

The Ambiguous Story of Democracy

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Democracy today is an ambiguous story. There is broad concern among analysts about democratic recession and the decline of democracy, which more recently has been complemented by a narrative about ill winds that blow in the face of democracy and explanations on why and how democracy dies.¹ Some years ago, the main concern was that the “third wave of democracy”² had reached a peak and that the processes of transition to democracy had come to a standstill. Lately, the main concern is about democratic backsliding, which refers to the eroding quality of the world’s democracies. The backsliding is evidenced by both the gradual and intentional weakening of checks and balances, as well as the decline of civil liberties, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and civil society participation; in sum, a shrinking of civic space, which is essential for democracy. Such a sceptical view is supported, not least, in reaction to the election of Donald Trump as US president and his populist style of government, where he apparently does not care very much about respecting the democratic rules of the game in the US and even less about the state of democracy abroad.

¹ For the arguments and debate about the recession and decline of democracy in different parts of the world cf. Larry Diamond 2008. “The Democratic Rollback. The Resurgence of the Predatory State”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 87 (2), pp. 36-48; Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) 2015: *Democracy in decline?* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. For the newer debate cf. Larry Diamond. 2019. *Ill winds, Saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition, and American complacency*. New York: Penguin Press; Roland Rich. 2017. *Democracy in crisis. Why, where, how to respond*. Boulder-London: Lynne Rienner Pubs; Steven Levitzky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How democracies die. What history reveals about our future*. New York, Penguin Press; David Runciman. 2018. *How democracy ends*. London: Profile books.

² Cf. Samuel P. Huntington. 1991. *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. University of Oklahoma Press.

However, the prospects for democracy are not completely bad. In its very recent analysis about the global state of democracy, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) discovered some reasons for optimism: more than half (62%) of the countries on earth, with more than half (57%) of the world's population, can be considered as democracies; between 2008 and 2018, there was even an increase in the number of democracies, from 90 to 97 (in contrast to the previous trends, which substantiated the "democratic recession"), and democratic transitions occurred in political regimes that had seemed staunchly undemocratic, or were stuck in the hybrid grey zone between democratic and non-democratic, countries like Armenia, Malaysia and Sudan, although in these countries, democracy still has to be consolidated.³

Some very recent events and surveys seem to support this more optimistic view. The local elections in Hong Kong in 2019 were a strong signal of the persistent appeal of democracy. Some more recent developments, in several countries of the Middle East and the South Mediterranean, indicate that the middle- and long-term effects of the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011 should not be underestimated. Although the expectations of rapid and sustained political change in most of those countries were frustrated, the more recent developments in this area indicate some hope. Some surveys among the youth indicate that young people from these countries aspire to a different form of society, one that embraces global values and an open, tolerant culture, independent sources of news, and a change of the backward-looking concepts of religion – which together points very strongly towards more open and democratically organised societies.⁴ Even in Russia, around the local elections of 2019, people stood up in favour of a more open and transparent, if not to say more democratic, election; despite the arrests and intimidation of opposition candidates, many Pro-Kremlin candidates suffered losses.⁵ So the prospects of democracy are not so bad at all.

Writing a story about democracy, one has to mention these different and sometimes ambiguous facts and developments. At the very beginning of this story, it is important to point out that democracy is still a very young form of government for many countries like Malaysia and Sudan. One can also say that the appeal of democracy stems from the fact that it shows several advantages over other systems.

³ International IDEA. 2019. *The global state of democracy 2019, Addressing the ills, reviving the promise*. Stockholm: IDEA, p. 2, also available at: www.idea.int.

⁴ Cf. ASDA'A BCW. 2019. *11th annual ASDA'A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2019, A call for reform*. Dubai 2019, <http://arabyouthsurvey.com/experts/sunil.html> (accessed 26 November 2019).

⁵ Cf. "Pro-Putin candidates suffer losses in Moscow elections", *The Guardian* 9 September 2019.

In addition, however, one also must admit that democracy is challenged by certain developments of different forms and kinds in nearly all regions on earth. To complete the story, we cannot simply note its current state, but must also ask what has to be done to safeguard and stabilise democratic regimes in the future, and, not least, who are the main actors who will have to contribute to that endeavour.

WHY IS DEMOCRACY SO ATTRACTIVE?

Why do so many people aspire to be part of a democratic system? What are its advantages in comparison to other forms of government?

Modern societies are marked by a high number of educated and well-informed people who demand respect for their human rights, and among these, the right to participate in political decisions which directly affect them. Regardless of the dominant local culture or religion or the level of socio-economic development of their country, people share the idea that their own dignity as a human being should be respected by others and, not least, by their government. This does not just mean physical integrity and basic food and housing or healthcare. It also includes the idea that every single person has the right to pursue his or her own wishes, ideas and dreams and also the right to freely and peacefully stand for the realisation of these ideas and dreams, to express them, to share them and also to inspire other people. This desire has recently been expressed by the above-mentioned democracy movement in Hong Kong, the activists in Russia, and the survey of Arab youth and can be found in many other countries around the world. All these pro-democracy activists know that democracy is the political regime that offers the most comprehensive guarantee for individual freedom and the respect of human dignity and human rights of each individual. And it also offers the most comprehensive guarantee for peace and understanding and a peaceful settlement of conflicts in international relations. Democracies do not carry out their conflicts with weapons and do not go to war against each other.⁶ Therefore, any regression of democratic development is a regression for human development and a reason for concern about peaceful international relations.

There are also some other hard facts which speak in favour of democracy, although we have to admit that a number of democracies are facing serious challenges to prove their superiority over hybrid or authoritarian regimes in certain

⁶ Cf. Dan Reiter and Allan C Stam. 2002. *Democracies at war*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

areas. This refers to the areas of sustainable social, human and economic development like basic welfare, access to justice, gender equality, social group equality and the absence of corruption. Democracies perform better in terms of generating and distributing welfare among the people, and they also have lower levels of corruption, on average, than non-democracies and hybrid regimes.

However, some authoritarian regimes which in the past have been very inefficient and corrupt, nowadays have also attained achievements, in some cases even memorable ones, especially in terms of economic development and eradication of poverty, if we look at China or Vietnam for instance. Also, with respect to corruption, we must note that non-democracies and hybrid regimes on average perform definitively worse. Nevertheless, we have to admit that several democracies occupy top positions in the international index of the most corrupt countries.⁷ Take Brazil, for example, where a corruption case not only put the once-world-famous President Lula behind bars, but also many government officials and company directors of that country, as well as presidents and government officials in other countries in Latin America, all bribed by the same Brazilian construction company whose illicit practices apparently were supported by the democratic government of that country.⁸ In Spain, which is considered a positive example for democratic transition and consolidation processes, serious cases of corruption have been discovered and former politicians from different political parties went to prison. In South Korea, a former president is also behind bars. Not to mention Africa, where, in many countries, departure towards democracy have been stopped repeatedly because of corruption and kleptocracy of the democratically elected leaders. It is obvious that corruption and its consequences can seriously damage not only the performance of a democratic regime but also the overall image of democracy as a system of government.

Nevertheless, democracies, in principle, offer better schemes of checks and balances, transparency and accountability. Even most authoritarian leaders undertake desperate efforts to present themselves as democrats and organise (fake) elections so as to present their regime as being based on the people's support. This is another notable indicator of the strength of the democratic idea that any govern-

⁷ Cf. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2018, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018> (accessed 27 December 2019).

⁸ Cf. Marcus André Melo 2016. "Latin America's New Turbulence: Crisis and Integrity in Brazil", *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2), p 50 – 67.

ment should be legitimised by the people and that the exercise of power should be limited and controlled by checks and balances.

Democracies, in principle, also offer better settlement and control of the rules for appropriate competition among market forces and general respect for the rules of the game in the economic area. These advantages can be observed in the past and present in many democracies around the world that are able to produce wealth and prosperity. And of course, democracies also offer, in principle, better mechanisms for redistribution because decisions on tax and social systems are taken with a view on the popular will and are legitimised by elections.

After examining several alternative forms of government, David Runciman from Cambridge University concluded: "For all its manifest and manifold imperfections, democracy has a better record than any rival form of government".⁹

THE CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRACY

Despite its advantages in general, many democracies face challenges and problems that present a specific risk for the whole democratic order because several of its key elements are being gradually undermined. Of course we have to mention here again the poor delivery of outcomes in some democracies in terms of economic development and social achievements as well as corruption. However, there are even more serious threats which go beyond malversation and corruption that foster backsliding of democracy and new authoritarian temptations.

Among those factors that reinforce anti-democratic developments, one first has to examine the extent to which these factors are linked to each other. These are the "populist peril"¹⁰ and the unthoughtful and careless handling of democratic principles and rules caused by the complacency of the democrats themselves.

Populism

Populism evolved in recent years in many democracies to become the dominant political style of political leaders and parties. It can be characterised as an anti-elitist, anti-institutional, plebiscitary and ultramajoritarian attitude.¹¹ Populists claim to represent "the people" against the powerful and the privileged. They deny the legitimacy of democratic institutions and procedures. They mobilise people behind

⁹ Runciman, *How democracies end*, p. 165ss.

¹⁰ Cf. Larry Diamond: *Ill winds*, p. 64s.

¹¹ Cf. Jan-Werner Müller. 2016. *What is populism?* Philadelphia: Univ. of Philadelphia Press.

a populist leader and they are opposed to the checks and balances and the limitation of power of a democratic regime. Populism is hostile to pluralism, is illiberal and is often also xenophobic against foreigners and immigrants. Populist regimes typically try to undermine the independence of courts, attack the independence of the media and strive to gain control of public broadcasting. They impose stricter controls over civil society and the internet, gerrymander districts and rig electoral rules and try to gain control over the body that runs elections. Hence, inevitably, populism leads to the destruction of democracy and to authoritarianism.

The appearance and strengthening of populist movements is not limited to young and presumably weak democracies. It also happens in the oldest modern democracy, the United States, where President Donald Trump is challenging, with his populist style of governance, the traditional processes and rules of the democratic game. Europe is also strongly affected by this trend. In Poland, the governing party is aiming to subjugate the judiciary under the government, with serious restrictions on the independence of the courts. The prime minister of Hungary publicly announced his intention to establish an “illiberal democracy” in his country. In many European countries, populist parties have won considerable shares in national and European elections over the last 15 years. In some countries like France, Germany and Italy, those parties use nationalist propaganda.¹² Meanwhile, in other countries, populism is more in line with a leftist programme. For the European Union, it is a new experience to see that the crisis of democracy has reached its own shores. Although the European Commission initiated infringement proceedings to bring Poland and Hungary back on the democratic track, it seems to be difficult to force the governments of those countries to fully respect the democratic principles of the Union as laid down in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty.

Disregard of democratic principles and rules

Such developments are linked to and supported by the other above-mentioned factor, the unthoughtful and careless handling of democratic principles and rules. Democracy always has been and still is a fragile and vulnerable system of government, open to manipulation from inside and intimidation from outside. This was the case in ancient Greece, as it is in many countries of our day. The problem with democracy nowadays is that there are countries where these institutional arrangements of democracy work relatively well, in some cases even for many years and

¹² Cf. Wilhelm Hofmeister. 2020. “Simple Explanations. Why Nationalists in Europe Grow Stronger”, *KAS-International Reports 2/2020*, p. 6 – 16.

decades. Nevertheless, simultaneously there is a tendency to undermine these institutions, like in Poland or Hungary, which also means a weakening of democracy that can lead to its destruction. In the cases of Venezuela and Turkey, this is quite obvious already. The governments of these countries restricted the liberty of expression and free media, subjected the judiciary under the government and imprisoned dissidents.

Two developments are closely linked to such tendencies. Many countries in different parts of the world introduced new rules for the registration of civil society organisations that resulted in the limitation of their activities. Such rules are often justified through apolitical, administrative arguments, but they imply a restriction of democratic freedoms and a limitation of the control of a government by the citizens. The second tendency is that in some countries the government or its cronies take over control of the most relevant media, which in fact is an attack on the freedom of opinion and expression.

Furthermore, it does not take a military coup d'état to destroy a democracy, like in the sixties or seventies in Latin America or some years ago in Thailand. On the contrary, today, we must perceive that democratic breakdowns have been caused by elected governments themselves. Constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. But elected autocrats only maintain the facade of democracy while eviscerating its substance. Although many actions of governments to subvert democracy are "legal" in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts, in several cases this has led to a decline of democracy. Where government policies are aimed at diminishing the checks and balances and at reducing the space for civil society organisations and opposition parties, there are real dangers for democracy.

Influence of undemocratic regimes

Additionally, there are other confounding factors which contribute to the complications of modern democracies. The first factor is the almost blatant support of populist, antidemocratic movements by Russia and China. These two powers actively take and support actions which are aimed at undermining liberal democracies abroad through new means and technologies. Their authoritarian rulers feel threatened by the demands for liberty and democracy not only in Hong Kong and Moscow, but also in other countries far away. Both countries and their allies cause serious damage to democracy that can be felt in all continents. In Cambodia, for example, the long-time ruler Hun Sen and his People's Party closed the space

for pluralism and democracy, which was only opened very slowly, and they quite obviously falsified the results of elections and banned the main opposition party.

Misuse of technology

Moreover, modern information technology (IT), which means primarily the internet and social media but also, in an increasing way, new forms of surveillance and artificial intelligence, do not necessarily contribute to safeguarding or even expanding our individual liberty and our ability to communicate, interact with others and participate in social and political processes.¹³ On the contrary, we have to realise that modern IT has also led to new and subtle forms of manipulation and, in the end, a restriction of our democratic liberties. Thus, we have to be careful and must protect our democratic liberties, if not by controlling the use of IT then by an appropriate handling of it.

Military intervention

Lastly, besides those new subtle forms of undermining democracy, the old and more obvious brutal methods have not disappeared at all. Military intervention did not only happen in African countries and in Arab states, but also in Thailand, in 2014. Currently, one can observe that in Latin America the military is suddenly very present on the political stage again. Also, the authoritarian regime in Venezuela is backed by the armed forces. Meanwhile, in Bolivia, the military “suggested” that President Evo Morales step down after he apparently falsified the results of the presidential elections. In Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Chile the democratic governments summoned the military to help defend the public order against riots that were provoked, not least, by frustrations about the poor performance and corruption of the governments. Once again, these are threatening developments that endanger the young democracies in the region.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The weakness of democracy is also linked to the ability or, more correctly, the inability of political parties to react appropriately to its challenges. Although the specific roles and functions of political parties in democracy continue to be

¹³ Cf. Runciman, *How democracy ends*, p. 120ss; José Maria Lasalle. 2019. *Ciberleviatán*, Barcelona: Arpa 2019.

valid – the aggregation of societal interests into policy agendas, the mobilisation of citizens around those platforms, the selection of candidates for elections, the recruiting of leaders to advance the party’s agenda and the formation of governments to implement them – the way political parties exercise these functions nowadays is different because of social and technological changes. This has direct consequences on individual parties and the party system as well. As many traditional political parties were and are not able to adapt to the challenges of modern times and to integrate new issues into their party programmes, such as the fight against climate change and other topics, new types of parties and new models of party organisations have emerged, like “internet parties” (such as the “5-star Movement” in Italy), but also new populist parties, some with a more nationalist agenda and others with a more leftist touch. Most of these new parties arose because of frustrations with the traditional parties. A good number of comedians have founded political parties and successfully participated in elections in recent years, like Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine, Marjan Sarek in Slovenia, Jimmy Morales in Guatemala, and Beppe Grillo, the founder of the 5 Star Movement, in Italy.¹⁴ Although one may not deny the right of these actors to engage in politics, it can also be considered a warning signal that in many places the political professionals of the traditional parties are not able to articulate appropriately the concerns of their citizens. The weakening of traditionally strong political parties leads to a fragmentation of party systems, which in parliamentary systems results in increasing difficulties to form strong and stable coalition governments, as can be observed in Spain, Belgium and some Nordic countries.

As long as civil society organisations or other forms of political associations cannot substitute for political parties in their core functions, the future of democracy in most countries depends on the capacity of parties to adapt in terms of organisation, programme and ideology, and, not least, communication in regard to new social and technological developments and their impact on policy making. It is also important that political parties stand for a clean and transparent form of doing politics. The above-mentioned threats to democracy exist because of corruption and money politics is often closely linked to political parties and in many cases there is not much difference between the behaviour of traditional or new parties.

¹⁴ Tej Parikh, “Comedians Will Soon Rule the World”, in: *Foreign Policy*, February 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/13/the-age-of-comedy-populism> (accessed 27 December 2019).

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY – THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CITIZENS

When traditional institutions fail or are too weak to protect threatened democracies, one has to look for alternative actors and forms. In this context, many authors set high hopes on the empowerment of civil society. Indeed, no democracy can survive without the active participation of its citizens. Today, there are different experiments with permanent processes for citizens' engagement in public decision-making worldwide.¹⁵ This is certainly an important contribution to strengthening democratic structures and processes. However, such citizens' engagement works above all at the local level and only for certain issues, which also shows the limits of such engagement and the role of civil society. Even if topics taken up by civil society actors are important, this does not mean that they represent the majority – just as in the political arena, where the political parties only represent a part of the society. The political process in a democracy, however, consists of bringing together the different opinions within a society and, at best, in finding compromises that, on the whole, represent the opinions and concerns of a majority of society. Democracy does not know absolute truths. That is why no one in the democratic process can refer to absolute truths, even if they are scientifically well founded, as in the climate debate. As long as a majority of citizens do not stand for certain solutions, they cannot be enforced.

This indicates that democratic processes are more complex than they may appear to be at first glance. It is simply not enough to stand for the "right" issue. It is also important to organise majorities, to convince fellow citizens, to consider many different aspects and interests in the process of political opinion and decision-making and, last but not least, to participate in general elections, because these are the decisive basis for the exercise of political power. Therefore, democracy is first and foremost a method of deciding on the legitimacy, exercise and control of political power.

For democracy to work, it needs the commitment of citizens, stronger democratic institutions such as political parties, respect for democratic procedures, social pluralism and all the other attributes of civil and political rights. What is also needed can only be provided by real people, acting people. Democracy requires politicians and political leaders, who, first and foremost, have to respect the real

¹⁵ Cf. Claudia Chwalisz (ed), "A New Wave of Deliberative Democracy, Reshaping European Democracy", Carnegie Europe, <https://bit.ly/2H0gYOb> (accessed 27 December 2019).

spirit of the system, who are ethically and morally committed to its underlying principles and values and practise them in their everyday policy-making. They are also expected to act with mutual respect and tolerance, which means to accept competing parties as legitimate rivals (as long as they are committed to the values of democracy), with a certain restraint in deploying the institutional prerogatives related to certain functions or offices, and, not least, also with the appreciation that politics is the art of compromise, where democratic forces must have the capacity for coalition building when they do not gain a majority themselves. In short, every democracy needs politicians who respect the virtues of political leadership, which are “basic honesty, reliability, sound judgment, devotion to public interest, and an underlying moral compass”, as the political scientist Francis Fukuyama indicated in his latest book.¹⁶

The final argument that is neglected in many analyses about the development of democracy is the necessary civic education of citizens and the political training of future political leaders. Civic education is not about indoctrination in favour of particular political positions or ideologies, but is about conveying knowledge about the functioning of political and state institutions and the learning of behaviours that are important for the functioning of a democracy, for example, tolerance, the critical examination of opposing opinions and, today especially, the critical handling of the internet and social media. Democracy must be learned anew from generation to generation and civic education contributes to this. However, especially in democratic countries, efforts should be increased so that citizens are offered additional civic education in schools and by independent institutions, which helps them to develop to become self-determined and to critically participate in political activities. Where democracies are threatened today, there is clearly a lack of this basic equipment for citizens.

The imperative of sustained efforts in political education applies also to the political parties themselves. They need not only committed, but also informed members and representatives, and they need them wherever they are politically present and active: in the municipalities, the regions and, of course, at the national level. Today, in view of complex issues and complex systems of decision-making, every professional politician is required not only to have a high level of knowledge, but also a normative attitude that does justice to high ethical and moral principles, as many societies now demand. Not all politicians meet these expectations.

¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama. 2018. *Identity. Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*. London: Profile Books, p. X.

However, in view of the new demands on a politician's level of information and knowledge, they are all called upon to undergo continuous training. This applies not only to officials and parliamentarians at the upper levels of a political and governmental system, but also to the many representatives of a party who work voluntarily and are involved in their communities or associations at the local level. They must broaden their knowledge through regular training in order to represent the positions of their party competently and to participate in public debates and political decisions in a qualified manner in the interests of their party. Last but not least, local politicians and members of city or municipal councils – who often only work on a voluntary basis – are required to have a high level of technical and specialist knowledge, which can only be acquired through continuous further training.

The parties themselves must be concerned about giving their members the chance to obtain continuous qualifications and additional training. Certainly, politics itself offers the most important form of political education through the concrete, current political processes, its continuous attentive monitoring through the media and participation in factual debates and decisions. Education provided by political parties or other institutions cannot compete with this. However, the deepening of factual issues, and above all their evaluation from the point of view of the principles and programme of a party, can only be achieved through internal party training.

Democracy is the best type of government invented until today. It will only survive with the continued commitment of its main beneficiaries, the citizens.

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