

DEMOCRACY EMBATTLED

Marc F. Plattner

Marc F. Plattner, founding coeditor of the Journal of Democracy and cochair of the Research Council of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies, will be retiring following the publication of this issue. His farewell message may be found in the box on page 7.

Five years ago, the *Journal of Democracy* marked its twenty-fifth anniversary with an issue that featured a dozen authors responding to the question “Is Democracy in Decline?” The majority of our contributors replied in the affirmative, even though the view that democracy was in retreat was by no means widely accepted at the beginning of 2015. Today, however, as we celebrate the *Journal's* thirtieth anniversary in 2020, perceptions have fundamentally changed. Almost everyone now thinks that democracy is facing a crisis, as articles on op-ed pages and in periodicals attest on a regular basis.

For our thirtieth-anniversary issue, we decided not to pose one specific question to prospective authors. Instead, we approached a substantial portion of our Editorial Board members and invited them to write on a topic of their own choosing. Not surprisingly, most of them chose to write about the state of democracy, either globally or in a particular country or region. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which their essays tend to agree about the condition of democracy in the world. The overall picture that they paint might be described as grim, but with rays of hope. Here I want to try briefly to distill the broad consensus that I see emerging from the articles that follow.

Liberal democracy, though much more widespread than it was in earlier times, is under greater threat today than at any time since the Second World War. Although few democratic regimes have collapsed, some large and important countries that were star performers during democratization's “third wave”—Brazil, the Philippines, Poland, Turkey—have suffered significant setbacks. In some cases this backslid-

ing has been so severe that it is doubtful whether these regimes can still properly be considered democracies at all, let alone liberal democracies.

An even more sudden shift has taken place in the so-called advanced democracies, mostly belonging to the West, which long have been home to liberal democracy. In 2015, the deep-rootedness and stability of these regimes were still largely taken for granted. That no longer is the case—or at least it should not be.

The past five years have witnessed a steep decline in the fortunes of the mainstream political parties of the center-right and center-left that long dominated and governed Western political life. They have lost ground to newer parties, often of the extreme right or left, typically described as populist.

Although there is much dispute about exactly how populism should be understood, few would deny that it has been gaining strength and influence, in both newer and more established democracies. Where populist parties have come to power, they have usually pursued illiberal policies hostile to such mainstays of democracy as the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, and the freedom and diversity of the media. But even when they remain in opposition, populist parties that attract significant electoral support tend to push their country's politics in an illiberal direction.

One reason for the weakening of mainstream parties and the advance of populism is growing disappointment with the poor performance of democratic governments. Voters blame them for lackluster rates of overall economic growth and for a distribution of its gains that seems to favor the very wealthy. The way in which governments have dealt—or failed to deal—with the immigration issue also is a major source of popular dissatisfaction.

The surge in populism, along with the rise of social media, has helped to generate an increase in political polarization and a decline of trust in democratic institutions. Public-opinion data from many places indicate a worrisome loss of support for democracy, especially among younger voters. The fading commitment to democratic values, in turn, cannot help but lead to a waning of the political will to defend democracy.

A further difficulty for democracy lies in the broad demographic trends shaping the evolution of world politics. The aging of the population in the advanced democracies is putting pressure on social-welfare systems. Unprecedentedly low levels of new births, especially where they are coupled with high rates of emigration, are creating fears that some countries will not be able to preserve their national language, character, and traditions. This has sharpened nationalist passions and made migration an intensely divisive issue.

As the migration question reminds us, in today's interconnected world the dividing line between domestic and international issues is not so easily drawn. Nonetheless, the challenges to democracy enumerated

A FAREWELL MESSAGE

This thirtieth-anniversary issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (JoD) also marks my last as coeditor. The JoD opened its offices in September of 1989 and published its inaugural issue (featuring such luminaries as Fang Lizhi, Leszek Kołakowski, Juan Linz, Jacek Kuroń, and Vladimir Bukovsky) in January of 1990. Larry Diamond and I were the founding coeditors, and we both have stayed on the job ever since, with Larry working part-time from Stanford and I based full-time in Washington at our parent organization, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Being editor of the JoD has been the highlight of my professional life, and it is with some sadness that I made the decision to step down. But I will be turning 75 this year, and I remain a creature of the age of print and paper. So I thought it was best to bring in a younger successor more attuned to the digital era—but no less committed to the high scholarly standards, deep analysis, broad coverage, and accessible style that has distinguished the JoD.

We are confident that we have found such a successor in William J. Dobson, who will take the reins in January, with Larry Diamond remaining as the JoD's "academic coeditor" for a transitional period. Will Dobson comes to us from NPR, where he has been Chief International Editor. Earlier in his career he held senior editorial positions with *Slate* magazine, *Foreign Policy*, and *Foreign Affairs*. He also is the author of *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy* (2012).

During my long tenure at the JoD, I have been blessed with an outstanding staff. I wish there were room to thank all of them by name, but I must single out our executive editor Phil Costopoulos, who was with us from day one and has helped to give the JoD its distinctive and readable style. I am deeply grateful to the JoD's Editorial Board, whose members have been incredibly generous with their counsel. Larry Diamond has been a superb partner and friend and has made an indispensable contribution to the success of the JoD. I also want to thank NED's Board of Directors and, above all, its president Carl Gershman for both their unwavering support for the JoD and their respect for its complete independence.

So I leave the helm with powerful reasons to be grateful for the JoD's past, as well as confident about its future.

—Marc F. Plattner

above are primarily *internal*. At the same time, however, democracy's *external* opponents have been growing stronger.

The latter is not a brand-new development. Regular readers of the *Journal of Democracy* will know that for some time we have been devoting extensive coverage to what we labeled "the authoritarian resur-

gence.” Many of our earlier articles on this topic were gathered together in an edited volume titled *Authoritarianism Goes Global* that was published in 2016.

We have not neglected domestic developments within the leading authoritarian countries, but we have paid special attention to their efforts to enhance their influence beyond their borders and to cooperate with one another in international organizations. For a long time the authoritarians’ use of sharp power—penetrating open societies with the aim of stifling debate and sapping the integrity of independent institutions—to spread their influence within democracies was largely ignored. Russian interference in U.S. and European elections finally made it impossible to overlook.

The three authoritarian governments most active in employing sharp power are China, Russia, and Iran. Each is the subject of an article in this issue. Authoritarianism is also the principal focus of essays on East and Southeast Asia and on the Arab world. We have found ourselves increasingly compelled to devote attention to democracy’s rivals.

The enhanced power and stature of the leading authoritarians have transformed the face of world politics. Although the United States remains the world’s preeminent nation with respect to both military and economic power, it no longer enjoys the unquestioned superiority in these realms that it did in the immediate post–Cold War era.

We are relearning the lesson that geopolitics matters deeply for the fate of democracy. When the United States and its Western allies were the primary shapers of the international order, it was favorable to the spread of democratic institutions, and liberal principles were embedded in the most important international organizations. Countries whose security needs or economic interests made them dependent on the advanced democracies could ill afford to act in ways that would earn these democracies’ ire. This gave rulers a powerful incentive to avoid (or at least to try to disguise) blatantly antidemocratic actions.

So when rebukes or penalties had to be expected if certain democratic “red lines” were crossed, would-be authoritarians needed to tread carefully lest they incur real costs. Today, however, with the democratic camp not only relatively weaker compared to its autocratic rivals, but also less inclined to give high priority among its foreign-policy aims to supporting democracy abroad, rulers with antidemocratic intentions feel that they have a much freer hand.

The recent geopolitical and economic achievements of the authoritarians—especially of China—have also changed the way in which the rest of the world views the competition between political systems. China’s success has given the rulers of developing countries not only an alternative source of aid, trade, and investment to what is offered by the West, but also a sense that democracy is not necessarily a requisite for modernization.

Some also see China as providing a model that they can seek to emu-

late. China's model is probably inimitable in its details, but the appeal among ruling elites of a system that combines rapid economic growth with political repression should not be underestimated. The future is likely to contain much more intense competition—ideological, economic, geopolitical, and even military—between alternative political systems than existed during the immediate post–Cold War era.

Another view that seems to be shared among our authors is a deep disappointment with the impact of social media and other emerging technologies. While these were initially regarded as promising instruments of liberation, today their dark side is increasingly apparent. Domestically, they have contributed to polarization and a coarsening of public discourse. Internationally, they have facilitated foreign disinformation campaigns and other forms of external interference in the political life of democracies. Today these technologies are helping authoritarians more than democrats.

Democracy's Persisting Appeal

This grim litany of problems besetting democracy is far from the whole story. For despite being in a “slump,” democracy continues to show vivid signs of its underlying strength and its persisting appeal. Most striking has been the outbreak in many countries around the world of massive protests opposing dictatorship and calling for democracy. In 2019 alone, notable examples included Algeria, Bolivia, Hong Kong, Iran, and Sudan.

To be sure, such protests may fall far short of achieving their democratic goals. It also must be acknowledged that large protests occurred in some democratic countries as well, where they were mostly directed against corruption and poor governance. It is striking, however, that protests *against democracy* are virtually unheard of.

What Carl Gershman refers to as “the instinct for freedom” remains strong. Even if attachment to democracy may be softening among young people who have always enjoyed its blessings, the desire for liberty and self-government is as powerful as ever among those who suffer under repressive governments. Whatever difficulties democracies may be having in their efforts to *supply* good governance, the *demand* for democracy is still remarkably robust.

Moreover, while democratic transitions are not nearly as plentiful as they were during the height of the third wave, they have been increasing of late. Tunisia and Ukraine are two key countries that remain committed to making their ongoing transitions succeed, and promising new democratic openings have occurred in Armenia, Ethiopia, and Malaysia.

Though populism continues to pose a threat in many countries, its progress has been less swift than many had feared (as indicated, for example, by its limited gains in the 2019 EU parliamentary elections). What is more, in a number of countries where populists had already achieved some electoral success, including Ecuador, Greece, Slovakia,

and Turkey, there are signs of a growing “pushback against populism.” This is a subject that the *Journal* plans to explore in upcoming issues.

Finally, democracy’s rivals probably are much less stable than they often are depicted as being. Despite their growing military power and recent geopolitical gains, the highly repressive regimes in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran are brittle. Though there is little question that Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Ayatollah Khamenei are politically dominant in their respective countries, they must deal with conflict among regime elites as well as growing resentment from the wider population.

So even if the democracies fail to fully recover their former *élan*, it is uncertain whether this would lead to an easy ascendancy for repressive authoritarian regimes. The current contest between democracy and its rivals might turn out to resemble that of the last two decades of the Cold War, which the late Pierre Hassner characterized by the phrase “competitive decadence”—that is, a race in which each side’s chief concern is to outlast the other by more adeptly managing its own internal tensions and weaknesses.

I doubt that any of the authors in our thirtieth-anniversary issue would strongly object to the brief account I have given of the condition of democracy in the world today. To be sure, they would be likely to differ from one another in the weight that they assign to the various factors sketched out here. Some might put greater emphasis on the internal challenges to democracy, and others on the external challenges. Some would stress the more hopeful aspects of the current situation, while others would take a bleaker view. But I think all would agree that both the negative and positive trends noted here must be taken in to account.

For both the title of this introductory essay and the headline on the cover of the issue, we have chosen the phrase “Democracy Embattled.” It reflects our sense that we are in the early stages of what is likely to be a long struggle. Democracy may be down, but it certainly is not out. While the years since 2015 may have witnessed its further decline, democracy is better prepared for the challenge ahead in at least one crucial respect.

Five years ago there was still a good deal of complacency about the health of democracy. Even those who decried its alleged flaws tended to be confident that democracy was pretty much invulnerable, at least in its North American and European heartlands. And many analysts and policy makers regarded worries about the resurgence of authoritarian power as excessively alarmist.

In five short years, however, there has been a remarkable sea change in opinion on these matters. Today almost all those who care about the future of democracy realize that it is facing a serious threat and that they will need to mount a strong defense, both domestically and internationally. Democracy is under assault, but democrats around the world now have a much clearer understanding of the need to do battle on its behalf.