



Democratization

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Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes

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ABSTRACT

Between 1974 and 2005, a majority of states became democratic for the first time in history. However, a global democratic recession began in 2006 and has persisted – and deepened – over the past 14 years. Not only have average levels of freedom (or democratic quality) been declining globally and in most parts of the world, but the pace of democratic breakdown accelerated and the number of democratic transitions declined, particularly in the past five years. Democratic regression is particularly visible among the G-20 countries and other most populous and geopolitically weighty countries, 19 of which have declined in freedom during the democratic recession, with only two improving. The principal method of democratic regression has been incremental strangulation of democracy by elected (typically populist) executives who gradually eviscerate institutional checks, political opposition, independent media, and other forces of scrutiny and resistance in civil society. Weak and declining rule of law has predisposed regimes to democratic regression, enabling ambitious rulers to hollow out political competition. But international factors have also been crucial, generating common economic and social stresses while lifting the constraints and lowering the risks autocrats face as they inaugurate or accelerate the slide into authoritarianism.

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Introduction

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the most dramatic expansion of democracy in the history of the world. What Samuel P. Huntington would call the “third wave” of global democratization became the first wave to establish democracy as the predominant form of government in the world.¹ When the wave began in 1974, only about 30% of all the world’s states were democracies – and only 22% of all states were of reasonably high quality, or what can be termed “liberal democracies.” The numbers were even more meagre among countries with populations larger than one million – 24% democracies, 20% liberal democracies. This led Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously to write in 1975, “Liberal democracy ... is where the world was, not where it is going.”² At that very moment, while Indira Gandhi was imposing emergency rule in India in a kind of executive coup against democracy, the new global wave of

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democracy was getting going in southern Europe with a military rebellion against the dictatorship and then an embattled transition to democracy in Portugal, a rapid transition to democracy in Greece, and a negotiated transition in Spain. By the late 1970s, the wave began spreading to Latin America's military dictatorships. A crucial early turning point came in 1978, when the United States pressured the authoritarian strongman, Joaquin Balaguer, to accept electoral defeat and leave office, resulting in the first democratic electoral alternation in the history of the Dominican Republic. Soon thereafter, transitions from military to civilian democratic rule followed in Ecuador and Peru. Then in 1982, the Argentine military regime – weakened by human rights sanctions during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) – imploded, leading to a democratic transition the following year. Yet still, as the democratic wave was gathering momentum in Latin America, Huntington speculated in 1984 that, given the global power of authoritarian regimes like the USSR, widespread poverty and violence, and inhospitable cultural traditions in much of the world, “the limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached.”³

Of course, Huntington would prove to be so wrong that just seven years later he would write the seminal book documenting the democratic transformation of the world. By then the global democratic wave had spread to Asia: the Philippines in 1986, Korea in 1987, gradually, beginning in 1986, Taiwan, and quietly, in 1988 in Thailand. Soon thereafter political liberalization processes ensued in South Asia, first Pakistan, then Bangladesh and Nepal. There soon followed the “big bang” of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, ushering in a rapid succession of democratic transitions and political openings in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet states, and sub-Saharan Africa.

This brief history of global democratic transformation at the end of the twentieth century is important to understanding the current era of democratic regression, for three reasons.

First, it is important to appreciate that while political science may sometimes be successful in explaining the past, its record of predicting the future is chequered at best. No one in the mid-1970s or even the mid-1980s anticipated that by the mid-1990s a majority of the world's states would be democratic – for the first time in the history of the world. Few people anticipated the imminence, scope, and speed of the collapse of the Soviet Union, or its stimulus to democratic change elsewhere in the world.

Second (a point to which I will return later in this article), even a cursory acquaintance with regime dynamics in this period underscores the importance of international factors, including the global balance of power and the foreign policies of powerful states. The successful imposition of democracy by an external power is an exceedingly rare occurrence, and it is difficult to point to a single instance of it during the third wave. But, to quote Karl Marx, while domestic actors “make their own history, ... they do not make it as they please.” Rather they are shaped and constrained, not only by the deep economic and social forces Marx wrote about, but also by the international context. Communist rule would likely have fallen in Central and Eastern Europe well before 1989 (or would never have been widely established) without the military and political dominance of the Soviet Union. Changes in American foreign policy – first with Jimmy Carter's rhetorical emphasis and aid conditionality on human rights, then with the Reagan Administration's crucially timed diplomatic interventions in the Philippines and South Korea – helped to tip the balance of power and expectations towards democratic actors in civil society and the political opposition.⁴

Third, democratization spread during the third wave to many countries that seemed to lack the supposed enabling conditions for it, such as high levels of per capita income and education, a substantial middle class and private sector, a reasonably capable state, cultural identification with liberal democratic values thought to be rooted in the Western enlightenment traditions, and a prior history of democratic government. As it happened, while “modernization” and exposure to Western values facilitated democratic transition in southern Europe (and later Central and Eastern Europe), parts of Latin America, and Korea and Taiwan, the weakness of structural preconditions for democracy did not prevent the third wave from spreading to many poor and lower-middle-income countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. But what the wave left behind in almost all of those countries was “illiberal democracy.”⁵ This is an important and underappreciated aspect of third wave. In 1974, over three-quarters of the world’s democracies (with populations above one million) could be classified as “liberal democracies,” in that they had both high levels of clean and fair democratic electoral competition and good protection for civil liberties with a reasonably strong rule of law. (The specific indicator I use for “liberal democracy” is one of the two best scores, a 1 or a 2, on *both* of the Freedom House seven-point scales of political rights and civil liberties).⁶ But as the third wave gained momentum, a much larger gap emerged between the number of electoral democracies and the subset of liberal democracies (see [Figure 1](#)). While the former increased dramatically and consistently from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, liberal democracy expanded much more slowly and unevenly. Hence, the proportion of democracies that are liberal went from 83% in 1974 to 74% a decade later. By 1988 that proportion had fallen to 64%, and then with the big bang of the communist collapse, it fell further, to 50% in 1991 and 40% in 1994. Gradually, some of these illiberal democracies became liberal and the ratio gradually improved to about 60% in 2006, when the democratic recession began. Since then, the increasingly prominent and now dominant trend has been – choose your preferred term – democratic backsliding, erosion, or regression. Moreover, as I will soon show, it has now accelerated into a growing pace of democratic failures, which have almost exclusively afflicted illiberal democracies.

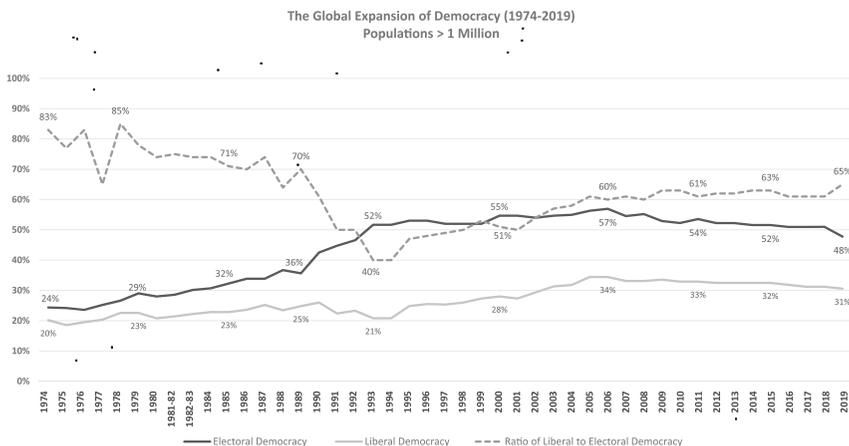


Figure 1. The global expansion of democracy (1974–2019) populations > 1 million.

The global democratic recession

For the past nearly decade and a half, the world has been in the grip of a democratic recession.⁷ Until recently, this has been a mild and even ambiguous phenomenon, so much so that distinguished scholars challenged the notion that it was happening at all.⁸ The main indicators of the downturn were three.

First, democracy simply stopped expanding. In fact, 2006 was the high water mark for democracy in the world, with the percentage of democracies peaking that year at 57% among states over one million population (Figure 1), and 61% of all states.⁹ Since then the proportion of democracies in the world has gradually declined, to 55% of all states and 48% of states above one million population. And the percentage of people living in democracies has declined from 55% to 47%. The year 2019 marked the first time since the end of the Cold War that the majority of states over one million population was not democratic, and also the first time that a majority of the world's people did not live in a democracy.

Second, beginning in 2006, freedom started to recede in the world. The ratio of countries gaining in freedom to the number declining in freedom (according to Freedom House) fell to about parity in 2006, but has been only about 50%–70% every year since¹⁰ – exactly reversing the pattern for the fifteen years (1991–2005) following the demise of the Soviet Union (Figure 2).

To be sure, the impact on aggregate freedom scores in the world has still been modest. Averaging all countries of the world, the Freedom House 100-point scale of political rights and civil liberties has declined from a score of 62.4 in 2006 to 58.7 in 2019 (or, by 5.9%). The decline in the global average score on the *Economist* magazine's Democracy Index in this period has been even more modest (1.5%). But this masks some more striking trends on the Freedom House scale. The average freedom scores for Africa, the Middle East and Latin American declined substantially between 2006

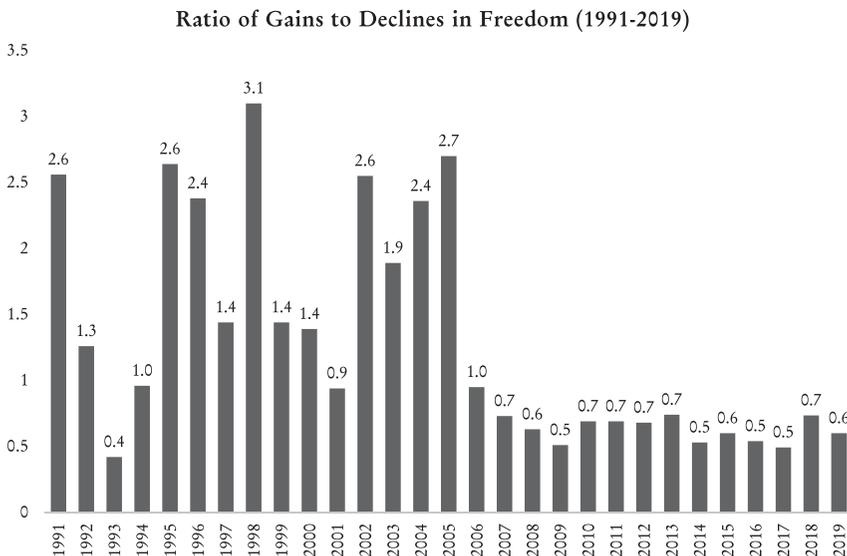


Figure 2. Ratio of gains to declines in freedom (1991–2019).

and 2019. Every other region showed at least a modest downward trend, except for East and Southeast Asian countries (over one million population), where the dramatic gains in Burma and the modest gains in Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia and East Timor slightly outweighed the deterioration in the Philippines, China, and (more modestly) South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia. Despite relatively high global correlations, four different scales of democracy – Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and V-Dem’s Liberal and Electoral Democracy indices – show sharply divergent trends for some regions (Table 1). The four scales agree that there has been a modest negative trend for the advanced Anglophone and West European democracies, a more substantial slide for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean above one million population, and erosion – but of widely varying extent – in Sub-Saharan Africa. But in sharp contrast to the other two scales, the V-Dem scales show substantial improvement in average scores for South Asia and the former Soviet Union during this period.

Third, the rate of democratic breakdown has been accelerating. If we divide the last 44 years of the third wave into four segments (“long decades”) of eleven years (1976–2019), we find that the rate of democratic breakdown went from 13.7% in the first long decade to just under 10.7% in each of the next two long decades, and then spiked up to 18.9% in the last eleven years. But this itself understates the intensity of the recent downturn. Figure 3 decomposes the third wave into nine five-year segments (1975–2019). The number of democratic breakdowns in the last five years (2015–2019) – 12 – (including by gradual and undeclared executive strangulation, for example, in the Philippines) was the highest of any five-year period since the start of the third wave, and the number of transitions to democracy – 7 – was the lowest. Hence the ratio of democratic transitions to breakdowns was by far the lowest of any five-year period in this nearly half century of political change. In fact, the ratio fell to below 1 (0.6) for the first time since the mid-1970s.

But numbers do not tell the whole story. Since the democratic recession began in 2006, democracy has been failing in a number of big and strategically significant states, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Turkey, the Philippines, and for the first time in a member state of the EU – Hungary.¹¹ These instances followed the executive-led strangulation (in the early years of the new century) of an emerging democracy in Russia and of a longstanding but deeply troubled democracy in Venezuela. Other states, like Sri Lanka and Nepal, have moved back and forth or hovered on the precipice. And then are the states that remain democratic but have been deteriorating in quality, including the world’s four largest democracies – the United States, India, Indonesia, and Brazil – and the largest democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland.¹² In 2019, India suffered one of the steepest declines on the 100-point Freedom House scale (4

Table 1. Percent change in democracy scores, by region and democracy scale, 2006–2019.

	Freedom House	Liberal democ (V-Dem)	Electoral democ (V-Dem)	EIU
EUR/ANG	–2.15%	–3.96%	–2.78%	–1.61%
CEE	–2.16%	–16.52%	–11.95%	–5.78%
LAC > 1	–7.68%	–6.97%	–7.28%	–3.75%
South Asia	–2.10%	21.79%	8.69%	2.14%
SSA	–12.31%	–2.82%	–2.62%	–6.08%
FSU	–10.81%	20.05%	8.87%	–6.08%
MENA	–15.94%	1.23%	–2.18%	1.02%
East/South East Asia	4.18%	7.53%	10.51%	6.20%

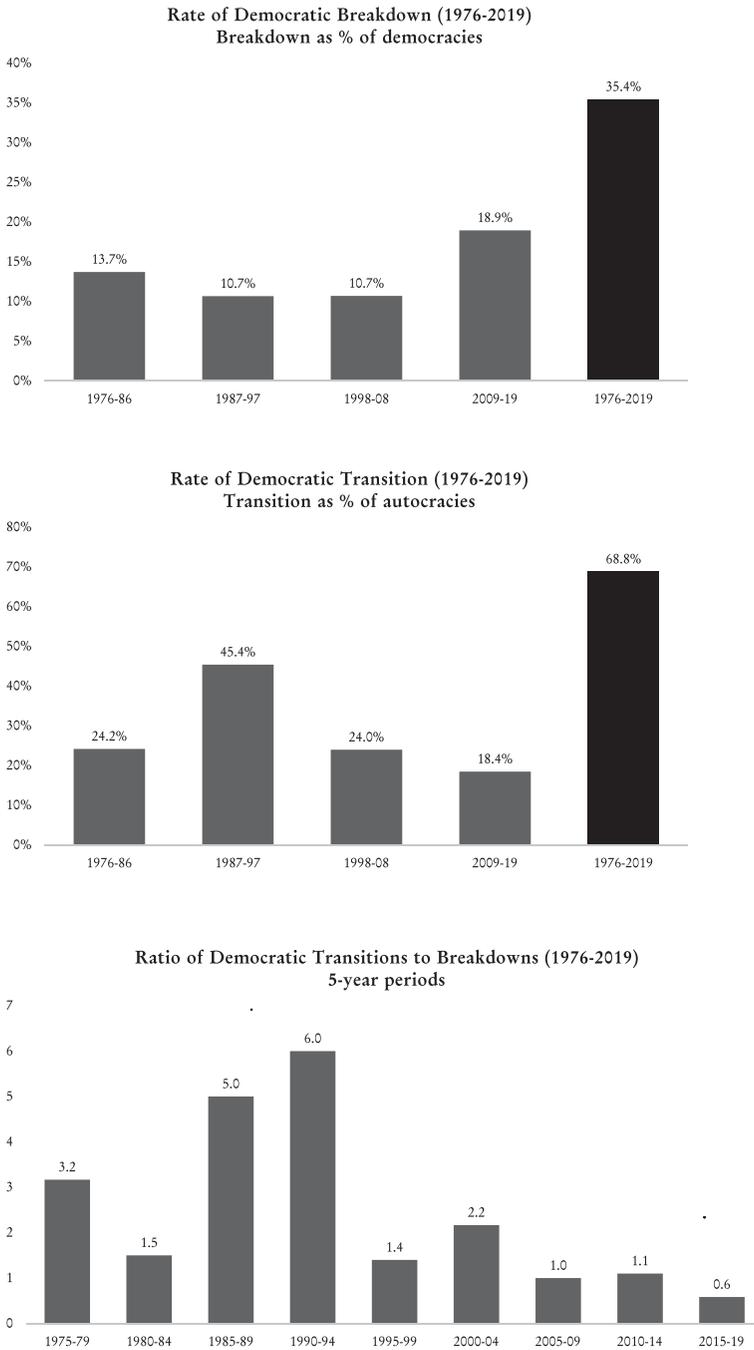


Figure 3. Ratio of democratic transitions to breakdowns (1976–2019) 5-year periods.

points). Since 2012, India has declined by 5 points, Indonesia by 7, Brazil by 6, Poland 9, and the U.S. 7 points.

To avoid selection bias, we can construct a simple rule to identify the countries with the most geopolitical weight: the 19 countries in the G20 (which also includes the EU), and any other countries that are among the 20 most populous countries in the world. This yields a set of 29 countries, which I have grouped in [Table 2](#) into three categories, based on their standing in 2005 (the year before the onset of the global democratic recession): advanced industrial democracies, emerging market (and mainly illiberal) democracies, and autocracies. We can ask a simple question: Between 2005 and 2019, how many of these countries improved on the 100-point scale by at least three points (which Freedom House reports consider a substantively significant increase), and how many declined by at least that much. Among the nine advanced democracies (all of them liberal democracies), five declined by at least three points, and only one improved by at least that much (Japan, by eight points). The U.S. was the biggest decliner, at seven points; France, Germany and Italy all declined by three points. Among the ten emerging market democracies, eight declined by at least three points and none improved by at least that much. Thailand and Turkey suffered catastrophic implosions of freedom, and Mexico joined Bangladesh and the Philippines in registering double-digit declines. Among the ten large autocracies, six suffered declines of at least three points, and only one (Pakistan) gained by that margin. China, Russia, and Egypt all

Table 2. Freedom House scores (0–100 scale) G-20 countries and other most populous countries.

Country	2005	2012	2019	Change 2019–2005
Advanced democracies				
Australia	96	97	98	+2
Canada	98	98	99	+1
France	93	95	90	–3
Germany	97	96	94	–3
Italy	92	88	89	–3
Japan	88	88	96	+8
South Korea	87	86	83	–4
United Kingdom	96	97	94	–2
United States	93	93	86	–7
Emerging market democracies				
Argentina	84	80	85	+1
Bangladesh	53	56	39	–14
Brazil	77	81	75	–2
India	76	76	71	–5
Indonesia	65	68	61	–4
Mexico	80	65	62	–18
Philippines	72	63	59	–13
South Africa	88	81	79	–9
Thailand	67	53	32	–35
Turkey	65	61	32	–33
Authoritarian regimes				
China	17	17	10	–7
Dem Republic Congo	20	20	18	–2
Egypt	30	41	21	–9
Ethiopia	36	18	24	–12
Iran	24	18	17	–7
Nigeria	48	46	47	–1
Pakistan	35	42	38	+3
Russia	35	27	20	–15
Saudia Arabia	12	10	7	–5
Vietnam	19	19	20	+1

became dramatically more authoritarian, and Saudi Arabia declined five points even though it began near the bottom.

We can summarize the data from [Table 2](#) in the following way: Of these 29 geopolitically weighty countries, 19 experienced substantive declines in freedom between 2005 and 2019, and only two improved. The picture does not get brighter if we widen the aperture to look at other regionally significant countries. Most observers of Southeast Asia would add (to Indonesia and Thailand above) Malaysia and Singapore as the region's other two most influential countries. Both began and ended this period around the mid-point of the 100-point scale, though in the case of Malaysia that involved a substantial drop in score (down to a low of 44 in 2016), and then, with the electoral earthquake in 2018, a sharp increase to 52. It remained there in 2019, though, it is now moving backwards. Sadly, Asia as a whole now appears to be on a general trajectory of democratic decline, with Burma and Thailand both stuck in military-dominated hybrid regimes, India witnessing an escalating assault on civil liberties and religious tolerance under Narendra Modi's populist BJP government,¹³ the media and opposition being hounded in the Philippines, and South Korea moving in an illiberal direction under a left-wing hegemonic ruling party.¹⁴

In Africa, the next most populous countries after those mentioned above are Kenya and Tanzania, which both declined sharply from 66 to 48 and 58 to 40, respectively. Each reverted from promising levels of political pluralism back towards previous levels of repression and ruling party dominance. The most important former communist country in Europe, Poland, declined from 92 to 84; and the largest post-Soviet country after Russia, Ukraine, dropped from 72 in 2005 down to 55 in 2013 (the final dark days of rule by a pro-Russian autocrat) before bouncing back to a rough democracy (62) after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. Finally, take the next largest Latin America country, Colombia, and a smaller regional pacesetter, Chile. Chile declined from 96 to 90 (largely due to a sharp drop in 2019). Colombia was the lone country among these second-tier regional influentials to substantially improve its freedom score (from 60 to 66).

It is only when we look country by country that the larger scope of the democratic recession becomes apparent. The overwhelming majority of the largest, most powerful and influential countries, globally and regionally, have been regressing politically during the last decade and a half. A number of advanced liberal democracies have become less liberal – most notably the most powerful liberal country, the United States. Numerous electoral democracies have slid the down path of creeping authoritarianism, with less protection of civil liberties, weaker accountability and rule of law, and/or more intense political polarization, undermining the functionality of democratic institutions and the normative commitments that sustain them. A growing number of electoral democracies have been breaking down, and so did one liberal and supposedly consolidated democracy, Hungary. Competitive authoritarian regimes, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Cambodia, have been squeezing out their competition, to the point now where the latter three are virtual one-party states.¹⁵ And regimes that were already deeply authoritarian (such as Venezuela) have become much more so.

Another way to assess the scope of the democratic recession is to focus on the positive – democratic transitions. But in recent years, these have not come close to compensating for all the negative trends. Beyond the numerical downturn – that 2015–19 was the first five-year period since the start of the third wave to see many more democratic breakdowns (12) than democratic transitions (7) – has been the rise and fall (or at least stalling) of hopes for democratic transition in numerous countries. When the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition was defeated in Malaysia's May 2018 parliamentary

elections for the first time in the country's history, hopes for a transition to democracy were euphoric, and not entirely unrealistic.¹⁶ But political divisions and opportunism within the opposition coalition have stalled that transition and may now be unravelling it.¹⁷ A similar fate fell upon Nigeria in 2015 when an incumbent president was defeated in an election for the first time in the country's 55-year history. Many Nigerians felt democracy was dawning, but the victor – a former military dictator – was at best only marginally more democratic, and hardly committed to institutional transformation, beyond trying to reduce corruption.¹⁸

Table 3 presents a list of 20 country cases where mass public protests or an “electoral earthquake” – an unexpected opposition defeat of an authoritarian incumbent at the polls – might have resulted in a transition to democracy. Some of these have so far produced political liberalization of authoritarian rule. Several are still ongoing, and in countries like Ethiopia and Sudan, and perhaps ultimately Malaysia or The Gambia, a transition to democracy could still transpire. But the striking thing about this list is that only two of the 20 cases have so far resulted in democratic transitions. The most common outcome has been the dashing – and not infrequently, the brutal crushing – of popular hopes and expectations for democratic change. Since my focus is on national-level political change, the list excludes the two mass movements for democratic reform in Hong Kong, the 2014 Umbrella movement and the 2019–20 protests against China's imposition of a draconian national security law. Still, all of this is a very far cry from the 1980s and 90s, or even early 2000s, when similar instances of mass public protest, peaceful revolution, and electoral defeat of autocratic incumbents produced transitions to democracy in a large number of countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the postcommunist world.

Explaining the democratic recession

What accounts for this long period of democratic regression? There is no single master explanation, but there are a number of agents and factors. In most instances of democratic regression or failure, we can find familiar agents of destruction: elected political leaders, greedy for power and wealth, who knock away various types of constraints on their power and enlarge and entrench it in undemocratic ways. Less common as authors of democratic demise these days are military leaders who seize upon civilian incompetence, corruption, or polarization and dysfunction to overthrow the constitution and take power directly. Military intervention still happens occasionally, for example in Thailand and Egypt (and behind the scenes, in Pakistan). The military also played a pivotal role in derailing popular mobilization for democratic change in Zimbabwe and Algeria, and has been a key pillar in support of authoritarian rule in Iran and Venezuela. But for the most part, this has mainly been an era of civilian assaults on democracy. Polarized parties and politicians still figure prominently in democratic breakdowns,¹⁹ but typically these days the authoritarian politician – Chavez and then Maduro in Venezuela, Erdogan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Kaczynski and the PIS in Poland, Duterte in the Philippines, and now Narendra Modi in India and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – is more the generator of the polarization than the product. Indeed, all of these have been classic populist politicians who rode to power by inflaming divisions and mobilizing the good, deserving “people” against corrupt elites – the professional or “deep” state and their effete, educated handmaidens in the other (liberal) political

Table 3. Potential democratic transitions, and outcomes, 2009–2020.

Country	Year(s)	Event or trigger	Outcome
Iran	2009	Green Movement: Mass public protests against election fraud	Repression and defeat
Tunisia	2010– 2014	Arab Spring: Mass public protests oust dictator Ben Ali and launch a four-year process of political conflict, contestation, negotiation, and constitution-making, concluding with national elections for a democratic government	Transition to Democracy
Egypt	2011– 2013	Arab Spring: Mass public protests oust president Mubarak and bring transitional elections, won by the Muslim Brotherhood	Military coup and renewed authoritarian rule
Bahrain	2011	Arab Spring: Popular uprising against authoritarian monarchy, demanding democratic constitutional reform and respect for human rights	Repression and defeat
Libya	2011–?	Arab Spring: Popular overthrow of Muammar Qhadaffi government, followed by protracted violent conflict	State collapse, civil war, rival authoritarian governments
Yemen	2011–?	Arab Spring: Mass public protests against authoritarian regime of President Saleh force him to abdicate, but country descends into civil war	Brutal protracted civil war
Syria	2011– 2020	Arab Spring: Mass public protests demand resignation of President Assad and political reform, followed by brutal regime violence and radicalization	Repression of protests, civil war, reconstituted dictatorship
Burma	2011– 2015	Political Reform and Competitive Elections: Military regime's political reform and release of Aung San Suu Kyi lead to mass mobilization and multi-party elections	Transition to Competitive Authoritarianism (Hybrid Regime)
Turkey	2013	Gezi Park Protests Widespread public protests and strikes against President Ergdogan's creeping authoritarianism and assaults on secularism and individual freedom	Repression, censorship, continued authoritarian drift
Ukraine	2014	Revolution of Dignity: Massive public protests against President Yanukovych's authoritarianism and pro-Russia alignment oust the President & his government	Transition to Democracy
Nigeria	2015	Incumbent president and party defeated in election for first time in country's history. Opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari takes office as president.	Continued, slightly liberalized semi-democracy
Ethiopia	2015–?	Ethnic minority protests escalate into broad demands for political change; reformer Abiy Ahmed becomes Prime Minister in 2018 and launches process of political reform, promises democratic elections	Transitional process, uncertain outcome
Zimbabwe	2016– 2017	Mass public protests against economic hardship, corruption and repression; military forces resignation of President Robert Mugabe in Nov 2017 and installs his successor	Reconstituted authoritarian rule
The Gambia	2016–?	Dictator Yahya Jammeh defeated in Dec 2016 elections, forced to flee in January. Opposition candidate Adama Barrow takes power but fails to fulfil democratic transition	Stuck in a hybrid status of semi-democracy
Malaysia	2018–?	Ruling BN coalition defeated in elections, producing first electoral alternation in history, but the	Stuck in a hybrid state of semi-democracy

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Country	Year(s)	Event or trigger	Outcome
Sudan	2018–?	opposition alliance proves fractious and fails to implement democratic transition Sudanese Revolution: Popular protests and sustained civil disobedience force the military ouster of dictator Omar al-Bashir in April 2019; state violence and ongoing protest lead to negotiated settlement for transitional government	Transitional government, uncertain outcome
Armenia	2018	Velvet Revolution: Opposition protests against autocracy lead to regime concession and the election of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan as PM.	Liberalized government, not yet full electoral democracy
Algeria	2019	Hirak Movement: Largest public protests since Algerian civil war force the resignation of President Bouteflika; regime engineers election of a new president in December 2019, despite massive opposition boycott	Reconstituted authoritarian rule
Lebanon	2019–20	Grassroots protests erupt against the entire political elite, condemning sectarian rule, corruption, and economic hardship	Government instability and ongoing protests
Bolivia	2019–?	Mass public protests allege fraud in the reelection of Evo Morales to a fourth term as president; Morales resigns under military pressure and an interim president takes office	Democracy in suspension

parties – as well as a host of alien threats, such as international institutions, refugees and migrants, and “undeserving” minorities who really don’t “belong” in the country.

Political norms and institutions

Unless one subscribes to genetic or “national character” explanations of political behaviour, it is reasonable to conjecture that the innate tendency to enlarge and abuse power is randomly distributed across people in the world. Within countries, then, it is culture and institutions that determine whether potential autocrats are elected to office, and if they are, whether they are effectively constrained from realizing their ambitions. Strong prevailing norms of commitment to democracy; mutual tolerance, trust, and restraint; and a willingness to compromise thus play a crucial role in inoculating democracy against authoritarian attacks.

The second inhibiting factor is political institutions: Whether the system has strong, institutionalized parties and in particular, agents of horizontal accountability – independent legislatures, courts, counter-corruption agencies, regulatory bodies, election commissions, and more – that monitor, circumscribe, and constrain the power of elected executives. Strong political parties with institutionalized linkages to voters also limit the scope for populists to forge direct, personalistic ties to mass constituencies.²⁰ The third factor is civil society, as independent non-governmental organizations and mass media become essential supplements and reinforcements for agencies of horizontal accountability. If a country has high levels of education and income, and a strong private sector independent of the state, it is more likely to have these elements of culture, civil society, and political institutions, but reasonably high economic

development does not guarantee these things, and low levels of development do not condemn a country to authoritarianism.²¹

There is some statistical evidence to suggest that weak rule of law is a “leading indicator” of trouble for democracy. As noted earlier, virtually all the democracies that broke down during this period (or any other) have been “illiberal”, which is to say that competitive, democratic elections have co-existed with high levels of corruption and weak rule of law institutions. In addition, countries (as averaged within regions) everywhere perform worse on transparency and the rule of law than they do on political rights and civil liberties. And in some regions (e.g. Sub-Saharan Africa and the post-communist states, but not Asia, on average), this is also the dimension that has declined the most.

Political craft

Political craft – or one could say, skill at authoritarian aggrandizement of power – has also been a relevant factor. There are basically three types of political leaders in a democracy: Those who respect democratic norms and would not think to mess with them in a serious way; those who lack strong commitment to democracy but also lack the nerve and/or the skill to be the architect of authoritarianization; and those who have both the ambition and the skill to dismantle democracy. The weaker the democratic institutions and other societal and external constraints, the less leadership skill is needed to pull off the task. What are the skills of authoritarian populism? They involve an ability to generate or manipulate fear of and hostility to established elites and outsiders (both “enemies of the people”). Populist leaders typically do so through charismatic appeal to emotions, such as fear and anger. Populism may appeal to rational interests, but its generation of images of threat, corruption, and cultural pollution has a strong non-rational or even irrational component. Populist leaders bypass mediating institutions and forge a direct relationship with “the people.” They negate pluralism by insisting they are the only legitimate representatives of the people.²² All of this requires some considerable strategic and rhetorical skill, and in the modern era, mastery of both the conventional mass media and social media.

Then there is the strategy and skill needed to dismantle democratic institutions. Again, if the constraints in the constitutional system and civil society are weak, then the aspiring autocrat may be able to move swiftly and clumsily to knock away the institutional props of democracy, as Edgar Lungu has done in Zambia or Patrice Talon in Benin. But to pull off the evisceration of democracy in a member state of the European Union without being expelled or seriously sanctioned – that took consummate skill on the part of Viktor Orbán, who is probably the most artful and Machiavellian authoritarian populist of this era. Erdoğan in Turkey, Sheikh Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh, Duterte in the Philippines, the Rajapaksa brothers in Sri Lanka, Jaroslaw Kaczynski (head of the ruling PiS in Poland), and Narendra Modi in India (among others) have all exhibited classic features of successful authoritarian populist leadership: charismatic mobilization of an intensely loyal mass following, cynical demonization of opponents and independent monitors, and a shrewd strategic nose for how to delegitimize and marginalize established elites and vulnerable minorities while promoting an ultra-majoritarian vision of democracy. The fact that Poland and India are still (for now) electoral democracies testifies not to the limits in skill and ambition of their populist leaders but to the strength (eroding though it is) of countervailing norms and institutions.

Each of these populist leaders does the work of eroding democracy through a sequence of incremental encroachments that I call “the autocrats’ twelve-step program.”²³ While the exact pace and sequence varies from one case to the next, the essence of the sequence is strikingly common across widely varying cases. The early steps seek to weaken and disable checks on the power of the ruler. The opposition is relentlessly portrayed as corrupt and disloyal, and therefore illegitimate. The media is attacked as “fake news” and unpatriotic, part of the broader network of corrupt elites who disdain the real people. Thus it must gradually be cowed and conquered. The courts are denounced as elitist and undemocratic, standing in the way of the “will of the people” as expressed at the ballot box. Therefore they must be purged and stacked with politically loyal judges. Then the authoritarian project attacks the foundations of the “deep state” – the civil service, the security apparatus, the agencies of horizontal accountability – purging them of “disloyal” elements and bending them to the will of the ruler and his party. Gradually, the executive, though democratically elected, knocks away the guardrails of liberal democratic restraint. Public broadcasting is taken over and made a mouthpiece of the ruling party. Stricter control is asserted over what can be conveyed on the internet – if it is critical of the government and ruling party. The business community is harnessed to the mission of partisan domination, with threats of tax and regulatory retribution for enterprises that do not get with the programme. Consequently, opposition parties are starved of funding. A new class of crony capitalists – slavishly loyal to the ruling party – is enriched through state contracts and licenses. These business cronies and servants of the ruling party then fund its campaigns and buy up what remains of the independent media. As checks on the elected ruler and his party fall away, the emboldened autocrats turn their focus to the last remaining instruments of scrutiny and accountability, in civil society. Independent civic associations, think tanks, universities, student groups, human rights organizations, writers, artists, and intellectuals are stigmatized as arrogant, snobbish, selfish elites who have betrayed “the people” and the country. Some are prosecuted and jailed so that others will get the message that resistance is futile. Finally, elections come again, but in a system where political pluralism and contestation have been reduced to faint whispers of their prior robustness. To make matters worse, the ruling party gradually extends its control over electoral administration, rigging the rules to ensure that no “accidents” happen on the road to reelection. In this way, the formal rules of political competition and representation are preserved, but their democratic content is hollowed out. Gradually the system morphs from a vigorous electoral democracy – with uncertain outcomes – into a “competitive authoritarian” regime, in which fear governs civic life, opposition lacks resources or legal protections, and state institutions praise and empower the autocrat.

International context

Human nature being what it is, there was always ample danger of this kind of regression and reversion. The biggest difference between the third wave (1975–2005) and the democratic recession (2006 to the present) has been the international context. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the U.S. pursued an increasingly forthright and explicit foreign policy on behalf of democracy and human rights. It was never consistent or free of *realpolitik* deals with friendly autocrats, but when push came to shove in places like Argentina, the Philippines, Korea, Chile, and South Africa, the

U.S. increasingly sided with the popular democratic opposition against the unpopular authoritarian incumbents.²⁴ On top of the public messages and private warnings of American diplomacy (high and low), U.S. foreign assistance transferred resources, knowledge and skills to help democratic parties, civil society groups, and institutional actors prevail over authoritarian alternatives.²⁵ And Europe followed suit, both in bilateral diplomacy and aid packages of countries like Britain and Scandinavia, and through the European Union, with its particular focus on transforming Central and Eastern Europe but its wider flows of aid and diplomatic encouragement, particularly to Africa.²⁶

We can decompose the past 45 years of global politics with surprising ease into three distinct 15-year segments. During the final period of the Cold War, from 1975 to 1990, freedom and democracy gradually expanded as the U.S. and its European allies swung more energetically behind movements for human rights, civic space, and democratization. The number of democracies in the world (among all states) increased from 46 to 74, and the percentage of all states that were democracies rose from 29% to 45%. From 1990 to 2005, the world experienced what the late Charles Krauthammer famously called a “unipolar moment.”²⁷ The other superpower, the Soviet Union, collapsed; China was still far from being able to pose a global economic, military or geopolitical challenge; and the United States stood alone as the “one first-rate power,” with “no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival it.” Krauthammer underestimated the importance of Europe’s economic influence and political conditionality, but we can certainly identify this period as one of peak democratic hegemony globally. And it coincided with the peak of global democratization, as the number of democracies rose to 117 and the percentage of democracies to 61% in 2005. But by then the world was transitioning to a third period, one of democratic recession. From 2006 to 2020, the number of democracies contracted to 108 and the percentage of democracies to 55%. Among states over one million population, the decline in the number of democracies was more dramatic, from 86 to 75, a drop from 57% to 48% (Table 4).

Beginning around 2006, a powerful set of global contextual changes all converged to take the breath out of the third wave of global democratization. The most obvious factor was the disastrous U.S. decision to invade and occupy Iraq. Not only was the effort to build a democracy in Iraq after the U.S. invasion a dramatic failure, but the effort was so arrogant and so costly in lives, treasure, and American prestige in the world that it

Table 4. Three historical phases of the third wave.

	1975–1990 Gradual democratic expansion Number (Percent)	1990–2005 “Big Bang” of democratic expansion Number (Percent)	2005–2019 Global democratic recession Number (Percent)
Democracies	46 (29%) 74 (45%)	74 (45%) 117 (61%)	117 (61%) 108 (55%)
Liberal democracies	33 (21%) 50 (30%)	50 (30%) 79 (41%)	79 (41%) 76 (39%)
Democracies States > 1 million	30 (24%) 54 (43%)	54 (43%) 85 (56%)	85 (56%) 75 (48%)
Liberal democracies States > 1 million	23 (19%) 33 (26%)	33 (26%) 52 (34%)	52 (34%) 48 (31%)

Note: The top line for each set of democracies provides the number and percent of states that are part of this group at the start of each historical period, and the second bolded line gives the number and percent in the closing year of the historical period.

marked an end of America's "unipolar" hegemony and of its appetite for "democracy promotion."²⁸ In fact, both in Europe and the United States, the term "democracy promotion" came to be associated with the use of force and the naïve and draining efforts to combat insurgencies and impose democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq. After rising ambitions and soaring rhetoric during its first five years, democracy promotion was downgraded during the final years of the George W. Bush administration and to some extent as well during the Obama Administration, which tried to square the president's personal commitment to freedom and human rights with his realist instincts in foreign policy. A new, or renewed, "pessimistic view of democracy promotion" took hold.²⁹ But this was also due to the rising salience, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, of counter-terrorism in the hierarchy of American foreign policy concerns. Increasingly, the United States seemed willing to trade off democracy and human rights concerns for security cooperation in the Global War on Terror. Suddenly, a new set of hard realist concerns emerged to fill the vacuum left by the end of the Cold War. Throughout the Middle East, but also in East Africa and Southeast Asia, security concerns once again trumped idealistic ones.

Global socio-economic trends

The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the acceleration of four deep and interrelated social and economic trends with important implications for democracy.

First was the rise of the internet, social media, and digital technology, which provided powerful tools for organizing mass, decentralized protests against dictatorship, but were less successful in facilitating the transformation of protest into organized, coordinated, politically led movements for democratic change. The failures of most Arab spring protests to secure lasting democratic reform, for example, owed in no small measure to this limitation.³⁰ With the digital revolution also came extraordinary new means for promoting disinformation, group hatred, and political polarization, which have facilitated the rise of illiberal and authoritarian populism.

Second was the shift from manufacturing to finance and technology/knowledge production as the dominant sources of wealth generation, which has been a major contributing factor to increasing income inequality, as a growing share of national income and wealth has been captured by the top one percent and especially the top tenth of one percent of income earners.

Third was the acceleration of globalization, with China joining the WTO in 2001 and rising levels of immigration into advanced economies. This displaced labour in the U.S. and some other advanced industrial economies, further aggravating social and economic insecurities and resentments.

Fourth was the long-term impact of the neo-liberal revolution in economic policy, with its emphasis on deregulation and more scope for the free functioning of markets. In the United States, this freed up financial markets to engage in ever riskier and more speculative lending and financial transactions. The final element was the growing economic instability of this potent mixture – deregulation, digitization, financialization, globalization – resulting in the 2008 financial crash, which, since it originated in the U.S. further badly damaged the reputation of democracy, as well as the resources and political self-confidence of the United States.

Initially, the effect on democracy of the financial and economic crises that erupted in 2008 seemed to be defeats for incumbents rather than overthrow of democracies.³¹

However, the longer-term impact has been more damaging, giving rising to substantial anxiety and social conflict, and fertile soil for the rise of populist, nativist, anti-immigrant politics, with illiberal and even blatantly authoritarian undertones.

It is difficult to disentangle the multiple effects of these glacial changes in the international geopolitical and normative environment. Yet, a backlash has been gathering for some time against these intertwined shocks and dislocations that made many ordinary people, particularly in the less densely populated smaller towns and rural areas, feel threatened and marginalized, falling in status and economic prospects at the same time as they felt they were losing control of their country (to the European Union and other supramational institutions), their democracy (to unelected experts, civil servants, and judges), and their culture and society (to immigration and to “progressive values” favouring diversity, inclusion, and racial and gender equality).³²

This convergence of factors, resulting in rising polarization, inequality, and economic distress (especially in the US), took the shine off democracy. If the world’s most powerful democracy could spawn a financial crisis that almost produced a global depression; if the world’s largest collection of democracies (the E.U.) could not manage its borders or accommodate the rising tide of refugees and migrants due to wars and revolutions, then maybe democracy was not such a great system after all. Many in the West began to lose confidence in their own democratic systems, but more important was the rise and resurgence of authoritarian challengers pushing – and to some extent creating the circumstances for – this narrative.

Russian rage and Chinese ambition

The last major element in the transformed global environment was “Russian rage and Chinese ambition,”³³ which in different ways have damaged and eroded the post-World War II, and especially the post-Cold War, hegemony of liberal values and institutions. Each of these authoritarian projects to bend global norms, expectations and institutions away from democracy has relied principally on a form of influence known as “sharp power,” because of the razor-like way it cuts with precision into the fabric of other societies.³⁴ In contrast to soft power, which seeks to inspire and persuade transparently through attraction and the power of example, sharp power operates in the shadows to compromise institutions. To quote the former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull (in discussing China’s penetration efforts in Australia), it is “covert, coercive, or corrupting.”³⁵ Its coercion stops short of military force, economic sanctions, or other “hard power” means of compelling compliance (though in former Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia, Russian cyber attacks and unconventional military aggression have blurred the line between hard and sharp power). Thus, sharp power represents an insidious form of global power projection. While Russia and China have been the principle deployers, other authoritarian states (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and occasionally smaller ones like Azerbaijan) have also used these covert, intimidating, and corrupting techniques to gain influence and undermine liberal democratic values.

Russia’s principle instrument of sharp power has been a kind of asymmetric warfare – a vast state-sponsored campaign to sow division and doubt in Western democracies and to aid the electoral fortunes of right-wing (and occasionally left-wing) illiberal populists sympathetic to Russia and dismissive of international liberal alliances like NATO, the European Union, the G7, and other forms of democratic solidarity, integration, and cooperation. Russia sent financial aid to some right-wing populist

European parties like the National Front in France, but its most damaging offensive was informational and psychological. Social media bots and trolls tied to the Kremlin disinformation machine aided the successful 2016 Brexit campaign and may well have tipped the balance to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Increasingly, it appears that Russian agents are back at work in Africa trying to tip elections to their favoured candidates (as in Madagascar).³⁶ And the sheer brazenness of Putin seizing Crimea by force and subjecting a hostile and ungrateful Ukraine to withering military punishment and penetration on its Eastern border has also sent a message to democracies in the region: Russia is back as an imperial power; don't mess with it. Even though democracy survived in the bulk of Ukraine, it was in a distressed and crisis-ridden state, while murky forms of Russian influence penetrated and constrained democratic politics in Georgia and the arc of other countries that had either been part of the Soviet Union or (like Mongolia and Central and Eastern Europe) a *de facto* part of its empire.

The far more consequential geopolitical development, however, has been the rise of China to superpower status, powered by 30 years of 8%–10% annual economic growth, a rapidly expanding military and global propaganda apparatus, and tens of billions of dollars in annual funding for a Belt and Road Initiative to construct infrastructure and telecommunications networks that assist economic development while also binding countries to China's influence.³⁷ Much more than Russia (for it has much more to spend), China has been pumping resources (overtly and covertly) into associations, parties, politicians, media, think tanks and universities in democracies and other societies abroad. The goal is not necessarily to destabilize individual democracies (save for Taiwan), but rather to stifle public criticism of China, preempt foreign and defense policies that could hinder China's rise to global dominance, and so create a world safe for autocracy. As China becomes the dominant source of global funding for the construction of highways, bridges, ports, stadiums, and other prestige projects; as China builds the digital highways that carry (and likely capture) both the conversations and the data of a growing number of societies, it displaces Western influence and promotes the idea that it has a superior, more functional model of governance. Relentlessly, it advances this notion through the propaganda of its sprawling global media empire,³⁸ including the infusion of Chinese content into various forms of reporting, as well as through the training of journalists in the Communist Chinese way of organizing and operating mass media. As with Russia's sharp power efforts, China's global campaign is generating a significant backlash.³⁹ The hard press of sharp power may leave countries feeling coerced and conflicted, rather than attracted and inspired, but it is nevertheless a form of power with immense potential. As it spreads authoritarian narratives about the dynamism and success of China, compared to the decrepit, dysfunctional state of Western democracies, it seeks in its own way to persuade the world that Moynihan was right 45 years ago when he reflected, "Liberal democracy ... is where the world was, not where it is going."

The Chinese Communist leadership probably could not have imagined what a gift to their global ambition Donald Trump would represent as President of the United States. By weakening America's standing and democratic alliances in the world, Trump played beautifully into the Russian and Chinese depictions of Western democracies as decadent and inefficacious. And he advanced their objectives of weakening the post-World War II democratic alliances in Europe and Northeast Asia that have been major pillars of the global liberal order. Even before Trump's victory in 2016, a growing number of Asians (50%) were choosing China as the most influential

country in their region, while only 30% picked the U.S., and the relative balance was shifting in Africa as well.⁴⁰

By the beginning of the fourth year of Donald Trump's presidency in 2020, all of this was clearly cumulating into a massive shift in the global *zeitgeist*, with authoritarian regimes like Russia and China seeming to have the wind at their backs while the United States was floundering. And then came COVID-19. Although the global pandemic originated in China and initially spread globally as a result of the embedded fear, rigidity, and opaqueness of the Chinese communist system, the Chinese state did bring it under control, dramatically reducing the number of cases, while the virus surged out of control first in significant parts of Europe (Italy, Spain, and the U.K.) and then in two of the four largest democracies in the world, the U.S. and Brazil, with India later experiencing a crisis as well. In reality, there appeared to be no clear relationship between regime type and effective management of the pandemic; democracies (like Taiwan and Korea) that acted early, vigorously, and transparently to coordinate a response, put public health officials at the forefront, and prioritized testing, tracing, and mask-wearing, enjoyed success in controlling the virus. But the image of the United States, with its incompetent elected leaders completely unable to contain the virus, did further reputational damage to democracy. And the pandemic proved to be a gift to political leaders – both of autocracies and democracies – interested in aggrandizing their power. From Hungary to Bangladesh to the Philippines and India, rulers exploited the opportunity to arrest critics, journalists, health workers, human rights activists, opposition leaders, and anyone else threatening “public order.”⁴¹

Conclusion

The democratic recession that began as a slow and quite uneven ebbing of progress fifteen years ago has now morphed into a substantial, comprehensive regression of freedom and democracy in the world – especially in those countries that matter most in the world because of their large size or geopolitical influence. In Asia, the statistical averages suggest a more benign pattern, but the unfolding reality is more alarming. While Japan and Taiwan stand out as resilient liberal democracies that have actually improved over the past decade, the Moon Jae In administration in South Korea has been “going the other way, exacerbating polarization, eroding democratic norms, and appealing to chauvinistic nationalism” in a process of creeping political hegemony that is poorly understood outside the country and has yet to register in international democracy ratings.⁴² Beyond the death squads and relentless assaults on independent institutions and critics in the Philippines, corruption is predictably on the rise as the rule of law deteriorates.⁴³ India – by far the most populous democracy not only in Asia but the world – is locked in an ugly, illiberal descent into religious bigotry and intimidation of critics and opponents. The authors of Sri Lanka's previous slide into autocracy, the Rajapaksa brothers, are now back in power and eager to return the country to dark times of corruption, nepotism, religious chauvinism, and human rights violations.⁴⁴ Malaysia is reverting to semi-authoritarian type; Bangladesh is mired in polarization and personalistic, one-party domination; the military rules from behind the curtain in Pakistan, Thailand, and Burma; and China is becoming ever-more authoritarian and belligerent. Sadly, before long, the annual democracy ratings will catch up to these realities.

We are perilously close to and indeed have probably already entered what Huntington would have called a “third reverse wave,” that is, a period in world history in which the number of transitions away from democracy significantly outnumber those to democracy. While domestic agents have largely been the authors of these regressions from freedom, their rollbacks of democracy have been greatly facilitated by the transformation of the international context. The prestige, power, success, and will of the world’s principal democracies is clearly on the wane, while the ambition and strategic vision of the world’s most powerful autocracies is rising. The global retreat of freedom is unlikely to be reversed any time soon unless the world’s wealthiest and most powerful democracies restore their own internal capacity and self-confidence, and renew their global commitment to supporting and defending democratic values.

Notes

1. Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
2. Plattner, *Democracy without Borders?*, 22.
3. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?”
4. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 92–6.
5. Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy;” Diamond, “Developing Democracy,” 42–9.
6. My annual count of the number of electoral democracies in the world is based on my own research and dataset assessing whether the citizens of a country were able to choose and replace their leaders in free and fair elections, with the minimum accompanying rights of opposition, speech, press, and assembly necessary in order for elections to be free and fair. For further definition on this standard, see Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 24–6, and Elklit and Svensson, “What Makes Elections Free and Fair.”
7. Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 56–87.
8. Levitsky and Way, “The Myth of Democratic Recession.”
9. One of the interesting and little-studied aspects of global democratization is the relationship between size and democracy. While there does not appear to be a general and continuous relationship between population size and democracy, there is a striking distinction between very small states (under one million population) and larger ones. Very small states are much more likely than larger ones to be democracies. The gap is even larger with respect to liberal democracy, and in both respects it has been growing. In 1999, 72% of very small states but only 51% of larger ones were democracies. By 2019, the disparity had grown to 87% and 48% respectively. The disparity was much more dramatic for liberal democracy, 60% of very small states and only 27% of larger states. And that has also grown, to 74% vs. 31% in 2019.
10. Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2020.”
11. Rupnik, “Hungary’s Illiberal Turn;” Bankuti, et al., “Disabling the Constitution.”
12. Fomina and Kucharczyk, “Populism and Protest in Poland.”
13. Ganguly, “An Illiberal India?”
14. Shin, “South Korea’s Democratic Decay.”
15. Morgenbesser, “Cambodia’s Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism.”
16. Lemièrre, “The Downfall of Malaysia’s Ruling Party.”
17. Wong, “Democracy in Crisis.”
18. Soyinka, “Lessons from Nigeria’s Militarized Experiment,” Obe, “Nigeria’s Emerging Two-Party System?”
19. McCoy and Somer, “A Theory of Pernicious Polarization.”
20. Kenney, *Populism and Patronage*.
21. For a more detailed overview, see Diamond, *Ill Winds*, 15–39.
22. Müller, *What Is Populism?* Galston, *Anti-Pluralism*.
23. Diamond, *Ill Winds*, 64–5.
24. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 608–42; Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 111–6.
25. Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad and Critical Mission*.

26. Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 136–42.
27. Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment.”
28. Diamond, *Squandered Victory*.
29. Carothers, “Is the U.S. Giving Up?”
30. Lynch, “After the Arab Spring.”
31. Diamond, “Impact of Economic Crisis.”
32. On the latter point, and the finding for a “cultural backlash” driving the illiberal populist wave, see Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
33. Diamond, *Ill Winds*.
34. National Endowment for Democracy, “Sharp Power”; Walker, “What Is Sharp Power?”
35. Diamond and Schell, *China’s Influence and America’s Interests*, 5.
36. Schwartz and Borgia, “How Russia Meddles Abroad.”
37. Pei, “A Play for Global Leadership.”
38. Lim and Bergin, “Inside China’s Propaganda Campaign.”
39. Trofimov, “Europe’s Face-off with China”; Erlanger, “Global Backlash against China.”
40. Diamond, *Ill Winds*, 141.
41. Diamond, “Democracy vs. the Pandemic.”
42. Shin, “South Korea’s Democratic Decay,” 101.
43. Mourdoukoutas, “Duterte Is Turning Philippines.”
44. Dibbert, “The Rajapaksas Own Sri Lanka.”

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