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Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 103-113 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0008>



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THE INSTINCT FOR FREEDOM

Carl Gershman

Carl Gershman has been president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) since its founding in 1984. Under his leadership, the NED has built a global democracy-grants program and established the Journal of Democracy, the International Forum for Democratic Studies, the World Movement for Democracy, and the Center for International Media Assistance.

When the first issue of the *Journal of Democracy* appeared in January 1990, a democratic revolution was sweeping the world. The Berlin Wall had fallen two months earlier, popular protest had toppled communist regimes throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union had begun to democratize (it would itself collapse within two years). What Samuel P. Huntington was later to call the “third wave” of democratization was cresting, with democracy spreading to every country in Latin America and the Caribbean except Cuba and with numerous democratic transitions also taking place in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. With the fall of communism, democracy had become the only form of government widely seen as legitimate, and its continued expansion seemed inexorable. Amartya Sen called the rise of democracy the most important thing that had happened in the twentieth century: In a dramatic ideological shift, people had come to believe that democracy was “the ‘normal’ form of government to which any nation is entitled—whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa.”¹

Thirty years later such optimism about democracy’s prospects seems profoundly unrealistic.² The world is now in the midst of what is frequently called a democratic recession, with political rights and civil liberties having declined for thirteen consecutive years according to Freedom House’s latest global survey. Many countries that were once emerging or electoral democracies have in recent years have become increasingly authoritarian—among them important regional players such as Bangladesh, Hungary, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela. Support for democra-

cy has declined even in the United States and other Western countries, where illiberal populist and nationalist movements have arisen in reaction to anxieties over the erosion of traditional cultural norms and disruptive demographic and technological change. Sharp political polarization and declining trust in the efficacy of democratic government have caused some analysts to warn of the possible “deconsolidation” of long-established Western democracies whose stability was once taken for granted.³

The troubles affecting existing democracies have been accompanied by a much bolder projection of power and influence by authoritarian states such as China and Russia. These and other despotic regimes are not just growing more repressive internally but also expanding their power internationally, filling vacuums left as a result of the declining influence, unity, and self-confidence of the democratic West. Authoritarian governments are using a combination of military and economic pressures, as well as ever more sophisticated information and surveillance tools, to increase their international influence; to monitor and control their own populations; to divide and weaken democracies through the application of “sharp power”; and to create a postdemocratic world order in which the norms of human rights and the rule of law are replaced by the principle of absolute state sovereignty. Authoritarians are also cooperating with one another to block democratic progress and bolster autocratic regimes throughout the world.

The resurgence of authoritarianism, the rise of illiberalism, and the democratic West’s loss of self-confidence have led to a sharp reversal of democracy’s progress and a new pessimism about its prospects. In 2017, some three-hundred leading activists and intellectuals, alarmed by illiberal trends in world politics and by the widespread cynicism about democracy that has fueled the rise of antisystem political movements and parties, adopted a statement called the Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal.⁴ The Appeal opened by declaring, “Liberal democracy is under threat, and all who cherish it must come to its defense.” It called for the creation of a new International Coalition for Democratic Renewal that could serve as a moral and intellectual catalyst for revitalizing the idea of democracy.

Such a coalition now exists under the leadership of Forum 2000, a Prague-based organization founded by the late Czech president Václav Havel in 1996 to strengthen global democratic cooperation. The coalition has established working groups to respond to new challenges to democracy, including the weakening of trans-Atlantic relations and the dangers posed by a rising People’s Republic of China (PRC). But these civil society efforts have yet to stimulate a dynamic response from governments and policy leaders in the West. Rather, those who have rallied most forcefully to the cause of democracy have been activists on the front lines of democratic struggle in authoritarian countries.

Foremost among these defenders of democracy have been the millions of people who have taken to the streets in Hong Kong since March 2019, when protests began over a change in the extradition law that

would subject Hong Kong residents and visitors to the jurisdiction of courts in mainland China. These protests, led by young people, quickly mushroomed into a sustained challenge to Beijing that was manifest in the stunning gains scored by the prodemocracy parties in the district-council elections held on November 24. In the words of China specialist Elizabeth Economy, “the ‘China model’ is cracking” under the weight of the Hong Kong protests and an accumulation of other crises. These include the slowdown of the Chinese economy, a trade war with the United States, international criticism of Beijing’s massive repression of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, resistance in Taiwan to heavy-handed PRC coercion, and growing controversies in many countries in connection with Beijing’s invasive Belt and Road Initiative.⁵

Mass protests also took place in mid-2019 in Moscow after the authorities disqualified dozens of candidates in elections for the local Duma, or city council. As in Hong Kong, the protesters showed no fear and were “maturing and getting stronger” by the day, as one Russian journalist put it.⁶ Putin was thrown on the defensive, and the candidates of his United Russia party were forced to run as independents in the Moscow Duma elections “for fear of association with a toxic brand,” according to reform activist Vladimir Kara-Murza.⁷ Putin no longer seems invincible after twenty years in power; his strongman posturing has lost its appeal during a period of economic and demographic decline in Russia that is generating widespread pessimism about the country’s future. A recent poll conducted by the Carnegie Moscow Center and the Levada Center reports that since 2017 the number of respondents favoring “decisive and full-scale changes” in Russia has grown from 42 to 59 percent, with 53 percent now saying that reforms are possible only with “serious changes to the political system.”⁸

An Invincible Instinct

The authoritarian regimes in Beijing and Moscow do not appear to be in danger of imminent collapse, and the protest movements currently challenging them could be repressed or simply lose momentum in the event of a protracted political stalemate. Nonetheless, these movements confirm the continuing validity of President Ronald Reagan’s observation in his 1982 Westminster Address that people’s “instinctive desire for freedom and self-determination surfaces again and again” in repressive systems.⁹ We are seeing examples of this today in many other authoritarian countries as well. In Venezuela, where the economy is in shambles and more than 10 percent of the population has fled to neighboring states, a united opposition has been recognized as the legitimate government by the United States and more than fifty other countries. The instinct for freedom has also surfaced in Nicaragua, where the regime of strongman Daniel Ortega remains unstable following protests that erupted in April 2018.

Ortega's rule most likely would not survive a collapse of the regime of his fellow populist and erstwhile patron Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela—or even a negotiated settlement leading to free Venezuelan elections. The resignation of Bolivia's increasingly autocratic president Evo Morales, following accusations that his party stole the October presidential election, is a further blow to populism in Latin America.

The Islamist regime in Iran is yet another example of a dictatorship whose survival is threatened, in this case by mass protests against corruption and economic misery in cities such as Qom and Mashhad that traditionally have been strongholds of the regime's Revolutionary Guards. The protests in more than a hundred cities triggered by an increase in fuel prices (which are set by the state) were “the most dramatic expression of hostility to the ruling ayatollahs” since the Green Revolution of 2009, according to the *Economist*.¹⁰ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey is also being challenged as never before following his party's losses in local elections earlier this year, especially in the rerun of the vote to choose Istanbul's mayor. The 2019 ousters of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, and Saad Hariri in Lebanon as the result of popular uprisings show that, despite the failure of the 2010–11 Arab Spring, resistance to authoritarianism in the Middle East has not been extinguished.

In some countries, popular resistance to autocratic rule has created openings for a democratic transition. In 2018, for example, surprising breakthroughs occurred in Armenia, Ethiopia, and Malaysia, all countries with considerable influence in their respective regions. In each case, deeply entrenched autocratic regimes succumbed to popular revulsion at corruption and at unresponsive and abusive governance. In Sudan, yet another opportunity for transition has emerged with the recent agreement between the military and the Forces for Freedom and Change (the unified opposition group that took shape during the protests leading up to Bashir's fall) on a constitutional declaration and a joint governing body. In all these countries, the obstacles to a successful democratic transition are formidable, but the very existence of this possibility in so many places represents a remarkable step forward.

Popular protests in several Central and East European countries have challenged the illiberal politics most conspicuously promoted by the governments of Hungary and Poland. In Slovakia, for example, the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée led to mass demonstrations that brought down the corrupt prime minister Robert Fico. One year after Fico's departure, political outsider and liberal reformer Zuzana Čaputová won election as Slovakia's president. In Romania, questions about the police response to the abduction and murder of a fifteen-year-old girl sparked an outburst of public revulsion against corrupt strongman rule and prompted the adoption of measures to strengthen judicial independence. And in the Czech Republic in June

2019, scandals involving billionaire prime minister Andrej Babiš led to the largest antigovernment demonstrations since the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Subsequent mass demonstrations on November 17, the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution, showed that broad segments of society are ready to stay active in defense of democracy. As one *Financial Times* article argued, illiberal populism in the region has been put on the defensive “mainly because hundreds of thousands of the region’s citizens, impatient with politicians who feed corruption and bend justice to their own purposes, have risen against it.”¹¹

Six Key Priorities for Democracy Assistance

The mass protests against corruption and autocratic rule taking place in so many countries around the world have not reversed the democratic recession of recent years, but they have mitigated some of its worst effects, and they give us reason to believe that significant democratic gains are possible in the period ahead. The coming years will be defined by the tension between democracy’s recession and its surprising resilience. In this environment, organizations and individuals working to strengthen democracy globally should focus on six urgent priorities.

1) Assisting democratic transitions: As noted above, one of the most surprising and encouraging developments during the recent period of democratic recession has been a series of popular revolts against corrupt and abusive autocratic regimes. These uprisings have created opportunities for democratic transitions in many countries, including Tunisia, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Armenia, Malaysia, Sudan, and Bolivia. Helping to ensure that these transitions succeed is the most urgent challenge that needs to be addressed by those working for democracy’s renewal. While recent breakthroughs have led to immediate gains for human rights and press freedom, this progress will have no lasting political significance—and will do little to reverse the democratic recession—if it does not lead to real social and economic reforms that respond to people’s needs and aspirations. For that to happen, the countries now in transition will need to develop new democratic institutions that will protect the rights of ordinary people; to enable citizens to hold political leaders and economic elites accountable; to foster economic growth and opportunity; and to enable societies to resolve in a peaceful way issues stemming from ethnic and other divisions. Only by building such institutions can these countries become inclusive and stable democracies.

The challenge is a daunting one because authoritarian rule often leaves countries with a legacy of degraded official institutions, as well as a civil society that is inexperienced and unprepared to take advantage of the opportunities that changed circumstances create. Such situations require a multisectoral approach that simultaneously supports the development of political parties, business associations, unions, and other institutions.

Establishing transition hubs to provide quick and accessible assistance in the areas of economic reform, political-party development, anticorruption, and security-sector reform is especially important. It is also critical to aid activists in cultivating the skills that will enable some of them to “cross over” to political leadership and government service, even as others remain in civil society to remind new governments of their reform promises and to hold them accountable for their performance.

Democratic transition is a long-term process, and international organizations providing assistance need to stay engaged with democratic reformers even when they suffer the inevitable setbacks. Ukrainian activists fighting for reform and against corruption did not stop their work following the failure of the 2004 Orange Revolution. The international groups that remained active in Ukraine were in a better position to assist the more successful reform process that followed the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity than they would have been if they had left during the lean years. It is also important to build local, national, and international cooperation networks that can provide activists with the resources they need to construct platforms for communicating their messages. Such networks can also convene gatherings and otherwise promote acts of international solidarity, thereby strengthening political support for reform movements and reassuring those on the front lines of democratic struggle that they are not alone.

2) Supporting the liberalization of authoritarian systems: There are significant differences among authoritarian regimes, and it is important to adapt assistance to the specific circumstances and opportunities in each country. The protests in Russia and Hong Kong, for example, have taken place in relatively open environments where, despite mass arrests, activists have used the most up-to-date digital tools to track the movements of riot police, keep the public and media informed, deploy lawyers to defend themselves against repression, and organize sophisticated social-media campaigns. While activists within the mainland Chinese “surveillance state” must contend with a more closed setting, groups there are nonetheless working across multiple sectors—including labor and the environment—to hold local officials accountable; to develop strong digital-security practices; to safeguard access to independent information and train new citizen journalists; and to mobilize international pressure in defense of human rights. Even in a country as isolated as North Korea, there is growing evidence that discontent is building due to increased awareness of the outside world among elites, participants in private markets, and young people who are captivated by South Korean popular music and television dramas. We must try to increase the flow of information into and out of North Korea, and to reach members of the elite who can access the internet and visit other countries in Asia.

Assistance to civil society groups, independent journalists, and human-rights defenders is important in all authoritarian countries, as is

mustering international support for activists enduring repression and violence. These courageous activists need such support—but they also have a great deal to teach the West about dealing with regimes such as those in Moscow and Beijing, which are increasingly adept at using information and state financial resources to manipulate international politics. “A generation of Eastern dissidents,” Anne Applebaum writes, “has thought harder than we have about how to self-organize, about how to operate in a world run by secretive, kleptocratic elites who go out of their way to create distraction and apathy.” Applebaum urges us to learn from these dissidents how to “compete in a world where money is offshore, power is invisible and apathy is widespread.”¹²

Transnational kleptocracy is a pillar of modern authoritarianism. Since it relies on cross-border networks, it is vulnerable to networked journalists and civil society groups that can track kleptocratic activity across borders, share information, expose illicit transactions, and put kleptocracy on the agenda of publics around the world. Building such networks and helping them to form alliances with investigative journalists from kleptocratic states needs to be part of a strategy to liberalize modern authoritarian systems, to make their international operations more transparent, and to advance the rule of law.

3) *Countering authoritarianism’s malign influence:* Modern authoritarian regimes such as those in Moscow and Beijing—technologically sophisticated, economically integrated, and globally connected—are attempting to undermine democratic norms and to manipulate educational and cultural institutions, media outlets, think tanks, and civic associations in countries around the world. These authoritarian states are not just preying upon the openness of established democracies; they are also using their multifaceted influence to overwhelm developing countries with limited resources that are unable to analyze, much less to counter, such activity. China uses “sharp-power” information tools and economic programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative to penetrate foreign societies and advance its geopolitical objectives. Russia, meanwhile, is reportedly manipulating elections in dozens of countries across Africa and Latin America to further its commercial and political interests.¹³

There is an urgent need to close the knowledge gap regarding China and Russia, as information concerning the international strategies of these powers is scarce in many of the societies where Beijing and Moscow are now deeply engaged. This asymmetry places many vulnerable countries at a strategic disadvantage. The challenge of responding to growing authoritarian influence is compounded by the fact that, except in a handful of countries, few resources have been dedicated to the subject by local media, think tanks, universities, or government bodies.

Democracy’s supporters should make it a priority to study the various forms of authoritarian influence and their effects on democratic institutions, norms, and values. Also critical are efforts to raise awareness,

particularly in countries and regions not familiar with the many dimensions of authoritarian influence. To this end, it is vital to support the training and development of local experts in vulnerable countries who understand how the Chinese and Russian systems work at home, as well as their growing capability to project influence internationally.

4) *Defending democratic values against growing illiberalism and intolerance:* German Green Party leader Ralf Fuecks argues in his new book that globalization and the digital revolution have divided modern societies into winners and losers. “Those who have acquired a good education, speak several languages, have international contacts and are technically literate,” he writes, “are more likely to see open markets, migration and cultural diversity as an opportunity. The rest are more likely [to] see them as a threat.” In this context, populist movements that bill themselves as revolts against globalist elites have been on the rise. According to Fuecks, supporters of these movements see “defence of an imagined cultural homogeneity and evocation of family, nation and state as the bastions against the threat from without.”¹⁴

One response to declining support for liberal democracy has been to promote broad-based civic education and leadership development as a way of nurturing a new generation of civic leaders and engaged citizens. Education International, a global association of education unions that represents 32.5 million educators in 170 countries, has just produced a new civic-education guide based upon John Dewey’s belief that “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”¹⁵

Such efforts are important, but they need to be supplemented by an intellectual and political strategy which challenges the globalist mindset that, in the words of economist Dani Rodrik, makes it possible “for Right-wing populists to hijack patriotism for destructive ends.”¹⁶ The Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal urges liberal democrats to defend civic nationalism and patriotism as alternatives to the illiberal nationalism that is the favored instrument of democracy’s most determined foes. As the Appeal states:

While democracy embodies universal values, it exists in a particular national context, what Václav Havel called the “intellectual, spiritual, and cultural traditions that breathe substance into it and give it meaning.” Democratic citizenship, rooted in such traditions, needs to be strengthened, not allowed to atrophy in an era of globalization. National identity is too important to be left to the manipulation of despots and demagogic populists.

As William Galston wrote in these pages, “Liberal democrats must make their peace with national sovereignty.”¹⁷

5) *Winning the new battle over technology and information:* The information and technology spheres have become critical arenas of contestation between democracy and authoritarianism. From disinformation and fake news to surveillance and the “end of privacy,” the revolution

in digital technology is unleashing threats to democracy. The challenge cuts across many different dimensions of life in modern societies, but its effect is perhaps most pronounced in the information and media space and in political processes. Here, tools such as big data, artificial intelligence, and algorithms that decide which information reaches a given audience are increasingly shaping how citizens view the world—and how they cast their ballots.

Authoritarian powers and rising illiberal regimes understand the power of digital technology, and they have already used it to great effect to manipulate the information space, to sow popular distrust in democracy, to divide publics, and to challenge shared notions of truth. They are building more repressive internet architectures and improving their techniques for surveillance and censorship.

Yet the information and technology arena also provides potent resources for democrats, enabling them to investigate abuses, counter illiberal narratives, and inform and organize citizens using emerging forms of independent online media. Since a growing segment of civic activity hinges on technology, and particularly on the internet and social media, the ability to adapt technology for democratic purposes is essential. A comprehensive response to the authoritarian challenge should include initiatives to expose the dangers posed by authoritarian manipulation of political processes and information; to strengthen open-source research and data journalism that reveal corruption and abuses; to protect internet freedom at the national and global levels; to deploy cutting-edge anticensorship and antisurveillance technologies; to strengthen digital-security support networks; and to step up efforts at the global level to influence the policies of internet-governance bodies and major technology firms. It will be critical to ensure that the constantly evolving digital public sphere is governed by democratic norms.

6) *Reviving political will:* In the United States and other leading democracies, there has been an ebb in the political will to defend freedom and to support those who are fighting for democracy in countries around the world. This loss of political will is the result of many factors, including the rise of illiberal movements and the growing political polarization that has undermined the morale and self-confidence of democratic countries. No less damaging is the commonly held view that defending democracy ceased to be necessary with the Cold War's end. Seymour Martin Lipset argued against this complacent view in 1995, long before the current crisis of democracy. The "global struggle" between freedom and its enemies persisted, he wrote, though its military dimension had grown less pronounced. Lipset contended that "almost everywhere outside the older democracies there is a democratic and an anti-democratic party," and said it would be extremely short-sighted to "abandon the field of battle in the continuing and far less costly struggle to build free societies for the twenty-first century and beyond."¹⁸ Recent developments, including

both the global backlash against liberal democracy and the emergence of a new authoritarian international whose leaders include Russia, China, and Iran, make it clear that the battle of ideas has not ended and that it remains essential to help people who are fighting to build free societies.

Reviving the spirit of democratic activism and hope in the West is a formidable challenge. Growing awareness of the threat posed by resurgent global authoritarianism might have the constructive effect of countering complacency and making it clear to people living in established democracies that they can no longer take the survival of freedom for granted. In addition, the struggles now taking place in the streets of Hong Kong and Russia, in Venezuela, in Sudan, and elsewhere could awaken a commitment to democratic renewal among publics around the world. The bravery and commitment of today's generation of activists are just as compelling as the courage of Soviet dissidents, of Poland's Solidarity, and of the "people power" movement in the Philippines was in decades past.

Because the rise of authoritarianism has been accompanied by a retreat of U.S. power and leadership on the world stage, it is more important than ever to strengthen democratic cooperation among the European democracies, as well as India, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, and Taiwan. But it would be an illusion to think that such cooperation can compensate for the harmful consequences of U.S. disengagement and isolationism. Democracy does not exist in a geopolitical vacuum. As Huntington warned a quarter-century ago when democracy seemed triumphant, a world without U.S. leadership "will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs."¹⁹

We do not yet know if the brave activists around the world who are leading from the front in the global struggle for democracy can help to revive political will in the United States and other established democracies. But their courage and determination in defending democratic values against great odds suggest that democracy is inherently resilient, and that its renewal is possible in the relatively affluent and stable countries that today are experiencing greater stress and tumult than at any time since the end of the Second World War. In his Westminster Address, President Reagan said "democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower." May his words prove true around the world, especially in the troubled heartland of democracy—the West and, above all, the United States.

NOTES

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