

Two Anniversaries (Draft – Not for Citation)

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I want to use my brief remarks to explore some comparisons between the two anniversaries being celebrated by our conference—the 25th anniversary of the Revolutions of 1989 and the 40th anniversary of the Portuguese transition to democracy, along with the Third Wave of Democratization that it initiated.

Much more attention is being paid around the world to the first of these anniversaries, and it is not hard to see why. The revolutions that brought down communism in Eastern Europe were not only a great advance for democracy; they marked a watershed in world history. People who lived through the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, even if they only watched it on television, felt that they were witnessing a major historical turning point, and they were right. The Revolutions of 1989-91 demarcated the history of the past 70 years into two distinct periods—the Cold War era and the post-Cold War era. Far into the future, 1989, like 1789, is likely to be regarded by historians as an epochal moment in world history.

The launching of the Portuguese Revolution in 1974, though it too was regarded in its day as an event of great significance, received much less worldwide attention. It didn't mark the end of an era, and no one at the time would have guessed that it would be the forerunner of a new global wave of democratization. In most respects, in fact, the year 1974 was a low point for the fortunes of the West and of democracy. The Arab oil embargo, initiated in late 1973, led to recession, a stock-market crash, and surging inflation. The rise of OPEC also seemed to foreshadow a more lasting shift in economic power from the advanced democracies to commodity-rich developing countries. Meanwhile, the United States was in political disarray, with the Watergate crisis and the resignation of President Nixon speeding American withdrawal and defeat in Vietnam. In the developing world, democracy clearly seemed to be in retreat. Even the two oldest and most successful democracies in Latin America, Uruguay and Chile, suffered military coups in 1973. Moreover, there was not much confidence that democracy would be the outcome of the military seizure of power in Portugal.

Nonetheless, Portugal did succeed, against the odds, in establishing and then consolidating a democratic regime. It did have some modest help from abroad in this regard from both the United States and Western Europe—indeed, the assistance to the transitions in Spain and Portugal provided by the German party foundations was often cited by those advocating that the United States establish the National Endowment for Democracy. But there is little doubt that the course and the outcome of the struggle in Portugal was primarily determined by the actions of the Portuguese themselves.

There is much greater scholarly disagreement about the causes of the revolutions of 1989. Who was most responsible for this democratic breakthrough? Some would say Mikhail Gorbachev, and it is difficult to deny that these revolutions would probably not have occurred in the way and with the speed that they did if he had not been at the helm of the Soviet Union. Others give the lion's share of the credit to Ronald Reagan, whose firm foreign policy and commitment to democratic principles helped the West to win the Cold War. But it would be wrong to overlook the crucial contribution of the East Europeans themselves, especially the opposition groups led by such extraordinary figures as Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel. Still, the revolutions of 1989 clearly had a more important external or geopolitical element than did the Portuguese revolution or most of the other third wave transitions during the 1970s and 1980s.

The transitions from communism, of course, were also more far-reaching than those from other types of authoritarian regimes, in that they involved wholesale economic transformations and in some cases also the creation of new states. Some scholars, notably Michael McFaul, have contended that these transitions were so different that they should not even be considered part of the third wave, but instead constituted a new “fourth wave” of democratization. While recognizing that the communist cases were distinctive in some important respects, I don’t believe that it is useful to speak of a fourth wave separate from the third: In the first place, 1989 is too close in time to 1974 to plausibly form a separate wave. Besides, Samuel Huntington himself, who originated the concept of waves of democratization, defines them simply as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that time.”

The interesting question, however, is to what extent the transitions that began with Portugal in 1974 paved the way for the events of 1989. There is no definitive way of answering this. Some argue that the peoples of Eastern Europe were uninterested in the democratic gains taking place in developing countries, that they were driven above all by Western models and the desire to “return to Europe.” Others counter that some East European intellectuals, such as Poland’s Adam Michnik, indicated that they were influenced by the example of the Spanish transition. But I would argue that, in a more general fashion, the East European transitions were fostered by the growing sense, bolstered by the transitions in other parts of the world, that democracy—and not communism—represented the wave of the future. And of course, the downfall of European communism in turn boosted the perception that one-party rule was a thing of the past, leading to a new flurry of transitions to democracy, especially in Africa.

But what is the state of democracy in the world today, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 40 years after the start of the third wave? Though few of the democratic gains of the past have been decisively reversed, there is little question that the last few years have been a discouraging period for democracy, and that 2014 has presented particular cause for alarm. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in other parts of Ukraine highlighted a trend toward the resurgence of authoritarian powers and a new willingness on their part to employ military and other means to counter democracy. After a hiatus of a quarter century, geopolitics is back at the heart of the struggle between freedom and autocracy. There is reason to suspect that what we call the post-Cold War period may have come to a close. We cannot know what will come next, but the chances are that in the years to come we will witness greater international instability than the world had seen for several decades.