

ACCORDING TO MOST ESTIMATES, democracy did not fare well in 2010. While there were no dramatic setbacks, the year nonetheless saw a continuation of the global democratic decline that began in the aftermath of the colored revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. The Freedom House Survey for 2010 shows a fifth consecutive year of democratic erosion, meaning that the number of countries in which freedom declined outnumbers those where it made gains — by 25 to 12. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index shows a similar trend, with lower democracy scores recorded in all regions since the last index was compiled in 2008. (Note: This review of 2010 was written in late December and so does not reflect the revolutionary events in the Middle East that were sparked by the flight of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011.)

Of special concern is that the backsliding seemed to accelerate during the holidays at the end of 2010, when autocrats in several important countries, thinking that few people were paying attention, struck harsh blows against democratic opponents. In Russia the rigged sentencing of dissident entrepreneur Mikhail Khodorkovsky to another six years in prison was orchestrated by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and represented a serious setback to prospects for reforming the corrupt and dysfunctional Russian state. In neighboring Belarus the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenka, following the December 19 presidential election, carried out the most sweeping and brutal repression of democratic oppositionists that Europe has seen since martial law was declared in Poland in 1981. And in Venezuela, strongman Hugo Chavez assumed decree powers for the next 18 months and rammed through laws imposing severe new controls on the Internet, telecommunications, and non-governmental organizations.

These and other setbacks to democracy in 2010, and the continuing trend of democratic decline, are a source of grave concern. But the picture is actually less bleak than it might appear. It is important to remember that these setbacks have come in the aftermath of what the late political scientist Samuel Huntington called the



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third wave of democratization, the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s when democracy expanded more rapidly than ever before in world history. According to Huntington’s thesis, this wave should have been followed by a “reverse wave”

of authoritarian resurgence, as happened during the 1920s and 30s with the rise of communist and fascist totalitarianism and several decades later with the spread of military and party dictatorships throughout much of the Third World. Significantly, though, such a reversal has not occurred. The number of electoral democracies, which peaked at 123 in 2005, has declined to 114, and the recent period has been characterized as a democratic “recession.” But this is much different than a depression and does not constitute a reverse wave.

In fact, it is probably most accurate to describe the current period as a political stand-off between democracy and authoritarianism. Democratic progress has stalled and been reversed in a few cases, but there has been no appreciable growth in the number of authoritarian regimes. And while democracy faces significant threats and challenges, autocrats are also vulnerable, which is why some of them felt the need to take repressive measures under the cloak of the holiday lull. They care about the international reaction precisely because they fear it might encourage domestic opponents to challenge their authority, which is far from absolute.

Thus, in Russia Putin may be in control, but he has lost the support of the political elite, which fears that his return to the presidency will usher in a period of Brezhnev-like stagnation and continued economic and societal decline. Lukashenka’s decision to crackdown in Belarus was taken to head off a popular challenge to the election result, which most opinion analysis and observer reports show did not give him a victory in the first round. And Chavez assumed decree powers to neutralize the National Assembly, where the opposition has a far greater presence following its gains in the parliamentary election last September.

Other dictatorships are also showing signs of trouble. Fidel Castro has conceded that “the Cuban model doesn’t work for us anymore;” and the China model, for all its economic success, appears less stable in light of what The Economist called Beijing’s “disastrous” response to Liu Xiaobo’s receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, which it said “betrays the

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government’s insecurity at home.” The Iranian regime has succeeded in suppressing the Green Revolution, just as the military in Burma crushed the Saffron Revolution two years earlier. But both uprisings had mass popular support and exposed the inherent illegitimacy of each regime. The inexorable erosion of the grotesque dictatorship in North Korea continues apace, with South Korea discreetly preparing for eventual reunification even as international attention remains focused on the nuclear threat from the North.

Moreover, there were some significant examples of democratic progress during 2010. Latin America is the region where the greatest gains occurred, the highlights being a successful election in Colombia following President Alvaro Uribe’s decision to respect the constitution and not seek a third term; a non-traumatic alternation of power in Chile after 20 years of government by the Concertacion coalition; and the election of two female presidents – Dilma Rousseff in Brazil and Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica. In Africa, Kenya took an important step forward with a referendum approving constitutional reform, and Guinea conducted its first free and fair election since independence in 1958. In Asia, the Philippines reaffirmed its democracy with the election of Benigno Aquino in the country’s first automated election, which was unexpectedly free of fraud and violence. In the post-communist space, Kyrgyzstan conducted successful parliamentary elections in October, just four months after an eruption of terrible ethnic violence; multi-ethnic moderate parties gained support in the

October elections in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (though not in the Republika Srpska); and pro-European forces in Moldova expanded their support in parliament and succeeded in forming a governing alliance after more than a month of painful negotiations. There were nine months of such negotiations in Iraq, but the formation of a representative government there was an extraordinary step forward for that important Middle Eastern country, which most observers had completely given up on just a few short years ago.

The words of Liu Xiaobo, taken from the final statement at his trial that was read by actress Liv Ullmann at the Nobel ceremony he could not attend, capture the spirit of democracy activists not just in China but throughout the world: “There is no force that can put an end to the human quest for freedom.”

Such gains have their roots in the steady work of grassroots democracy activists, many working in exceedingly dangerous environments, whom NED is proud to have continued to support in 2010. In the Middle East, for example, where democracy has lagged more than anywhere else, young bloggers and citizen journalists have contributed to an upsurge of independent media, and labor and rights movements have been in the forefront pressuring for change. In Russia, despite all the backsliding, the democratic opposition and NGO sector have shown surprising resilience and cohesion, especially the Strategy-31 and Solidarity movements, which have held together remarkably well, and the human rights organizations working in the North Caucasus which have demonstrated a new level of trust and coordination. A

movement of resistance in Cuba is gathering momentum, fired by the martyrdom last February of the imprisoned Afro-Cuban activist Orlando Zapata Tamayo, whose death set off a new wave of resistance on the island. Africa’s “martyrs of the people” included two murdered human rights defenders, Floribert Chibeya in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Chidi Nwosu in Nigeria, both of whom personified the courage and persistence of African activists throughout the continent. The words of Liu Xiaobo, taken from the final

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Last May, another activist and dear NED friend, Ilko Kucheriv, died of lung cancer soon after returning to Ukraine from the World Movement for Democracy’s Assembly in Jakarta. The day before his death, Ilko wrote a message to his friends that, like Liu’s final statement, conveys the special character of those who give their life for freedom. “I remain an optimist,” he wrote. “None of us knows how much we will be given.

This has led me to reconsider all my values and particularly the value of time. I want to spend it in the most effective and thoughtful way....I have been thinking about my work and my organization; I believe that people can and should strive to change the world for the better.” It’s a privilege for all of us at NED to be associated with such people and to assist, in our own small way, their struggle for a better world.



Carl Gershman
President