

The State of Democratization at the Beginning of the 21st Century

by Larry Diamond

Thirty years ago, a global democratic revolution began with the Portuguese military revolution that overthrew several decades of dictatorship and launched a contentious but ultimately successful democratic transition in that country. This “third wave” of global democratization then spread to Spain and Greece, then to Latin America, and eventually to a number of countries in Asia, Africa, and, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Central and Eastern Europe as well. By the mid-1990s, the percentage of states in the world that were democracies had increased from 27 percent in 1974 to over 60 percent. Democracy had become the dominant form of government in the world.

Since the mid-1990s, the global democratic revolution has stalled in some respects while deepening in others. Several things have been striking about the global trends in democratic development over the past decade. The first has been the relative stability of democracy as a system of government in the world. This has been true in two senses. First, the overall number of democracies in the world has remained relatively stable since 1995. By the end of 2002, the number of democracies in the world (as rated by Freedom House) had increased slightly from 117 in 1995 to 121 in 2002, but it fell back to 117 at the end of 2003. In recent years, democratic breakthroughs have been counterbalanced by democratic setbacks or by changes in scoring, as several countries oscillate on the margins of electoral democracy and electoral authoritarian rule.

Stability has been evident in a second sense as well. Although many democracies continue to perform very poorly, there have been few outright breakdowns of democracy into renewed authoritarian rule. The most spectacular democratic reversal since 1995 has come in Pakistan, where the military overthrew a deeply corrupt and badly governing parliamentary system on October 12, 1999. As I noted in the *Journal of Democracy* the following year, this was only the fourth blatant reversal of democracy in a country with more than 20 million people since the third wave of democratization began in 1974.¹ The other three were the military coups in Nigeria in 1983, in Sudan in 1989, and in Thailand in 1991, and the latter was reversed

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within 17 months. All the other breakdowns of democracy either occurred in relatively small African states, or took the form (most notably in Peru) of a somewhat ambiguous executive seizure of power, a “self-coup,” that sought to preserve the constitutional facade of democracy. I wondered at the time whether the coup in Pakistan might signal the onset of a new “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns, as the problems that brought the demise of democracy in Pakistan beset a number of other poorly functioning democracies in the world. Briefly, these problems— that I termed the “triple crisis of governance”—are: 1) the lack of accountability and a rule of law, as evidenced in pervasive corruption, smuggling, criminal violence, personalization of power, and human rights abuses; 2) the inability to manage regional and ethnic divisions peacefully and inclusively; and 3) economic crisis or stagnation, stemming in part from the failure to implement liberalizing economic reforms and the failure to raise the levels of integrity, capacity, and professionalism in the state bureaucracy. Clearly, these problems concern many important new democracies in the world. Yet, four years after the coup in Pakistan (with that country having achieved only a very partial return to democracy), no other democracy has been overthrown by the military.

The indispensable requirement for a country to be a democracy is that all its principal positions of political power be decided by regular, meaningful, free and fair elections.

Instead, what has been happening during the late period of the third wave has been the slow political descent into ambiguous or “hybrid” status of some regimes that continue to have multiparty, competitive elections and other constitutional trappings of democracy. This has been the second noteworthy development of recent years. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has been the most prominent instance of a major country slowly, steadily deteriorating from a democracy to semi-democracy. But under the autocratic, demagogic hand of Hugo Chavez, a former army officer who tried and failed twice to seize power by force in the early 1990s, Venezuela has been headed in the same direction. The indispensable requirement for a country to be a democracy is that all its principal positions of political power be decided by regular, meaningful, free and fair elections. This means that it must be possible to turn the incumbents out of power if the majority (or plurality) of voters prefer a different party or coalition of rulers, and that whoever is elected must have real power to rule. It also requires the freedom of all parties and candidates to campaign and solicit votes, and thus some considerable freedom of speech, movement, assembly, and association in political life, if not entirely in civil society. To be fair, elections must also be impartially administered in a way that prevents or counteracts fraud in the voting and vote counting, assures the secrecy of the ballot, enables virtually all

adults to vote, and resolves disputes in a transparent manner.²

If we apply this minimum definition of (electoral) democracy in a rigorous way, then some of the countries that are today classified as democracies—such as Armenia, Ukraine, Venezuela, Paraguay, Nigeria and Mozambique—appear ambiguous, and may be better classified as “electoral authoritarian.”³ Ukraine’s Supreme Court overturned the victory in the November 21st presidential election of pro-Moscow Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, which was the product of massive and blatant electoral manipulation. Viktor Yushenko, the opposition candidate and real winner of the Ukrainian election, should steer the country towards democracy. Had the results been sustained, however, Ukraine would clearly be classified as an electoral authoritarian regime. If we count all the ambiguous regimes as democracies, I estimate that at the end of 2002 there were some 44 electoral authoritarian regimes in the world. Roughly twenty of these are “competitive authoritarian” in the sense that there is significant opposition representation in parliament and some capacity to register opposition, resistance, and a check upon power peacefully in civil society, the mass media, the judiciary, and other institutions. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the world today is how few regimes in the world do not make even a feeble attempt (through the façade of electoral authoritarianism) to claim some democratic legitimacy. Today, only about one in every eight regimes in the world is politically closed in this way, forbidding any kind of multiparty electoral competition, and only a very few states are ruled by the military. This is certainly a triumph for the *idea* of democracy.

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There is another respect, as well, in which the status of democracy appears somewhat more hopeful today than it did in the mid-1990s. Whether or not there are more democracies today than in 1995, there is more political and civil freedom in the world. There has been a steady improvement in the average freedom score for all countries in the world, from 4.47 at the start of the third wave in 1974 to 3.63 in 1995. Since 1995, the average score has continued to improve each year, to 3.38 at the end of 2002.

The number of states rated “free” by Freedom House has also increased from 76 in 1995 to 88 at the end of 2003, an improvement of six percentage points as a proportion of all states. A state is rated “free” if it receives an average score of 2.5 or better (meaning lower) on the twin scales of political rights and civil liberties, each of which ranges from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). One could argue that states

at the lowest level of the “free” category (typically those which receive a 2 on political rights and a 3 on civil liberties) have such serious problems with the protection of human rights and the administration of justice that they cannot be considered “liberal.” Thus I now consider a score no worse than 2 on each scale as the minimum empirical indicator of liberal democracy. Even by this more rigorous standard, the number of liberal democracies in the world has been steadily increasing. But by this more demanding standard, the gap between electoral democracy and liberal democracy is more apparent. In 1974, four of every five democracies in the world were liberal; today less than two-thirds are.

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The trends in the distribution of freedom and democracy in the world have been quite uneven across the regions. All of the industrialized states of the “west” (Western Europe, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) are liberal democracies. Almost all of the states of Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe are democracies; half of the former and most of the latter are liberal democracies. By contrast, of the fifteen states of the former Soviet Union, only the three Baltic states are liberal democracies, and most of the others are now some form of authoritarian. Only about half of those 25 states in the East, Southeast and South are democracies, but of the twelve Pacific Island states, eleven are democracies and eight of those are liberal democracies. About two of every five African states are democracies now, but most of them are not liberal. Finally, of the nineteen states of the Middle East and North Africa, there are only two democracies, Israel and Turkey. This region also has by far the lowest average freedom score (5.5) of any region of the world, compared with 4.4 in Asia, 4.3 in Africa, 3.4 among the postcommunist states, and 2.5 in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴

This scarcity of democracy and freedom in the Middle East has led many to question whether Islam and democracy are compatible. Of the 47 Muslim-majority countries in the world, only nine are democracies (and only one, Mali, is a liberal democracy). While only about a fifth of the Muslim-majority countries are democracies, three-quarters of the remaining countries in the world are democracies.⁵ But the Muslim-majority democracies include some very large countries, such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Bangladesh. The largest concentration of minority Muslims in the world (larger than almost all states) lives in a democracy, India. In that country, Muslims are strongly committed to and participatory in democratic institutions and procedures. In the Middle East, there are signs of democratic ferment and progress. In Turkey, a party with Islamist roots won a decisive victory in the

2002 elections and was permitted by the military to take power. In Iran, the authoritarian fusion of Islam and politics has suffered a broad loss of legitimacy, and there is now overwhelming public aspiration for a more open, tolerant, and democratic political system. In recent years, the Gulf monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar have each taken tentative steps toward more constitutional rule, and democracy is struggling to be born in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority as well.

In the Arab world over the last two decades, political liberalization has proven to be no more than a tactic of political survival and one element in a type of regime that combines “guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression.”⁶ Shifting from this form of electoral authoritarianism (and from the more extreme forms of political closure in countries like Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria) to a genuine electoral democracy, would seem to require a transformation in the political climate and culture of the region, and in its relations with Europe and the United States.

On the level of ideology or values, it is striking that democracy appears to remain the only legitimate form of government in the world. Even where there is resentment against the West or the United States, there is no broad preference for a non-democratic form of government. Indeed, much of the current criticism of American “hegemony” in the world, or of conditionality by the International Monetary Fund, stems precisely from the belief in many societies that their own elected governments do not enjoy sufficient sovereignty and that decisions at the international level should be made in a more consultative, democratic fashion. Although much has been made of the so-called “clash of civilizations,” especially since September 11, 2001, survey evidence indicates, “Muslims are as supportive of democracy as non-Muslims.” In four African countries with substantial Muslim populations (Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda) the Afrobarometer has found that large majorities of Muslims as well as non-Muslims support democracy, and any hesitancy in supporting democracy among African Muslims “is due more to deficits of formal education and other attributes of modernization than to religious attachments.”⁷ Data from Central Asia and the Middle East point in a similar direction.⁸ At the same time, many Muslim intellectuals are making the case either for a liberal interpretation of Islam or for a broader liberal view that de-emphasizes the literal meaning of sacred Islamic texts while stressing the larger compatibility between the overall moral teachings of Islam and democratic principles such as accountability, freedom of expression, and the rule of law.⁹

These trends provide cause for hope about the future of democracy in the world. There is no intrinsic reason why there must be another “reverse wave” of democratic breakdowns in the world. Whether that happens will heavily depend on whether the new democracies that have come into being during the third wave can respond to the “triple crisis of governance,” by controlling corruption, strengthening the rule of law and the capacity and professionalism of the state, improving economic management and entrepreneurship, and finding ways, through mechanisms of power-sharing and protection of minority rights, to manage ethnic and regional conflict.

The key to preventing a new “reverse wave” is thus to improve the quality of governance and the policy outputs of new democracies. If democracy “works” in this sense, to provide accountable government, a decent society, and gradually, a better life for most people, it will deepen and consolidate where it now exists, and it will continue to spread. It is not inconceivable that some decades hence, virtually all the countries in the world will be democratic.

Table. Trends in Democracy and Liberal Democracy, 1974–2003

Year	Number of Democracies	Number of Liberal Democracies FH Score 1–2	Liberal Democracies As a Percentage of all Democracies	Number of “Free” States FH Score 1–2.5
1974	39	32	82.1	39
1987	66	48	72.7	57
1990	76	53	69.7	65
1991	91	54	59.3	76
1992	99	57	57.6	75
1993	108	62	57.4	72
1994	114	62	54.3	76
1995	117	67	57.2	76
1996	118	68	57.6	79
1997	117	69	59.0	81
1998	117	69	59.0	88
1999	120	71	59.2	85
2000	120	74	61.7	86
2001	121	75	62.0	86
2002	121	73	60.3	89
2003	117	76	65.0	88

Sources: Data from Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1990–1991 through 2004* (New York: Freedom House, 1991 and following years), and Adrian Karatnycky, “The 30th Anniversary Freedom House Survey,” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 106–107 (Table 2).

Notes

¹ Larry Diamond, “Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (July 2000): 91–106.

² Larry Diamond, “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 21–35.

³ Andreas Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation,” and Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 36–50 and 51–65.

⁴ These regional averages are for freedom scores at the end of 2002.

⁵ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2002/charts.pdf>.

⁶ Daniel Brumberg, “Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 56.

⁷ “Islam, Democracy, and Public Opinion in Africa,” Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 3, September 2002, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfrobriefNo3.pdf>.

⁸ Richard Rose, “How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 102–111; Mark Tessler, “Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries,” *Comparative Politics* 34 (April 2002).

⁹ See the essays on Islam and democracy in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg, eds., *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).