendant in peoples' values and aspirations. This creates significant new opportunities for democratic growth. If the current modest recession of democracy spirals into a depression, it will be because those of us in the established democracies were our own worst enemies.

NOTES

I would like to thank Erin Connors, Emmanuel Ferrario, and Lukas Friedemann for their excellent research assistance on this article.

1. For an elaboration of this definition, see Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, 2008), 20–26.

2. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); see also their essay in this issue.

3. I count as liberal democracies all those regimes that receive a score of 1 or 2 (out of 7) on *both* political rights and civil liberties.

4. Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

5. Freedom House classifies all the world's regimes as democracies or not from 1989 to the present based on whether a) they score at least 7 out of 12 on the "electoral process" dimension of political rights; b) they score at least 20 out of 40 overall on the raw point scale for political rights; c) their most recent parliamentary and presidential elections were reasonably free and fair; d) there are no significant hidden sources of power overriding the elected authorities; and e) there are no recent legal changes abridging future electoral freedom. In practice, this has led to a somewhat expansive list of democracies—rather too generous in my view, but at least a plausible "upper limit" of the number of democracies every year. Levitsky and Way suggest in this issue that a better standard for democracy would be the Freedom House classification of Free, which requires a minimum average score of 2.5 on the combined scales of political rights and civil liberties. But I think this standard excludes many genuine but illiberal democracies.

6. My count of electoral democracies for 1998–2002 was lower than that of Freedom House by 8 to 9 countries, and in 1999, by 11 countries. For example, I dropped from this category Georgia in 1992–2002, Ukraine in 1994–2004, Mozambique in 1994–2008, Nigeria in 1999–2003, Russia in 2001–2004, and Venezuela in 2004–2008.

7. Amy R. Poteete, "Democracy Derailed? Botswana's Fading Halo," *AfricaPlus*, 20 October 2014, <http://africaplus.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/democracy-derailed-botswanas-fading-halo/>.

8. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 20.

9. Kenneth Good, "The Illusion of Democracy in Botswana," in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democratization in Africa: Progress and Retreat*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 281.

10. The comparisons here and in Figure 2 are with the reconfigured political-rights and civil-liberties scales, after the subscales for transparency and rule of law have been removed (see endnote 11 below).

11. I created the scale of transparency and rule of law by drawing subscales C2 (control of corruption) and C3 (accountability and transparency) from the political-rights scale and the four subscales of F (rule of law) from the civil-liberties scale. For the specific items in these subscales, see the Freedom in the World methodology, www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2014/methodology#.VGww5vR4qcl.

12. Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). See also his essay in this issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.

13. On Russia, see Miriam Lansky and Elspeth Suthers, "Putin versus Civil Society: Outlawing the Opposition," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (July 2013): 74–87.

14. See Andrew Nathan's essay "China's Challenge" on pp. 156–70 of this issue.

15. Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung, "Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (January 2014): 71–85.

16. Carl Gershman and Michael Allen, "The Assault on Democracy Assistance," *Journal of Democracy* 17 (April 2006): 36–51; William J. Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

17. Darin Christensen and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Defunding Dissent: Restrictions on Aid to NGOs," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (April 2013): 77–91.

18. See the essays in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) and the ongoing trailblazing work of the Citizen Lab, <https://citizenlab.org/>.