Remarks on the Democratic Recession

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The Protracted Democratic Recession

We celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Third Wave of Democratization at a moment when democracy globally remains in a steep and protracted recession. The evidence—which I have laid out in my recent Lipset Lecture on Democracy and this past April in the *Journal of Democracy*—is simply overwhelming. I have just finished updating this data through the end of last year, and the story is as follows.

Around 2007, the long trend of expansion in global freedom and democracy came to an end and began to reverse. We have now had 17 consecutive years in which more countries have declined in freedom than have gained, usually by a considerable margin. Each of the three main annual indexes of democracy—the Freedom House Survey, the Economist Democracy Index, and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index—have shown a steady downward global trend. The declines on these scales have not been calamitous—the average decline per region over this time has been about 8 percent in total score. But the declines have been relentless, a steady downward trend over more than a decade and a half.

Moreover, declining freedom has been the trend in every major region. And the recession of democracy has been accelerating in recent years.

To appreciate the acceleration, consider the following statistics. The failure rate for democracies in the first decade after the Revolution of the Carnations—when we didn't even know that the world had entered a "Third Wave of Democratization"—was 16 percent. In other words, one out of every six democracies in the world broke down in the decade between 1974 and 1983. Then the failure rate plunged to 7 percent in the miracle decade of democratic expansion from 1984 to 1993. In the following decades it then rose to 10 percent, then 13 percent, then 18 percent in the decade that ended last year.

At the same time, the rate of transition to democracy has been steadily declining. In the decade following the Portuguese revolution, one of every five authoritarian regimes experienced a transition to democracy. That rate rose—incredibly—to one out of every two in the decade between 1984 and 1993. In the subsequent three decades the transition rate has fallen to 22 percent, 20 percent, and in the last decade 13 percent. When you juxtapose these two trends, here is what you find. From 1974-83, there were twice as many democratic transitions as failures. In the subsequent "big bang" decade, there we nearly seven times as many. This is when democracy was surging.

Democratic expansion continued in the following decade, but by around 2007, it peaked, and since then the percentage of states that are democracies has been steadily declining. In the past decade, there were nearly twice as many democratic breakdowns as transitions. If we look just at the states with over 1 million population, we find that around 2019, for the first time since 1992, the percentage of democracies among these states fell below 50 percent.

Now, I am using a certain amount of judgement to classify countries as democracies or not. I have made the assessment, which is disputed but I think justifiable, that India can no longer be called a democracy, given the steady authoritarian trend under the BJP that has decimated the independent press, civil society, academic freedom, state neutrality, religious tolerance, civil liberties, judicial independence, and free and fair political opposition. The fact that the BJP will likely suffer some erosion of its parliamentary strength when the Indian election results are announced soon does not change the fact that the system is now better characterized as a competitive authoritarian regime than an electoral democracy. And I have made a similar difficult judgement about Indonesia. If one accepts these judgements and records all the other transitions from democracy to autocracy in recent years, then the percentage of the world's population living in democracies has been cut in half over the last few years, from about 50 percent to 24 percent.

Whether you judge that some countries in the gray zone are over the line or under it with respect to electoral democracy, the data also show quite substantial regression among the bigger and more consequential countries—those with populations above 50 million or GDPs above $500 billion (or both). Of the 20 big states that experienced significant change between 2006 and 2022, 18 of them declined. 11 of those were democracies in 2006, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey—and the U.S. (the only advanced industrial democracy in this group). Just two big-country democracies notably improved in this period, Colombia and Taiwan. Of the eight big authoritarian regimes that experienced significant change, *all* of them became more repressive, including Russia and China.

We can't look at these numbers, and the relative country weight behind these numbers, *and* the qualitative trends of political polarization, illiberal populism, and closing slivers of space in the world's autocracies, and not conclude that we are in still in the grip of a potent and protracted democratic recession, and that we must develop a strategy to reverse it.

There are some rays of hope here. There has been much less regression among the world's liberal democracies, those with strong civil liberties, accountability, and a rule of law.

The percentage of states that are liberal democracies has declined much more modestly in this period, because liberal democracy provides considerable immunity against democratic failure. Typically, if liberal democracies die, they first become illiberal democracies, then illiberal non-democracies. Late last year, two troubled democracies, Poland and Argentina, both had very consequential national elections that brought significant electoral alternation. In Poland, these elections restored to power a liberal coalition committed to constitutionalism and a rule of law. In Argentina, they brought to power perhaps the most purely libertarian figure (Javier Milei) ever elected to the leadership of a democratic country, representing a radical break with the corruption, inflation, and statism of that country, long mired in the legacy of Juan Peron. The victory of Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition in Poland showed "that autocratic populism can be defeated, even after an unfair election."[1] As elections elsewhere have also shown, pro-democracy forces must unite behind a common positive vision that addresses voters' bread and butter concerns, demonstrate the corruption and performance failures of the incumbents, and transcend populist polarization with broad appeals to a democratic, "civic nationalism." That has also been a lesson of the recent stunning municipal election victories for liberal opposition forces to the authoritarian president, Erdogan, in Turkey.

The problem is that in many countries where democracy is in crisis or decay, not only India but also for example South Africa, liberal democratic forces are weak, disunited, poorly led, and bereft of a compelling program.

I have not been able to address here the larger and deeper structural drivers of democratic decay, including weak institutions, entrenched corruption, and the rising power of authoritarian regimes in parallel with the receding resolve and resources of the Western democracies. It is enough to close by saying that the situation is far from hopeless. The protracted democratic session could morph into a much deeper authoritarian trend, what we might call a new authoritarian wave, but it can also be reversed soon if we put our minds, resources, and values to the task.

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[1] Anne Applebaum, "Poland Shows that Autocracy is Not Invevitable," *The Atlantic,* October 16, 2023.