

The Global State of Democracy

“The progress of democracy in the world over the last quarter-century has been nothing less than remarkable.... But if the reach of democracy is greater than ever, it is also thinner and more vulnerable.”

LARRY DIAMOND

Historians and philosophers already see the twentieth century as the bloodiest and the most destructive and brutal century in human history. But a parallel fact is less often noted: the twentieth century witnessed a profound transformation in the way societies are governed. As Freedom House pointed out in its January 2000 annual survey of freedom in the world, not a single country in 1900 would qualify as a democracy by today's standards.¹ By 1950, only 22 of the 80 sovereign political systems in the world (about 28 percent) were democratic. When the most recent wave of global democratization began in 1974, 39 countries were governed by democracies, but the percentage of democracies in the world was about the same, only 27 percent.

By January 2000, Freedom House counted 120 democracies, the highest number and the greatest percentage (62.5) in world history. This represents a dramatic change even from 1990, when less than half the world's independent states were democracies. Freedom House's assessment of the number of “free” states—those that “maintain a high degree of political and economic freedom and respect basic civil liberties”—also is near a recent historic high, with 85 states (44 percent) “free” at the end of 1999.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet communism, democracy has been the dominant form of government. It is not difficult to infer from this dramatic expansion a nearly universal legitimacy for democracy—a global hegemony. Indeed, in its most recent Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the United States Department of State went so far as to identify democracy and human rights as a third “universal language” (after money and the Internet).² The State Department's report envisions the emerging transnational network of human rights actors (both public and private) becoming an “international civil society... that will support democracy worldwide and promote the standards embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

The globalization of democracy is indeed one of the most historic and profound global changes of the past several decades. In its duration and scope, this third global wave of democratization also stands in sharp contrast to the “second wave” of democratization that began at the end of World War II and expired in less than 20 years. That movement gave way to a “second reverse wave” in which democracy broke down in

more than 20 developing countries and military rulers and civilian autocrats brutalized human rights and the rule of law.³

Remarkably, a quarter-century after the inception of democratization's third wave in 1974, the world still has not yet entered a “third reverse wave.” Not only do more democracies exist than ever before, but very few high-profile democratic reversals have occurred. In fact, during the third wave's first 25 years, only three blatant reversals of democracy took place in countries with more than 20 million people: the military coup in Nigeria at the end of 1983, the 1989 military coup in Sudan, and the 1991 military coup in Thailand. The former two coups occurred in Africa before the third wave of democratization reached the continent in 1991. The Thai coup was a major setback for democracy in Southeast Asia, but it did not last. In little more than a year, the country's military leaders felt compelled to convene national elections to legitimize their rule, and their insistence on installing a nonelected army commander as prime minister triggered massive demonstrations that brought down the authoritarian project. Just 17 months after the February 1991 coup, democracy was restored to Thailand with the election of the first nonmilitary prime minister since the mid-1970s.

If we understand that the military coups in Nigeria and Sudan (and in Ghana in 1981) came before the third wave reached Africa, then, prior to October 1999, democratic reversals during the third wave had been of only three types. First were democratic breakdowns during the 1990s in small, relatively marginal states such as the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), Gambia, Lesotho, Niger, and Sierra Leone. Second, democratic transitions or possibilities for democratic transitions were reversed or aborted in countries such as Cambodia, Lebanon, Kenya, Nigeria, and several post-Soviet states. And finally, democracy was mangled by elected presidents in Peru and Zambia, but in ways that preserved the framework of competitive, multiparty politics and thus at least some possibility of displacing the autocratic presidents in a future election.

The October 1999 military coup in Pakistan, however, may portend a more ominous trend; Pakistan is a truly strategic country, a regional power with nuclear weapons and a long-running, precarious conflict with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir. The principal causes of democratic breakdown in

Pakistan—the abuse of executive power, human rights, and the rule of law; growing ethnic and religious sectarian violence; and profound economic failure and injustice stemming from structural distortions and administrative incapacity—are not unique to Pakistan. Increasingly, these problems afflict many other large, strategic, emerging democracies in the world, such as Russia, Brazil, Turkey, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

THE VARIED STATES OF DEMOCRACY

If we look only at the aggregate picture of democracy in the world, we can be cheered. More democracies exist than ever before, and the average level of freedom is also the highest ever recorded in the Freedom House annual survey of political rights and civil liberties. To comprehend the true state of democracy worldwide, however, we must analyze global trends.

Democracies—in the minimal sense, “electoral” democracies—share at least one broad essential requirement. The principal positions of political power in the country are filled through regular, free, and fair elections between competing parties, and an incumbent government can be defeated in those elections. The standard for electoral democracy—what constitutes “free and fair”—is more ambiguous than is often appreciated. As a result of the dubious conduct of recent national elections, such prominent multiparty states as Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria, and Indonesia fall into a gray area that is neither clearly democratic nor clearly undemocratic, even in the minimal electoral sense. Indeed, there is growing evidence of outright fraud in the March 2000 election that confirmed Vladimir Putin in the presidency of Russia.⁴ Even short of fraud, Putin had such massive advantages of incumbency and support from crony capitalists that opposition parties virtually conceded his election in advance.

Russia is not unique. Freedom House laudably resists classifying as democracies such countries as Malaysia, Singapore, Peru, and Kenya, where electoral competition has been blatantly tilted in favor of the ruling party or president. But some of Freedom House’s “democracies,” such as Nigeria, Liberia, Indonesia, and the Kyrgyz Republic, suffer such widespread electoral fraud or systematic unfairness as to render the outcomes dubiously democratic at best. In fact, five of the states classified by Freedom House as democracies in 1999 (Djibouti, the Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Niger, and Sierra Leone) suffer from too much fraud, intimidation, or abridgment of free electoral choice to justify that classification. Yet even if we move these states, along with Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria, and Indonesia, out of the category of electoral democracy—while recognizing that Mexico and Senegal became electoral democracies in 2000 as a result of reforms in electoral administration that allowed the opposition finally to capture the presidency—we still find that almost 60 percent of the world’s states are democracies. In the long sweep of world history, this is an extraordinary proportion.

However we judge them, elections are only one dimension of democracy. The quality of democracy also depends on its levels of freedom, pluralism, justice, and accountability. The deeper level of liberal democracy requires these conditions:

- Freedom of belief, expression, organization, demonstration, and other civil liberties, including protection from political terror and unjustified imprisonment;
- A rule of law under which all citizens are treated equally and due process is secure;
- Political independence and neutrality of the judiciary and of other institutions of “horizontal accountability” that check the abuse of power, such as electoral administration, audits, and a central bank;
- An open, pluralistic civil society, including not only associational life but the mass media as well;
- Civilian control of the military.⁵

These various dimensions of democratic quality constitute a continuum, and determining exactly when a regime has sufficient freedom, pluralism, lawfulness, accountability, and institutional strength to be considered a liberal democracy is difficult. For some years, I took as a rough indicator the Freedom House designation of a country as “free.” Generally, these are countries that receive an average rating of between 1 and 2.5 on the two scales of political rights and civil liberties. (Each scale ranges from 1 to 7, with 1 being “most free” and 7 “least free.”) However, countries with average scores of 2.5 have civil liberties scores of 3 on the 7-point scale, indicating serious deficiencies in the rule of law and the protection for individual rights. Typically in such countries (for example, the Philippines, El Salvador, and recently India), the judiciary is weak and ineffectual, if not politically compromised; corruption is widespread; and police and other security forces abuse citizens’ rights with impunity. Therefore, we should only consider as minimally “liberal” those countries with an average score of 2.0 or better (that is, lower) on the Freedom House combined scale of political rights and civil liberties. By this standard, only 37 percent of the world’s states were liberal democracies at the beginning of 2000.

We also need to consider the stability and rootedness of democracies. For political scientists, democracies are “consolidated” when all significant political elites, parties, and organizations, as well as an overwhelming majority of the public, are firmly committed to the democratic constitutional system and regularly comply with its rules and constraints. Strikingly, the third wave of democratization that began in 1974 has progressed only slowly toward consolidation. Except for the new democracies of southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, and Greece) and a few scattered others, the third-wave democracies have not taken firm root, although they are progressing more rapidly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Global assessments of the state of democracy and freedom in the world mask large differences among groups of countries. This is clearly true with respect to the level of development. The 30 “core” countries of Western Europe, along with the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Israel, are all liberal, consolidated democracies. In fact, these core states account for the clear majority of all liberal democracies with populations over one million. Size also matters in the following respect. “Microstates” (those with populations under 1 million) are overwhelmingly democratic and liberal; and aside from the 30 core countries (eight

Democracy, Liberal Democracy, and "Free" States by Region (and Cultural Grouping), 1999–2000

Region	Number of Countries	Number of Democracies (percent of total)	"Free" States (percent of total)	Liberal Democracies (percent of total)
Western Europe and Anglophone states	28	28 (100%)	28 (100%)	28 (100%)
Latin America and Caribbean	33	29 (88%)	20 (70%)	16 (48%)
South America	12	11 (92%)	6 (50%)	4 (33%)
East Central Europe and Baltic States	15	14 (93%)	10 (67%)	9 (60%)
Former Soviet Union (less Baltics)	12	5 (42%) 4 (33%)*	0	0
Asia (East, SE, South)	26	12 (46%)	8 (31%)	3 (12%)
Pacific Island	11	10 (91%)	9 (82%)	9 (82%)
Africa (Sub-Saharan)	48	20 (42%) 16 (33%)*	8 (17%)	5 (10%)
Middle East-North Africa	19	2 (11%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
Total	192	120 (63%) 115 (69%)*	85 (44%)	71 (37%)
Arab Countries	16	0	0	0
Predominantly Muslim Countries	41	8 (20%) 5 (12%)*	1 (2%)	0

Source: The 1999 Freedom House Survey; *Journal of Democracy*, January 2000, pp. 187-200.

*Indicates a regime classification of the author that differs from that of Freedom House (FH). Freedom House rates Djibouti, the Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Niger, and Sierra Leone as electoral democracies, but all five have levels of coercion and fraud that make the electoral process less than free and fair. Other countries rated as electoral democracies have only dubiously democratic elections, including Russia, Nigeria, and Indonesia.

of which are microstates), no other group of countries in the world has so much political and civil freedom on average. Of the 41 countries with populations under 1 million, two-thirds are liberal democracies and almost four-fifths are democracies. However, these microstates have little scope to influence the direction of many other countries. (Indeed, two-thirds are island states, and hence share no land border with any country.)

As can be seen in the table above, electoral democracy stretches into nearly every major world region, although it is much more prevalent in some areas than in others. Liberal democracy is another story. The fragility and limited reach of liberal democracy is indicated by the fact that 54 of the 71 liberal democracies are either the 30 core countries or other states with populations of less than 1 million. If we set aside the 30 core countries and the other 33 microstates, we have 129 states. Only 13 percent of these 129 states in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and postcommunist Europe are liberal democracies.

Also striking are the differences in the distributions of regimes within regions. The 15 postcommunist states of Central and Eastern Europe (including the Baltic states) are moving to-

ward the liberal democratic West in their levels of freedom; the majority of these states are now liberal democracies, and many are progressing toward democratic consolidation. Of the remaining 12 states of the former Soviet Union, none is a liberal democracy, and less than half are democracies.

Just under half of the 26 states of Asia (East, Southeast, and South) are democracies, and only three are liberal democracies, but we see the effect of size when we compare this group with the 11 Pacific Island states, which are mainly liberal democracies. Similarly, while half the states of Latin America and the Caribbean are liberal democracies, these are mainly clustered in the Caribbean region. Only a third of the 12 South American states are liberal democracies. Liberal democracy is scarcely present (10 percent) among the 48 states of sub-Saharan Africa (the liberal democracies of Africa are again disproportionately microstates), but at least a third of these 48 states are now electoral democracies, a much greater figure than just a decade ago.

In contrast, not a single Arab democracy or majority Muslim country is a liberal democracy; indeed, only slightly more than

10 percent of the states with predominantly Muslim populations are even electoral democracies.

VARIED PROGRESS TOWARD CONSOLIDATION

If we set aside the core states and the microstates, surprisingly few other democracies in the world are clearly "consolidated" (a democracy is consolidated when all politically significant elites and organizations, as well as the overwhelming majority of the mass public, believe that democracy is the best form of government and comply with its rules and restraints). Among the long-standing democracies in the developing world, India (with all its troubles), Costa Rica, Mauritius, and Botswana could be seen as consolidated. Venezuela and Colombia were considered consolidated democracies in the 1970s and 1980s but have become destabilized and seriously threatened in the past decade by economic mismanagement, corruption, and state decay as established parties and politicians grew complacent and distant from popular concerns. Indeed, the entire Andean region of South America now suffers a deep crisis of governance, sharply eroding the authority and capacity of the state and public confidence in democratic institutions. Like Colombia, Sri Lanka's long-established democracy has also sunk into illiberal and unstable status as a result of protracted internal violence, in this case an ethnic civil war. In Latin America, only Uruguay shows the levels of both elite and popular commitment to democracy that mark consolidation, although the recent presidential elections in Argentina and Chile (as well as the growing readiness of Chile to confront the crimes of the authoritarian past) indicate progress toward consolidation.

Significantly, the region where the most rapid, visible, and frequent strides toward democratic consolidation are being made is Central and Eastern Europe. In that area (including the Baltic states but not much of the Balkans), former communist countries are entrenching democratic practices and norms. Electoral returns, elite behavior, and mass attitudes and values (as revealed in public opinion surveys) show a deepening commitment to democracy in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and progress as well in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Popular commitment to democracy is particularly strong among younger people; hence the political culture and party system will become more democratic as voters who have come of age in the postcommunist era become more numerous. Within a decade or two, almost all of Europe from the Atlantic to the former Soviet border will likely consist of consolidated liberal democracies as integration into the expanding architectures of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization helps lock the new democracies into place.

It is difficult for people living amid a profound but slow-moving transformation to recognize its historical significance. But the creation of a new, enlarged, unified, and entirely democratic Europe will be seen by historians a few decades hence as one of the truly great and lasting changes in the political character of the world.

Levels of freedom, democratic quality, and mass support for democracy are all considerably weaker in the non-Baltic former Soviet countries. In 1998, for example, Richard Rose of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow found that 41 percent of Rus-

sians and 51 percent of Ukrainians favored the restoration of Communist rule (and only slightly lower percentages said they would approve suspending parliament and having strong single-leader rule). By contrast, only one in five respondents from Central and Eastern Europe supported either alternative. In Russia and Ukraine, as well as in other post-Soviet electoral "democracies," power is wielded much more roughly, elections are less fair, the rule of law is much more tenuous, and thus people are much more cynical about their politics and government.

The key question for the European community of democracies is whether this postcommunist divide can be overcome. In particular, will the new Europe include Russia? Will Russia gravitate, economically and politically, to the democratic West, or will it fall back on some version of its authoritarian and imperial tradition? As former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in the Fall 2000 *National Interest*, the United States and its European allies, in their ongoing engagement with Russia, should hold open the option of a "truly democratic Russia" becoming closely associated with both the European Union and NATO. At the same time, however, they should move forward vigorously with expanding both organizations to include ultimately all the former communist states of Central Europe. Such a strategy would cement the construction of an enlarged and democratically unified Europe while creating the context for a truly post-Soviet generation of Russian leaders to realize "that in order to recover Russia must opt for the West."

THE FUTURE OF THE "SWING" STATES

The future of democracy in the world will be heavily determined by the political trajectory of the most powerful and the most populous states outside the wealthy, liberal democratic core. Depending on where the line is drawn (a population of 100 million or 50 million, or a GNP of \$100 billion or \$50 billion), 20 or 30 such states can be identified. Because of their political, economic, and demographic weight, these states will have a disproportionate influence on the democratic prospects of their regions. Among the most influential, troubled, and changeable are China, India, Russia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Turkey, Pakistan, the Philippines, Iran, Nigeria, South Africa, and Indonesia. Because few of these states have stable consolidated regimes (whether democratic or authoritarian), they are "strategic swing states."⁶ Only a few of this group of 30 influential states—South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Poland, and the Czech Republic—might be considered liberal and in some respects consolidated democracies, and even some of these states have flawed democratic functioning. India's democracy is consolidated, but it faces serious problems with respect to entrenching good government and the rule of law.

Most of the 30 strategic swing states are much more deeply troubled and unstable than India. Their instability stems from three interrelated crises of governance, all of which were dramatically manifested in Pakistan as its democracy reeled toward collapse in the 1990s. First, they suffer a pervasive lack of accountability and a weak rule of law that permits endemic corruption, smuggling, violence, personalization of power, and abuse of human rights. Second, they have not been able to find

workable, credible institutional formulas and civic codes to manage regional and ethnic divisions peacefully and give all citizens an inclusive stake in the political system. Third, they have faced economic crisis, stagnation, or instability because they have not sufficiently liberalized their economies, reduced state ownership and control, or rationalized and strengthened their corrupt, swollen state bureaucracies.

These crises of governance are not unique to large strategic states of the developing and postcommunist worlds. They afflict the smaller states as well. They represent the core problems that inhibit sustainable democratic progress and that threaten either the complete breakdown of democracy, as in Pakistan, or the kind of progressive erosion that has been occurring for a decade in Colombia and Venezuela.

None of the governance challenges confronting the swing states is more serious and pervasive than controlling corruption. Probably not a single threatened and vulnerable democracy in the world today has dilemmas that do not stem from rampant political corruption, rent-seeking behavior, and, more broadly, the weakness of the rule of law. In the next decade the prospects for sustainable democratic progress in the world will be heavily shaped by one question: Will emerging democracies and transitional regimes adopt the institutional reforms to control corruption and ensure a predictable, fair, credible, accessible, and efficient administration of justice?

To a great extent, we now know what must be done. Judiciaries must be modernized and professionalized, and their independence must be rigorously protected through reforms that insulate the appointment, remuneration, administration, and supervision of judges and prosecutors from partisan political influence. A wide range of other independent institutions of horizontal accountability must not only be established but given similar constitutional autonomy, substantial resources, and capable, dedicated leadership. These include:

- A countercorruption commission for receiving and monitoring the declared assets of public officials and for investigating corruption charges;
- A human rights commission to receive and investigate citizen complaints about violations of constitutional rights, and to educate people about their rights and obligations as democratic citizens;
- An independent, supreme auditing agency to audit the accounts of any state agency on a regular basis and on suspicion of specific wrongdoing;
- An ombudsman's office to provide citizens an outlet for grievances about unfair treatment and abuse of power by government agencies; and
- A truly independent electoral commission, which would ensure that abusive and corrupt elected officials can be removed from office in free and fair elections, and that all parties and officials can be disciplined in advance of elections.

The progress of democracy in the world over the last quarter-century has been nothing less than remarkable. No period in world history has seen a wider expansion of the democratic form of government and of the ability of citizens, armed with universal suffrage, to change their political leaders in relatively free and fair elections. But if the reach of democracy is greater than ever, it is also thinner and more vulnerable. The great challenge of the next decade is to deepen, stabilize, and consolidate the many emerging and struggling democracies outside the core. To do that, most will have to address seriously the triple crisis of governance outlined here. Most important, if they are to win the permanent and unconditional support of their citizens, these troubled democracies must make dramatic progress in controlling corruption and strengthening the rule of law.

It is too often forgotten that the challenge of building democracy heavily overlaps that of establishing the authority and capacity of a viable but restrained state. Whether this broad challenge can be effectively addressed, especially through legal, institutional, and economic reforms of the state's structure and role, will determine whether democracy continues to prosper in the world or gives way to a third "reverse wave" of democratic breakdowns.

NOTES

1. Freedom House is an independent nongovernmental organization based in New York that advocates for democracy and human rights worldwide. Its annual survey of freedom in the world, which it has conducted for the past 30 years, is available on its website, www.freedomhouse.org.
2. *1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 25, 2000).
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
4. For extensive documentation of fraud in Russia's March 2000 presidential election—sufficient to question its legitimacy—see the special report in *The Moscow Times*, September 11, 2000 (www.themoscowtimes.com).
5. For a fuller description, see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 10–12.
6. Larry Diamond, "Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?" *Journal of Democracy*, July 2000.

LARRY DIAMOND is a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy*, and codirector of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies.