Democracy

What’s gone wrong with democracy

Democracy was the most successful political idea of the 20th century. Why has it run into trouble, and what can be done to revive it?

The protesters who have overturned the politics of Ukraine have many aspirations for their country. Their placards called for closer relations with the European Union (EU), an end to Russian intervention in Ukraine’s politics and the establishment of a clean government to replace the kleptocracy of President Viktor Yanukovych. But their fundamental demand is one that has motivated people over many decades to take a stand against corrupt, abusive and autocratic governments. They want a rules-based democracy.

Yet these days the exhilaration generated by events like those in Kiev is mixed with anxiety, for a troubling pattern has repeated itself in capital after capital. The people mass in the main square. Regime-sanctioned thugs try to fight back but lose their nerve in the face of popular intransigence and global news coverage. The world applauds the collapse of the regime and offers to help build a democracy. But turbing out an autocrat turns out to be much easier than setting up a viable democratic government. The new regime stumbles, the economy flounders and the country finds itself in a state at least as bad as it was before. This is what happened in much of the Arab spring, and also in Ukraine’s Orange revolution a decade ago. In 2004 Mr Yanukovych was ousted from office by vast street protests, only to be re-elected to the presidency (with the help of huge amounts of Russian money) in 2010, after the opposition politicians who replaced him turned out to be...
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just as hopeless.

Democracy is going through a difficult time. Where autocrats have been driven out of office, their opponents have mostly failed to create viable democratic regimes. Even in established democracies, flaws in the system have become worryingly visible and disillusion with politics is rife. Yet just a few years ago democracy looked as though it would dominate the world.

In the second half of the 20th century, democracies had taken root in the most difficult circumstances possible—in Germany, which had been traumatised by Nazism, in India, which had the world’s largest population of poor people, and, in the 1990s, in South Africa, which had been disfigured by apartheid. Decolonisation created a host of new democracies in Africa and Asia, and autocratic regimes gave way to democracy in Greece (1974), Spain (1975), Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985) and Chile (1989). The collapse of the Soviet Union created many fledgling democracies in central Europe. By 2000 Freedom House, an American think-tank, classified 120 countries, or 63% of the world total, as democracies.

Representatives of more than 100 countries gathered at the World Forum on Democracy in Warsaw that year to proclaim that “the will of the people” was “the basis of the authority of government”. A report issued by America’s State Department declared that having seen off “failed experiments” with authoritarian and totalitarian forms of government, “it seems that now, at long last, democracy is triumphant.”

Such hubris was surely understandable after such a run of successes. But stand farther back and the triumph of democracy looks rather less inevitable. After the fall of Athens, where it was first developed, the political model had lain dormant until the Enlightenment more than 2,000 years later. In the 18th century only the American revolution produced a sustainable democracy. During the 19th century monarchs fought a prolonged rearguard action against democratic forces. In the first half of the 20th century nascent democracies collapsed in Germany, Spain and Italy. By 1941 there were only 11 democracies left, and Franklin Roosevelt worried that it might not be possible to shield “the great flame of democracy from the blackout of barbarism”.

The progress seen in the late 20th century has stalled in the 21st. Even though around 40% of the world’s population, more people than ever before, live in countries that will hold free and fair elections this year, democracy’s global advance has come to a halt, and may even have gone into reverse. Freedom House reckons that 2013 was the eighth consecutive year in which global freedom declined, and that its forward march peaked around the beginning of the century. Between 1980 and 2000 the cause of democracy experienced only a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been many. And democracy’s problems run deeper than mere numbers suggest. Many nominal democracies have slid towards autocracy, maintaining the outward appearance of democracy through elections, but without the rights and institutions that are equally important aspects of a functioning democratic system.

Faith in democracy flares up in moments of triumph, such as the overthrow of unpopular regimes in Cairo or Kiev, only to sputter out once again. Outside the West, democracy often advances only to collapse. And within the West, democracy has too often become associated with debt and dysfunction at home and overreach abroad. Democracy has always had its critics, but now old doubts are being treated
with renewed respect as the weaknesses of democracy in its Western strongholds, and the fragility of its influence elsewhere, have become increasingly apparent. Why has democracy lost its forward momentum?

The return of history
THE two main reasons are the financial crisis of 2007-08 and the rise of China. The damage the crisis did was psychological as well as financial. It revealed fundamental weaknesses in the West's political systems, undermining the self-confidence that had been one of their great assets. Governments had steadily extended entitlements over decades, allowing dangerous levels of debt to develop, and politicians came to believe that they had abolished boom-bust cycles and tamed risk. Many people became disillusioned with the workings of their political systems—particularly when governments bailed out bankers with taxpayers' money and then stood by impotently as financiers continued to pay themselves huge bonuses. The crisis turned the Washington consensus into a term of reproach across the emerging world.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party has broken the democratic world’s monopoly on economic progress. Larry Summers, of Harvard University, observes that when America was growing fastest, it doubled living standards roughly every 30 years. China has been doubling living standards roughly every decade for the past 30 years. The Chinese elite argue that their model—tight control by the Communist Party, coupled with a relentless effort to recruit talented people into its upper ranks—is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock. The political leadership
changes every decade or so, and there is a constant supply of fresh talent as party cadres are promoted based on their ability to hit targets.

China’s critics rightly condemn the government for controlling public opinion in all sorts of ways, from imprisoning dissidents to censoring internet discussions. Yet the regime’s obsession with control paradoxically means it pays close attention to public opinion. At the same time China’s leaders have been able to tackle some of the big problems of state-building that can take decades to deal with in a democracy. In just two years China has extended pension coverage to an extra 240m rural dwellers, for example—far more than the total number of people covered by America’s public-pension system.

Many Chinese are prepared to put up with their system if it delivers growth. The 2013 Pew Survey of Global Attitudes showed that 85% of Chinese were “very satisfied” with their country’s direction, compared with 31% of Americans. Some Chinese intellectuals have become positively boastful. Zhang Weiwei of Fudan University argues that democracy is destroying the West, and particularly America, because it institutionalises gridlock, trivialises decision-making and throws up second-rate presidents like George Bush junior. Yu Keiping of Beijing University argues that democracy makes simple things “overly complicated and frivolous” and allows “certain sweet-talking politicians to mislead the people”. Wang Jisi, also of Beijing University, has observed that “many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos” and that China offers an alternative model. Countries from Africa (Rwanda) to the Middle East (Dubai) to South-East Asia (Vietnam) are taking this advice seriously.

China’s advance is all the more potent in the context of a series of disappointments for democrats since 2000. The first great setback was in Russia. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the democratisation of the old Soviet Union seemed inevitable. In the 1990s Russia took a few drunken steps in that direction under Boris Yeltsin. But at the end of 1999 he resigned and handed power to Vladimir Putin, a former KGB operative who has since been both prime minister and president twice. This postmodern tsar has destroyed the substance of democracy in Russia, muzzling the press and imprisoning his opponents, while preserving the show—everyone can vote, so long as Mr Putin wins. Autocratic leaders in Venezuela, Ukraine, Argentina and elsewhere have followed suit, perpetuating a perverted simulacrum of democracy rather than doing away with it altogether, and thus discrediting it further.

The next big setback was the Iraq war. When Saddam Hussein’s fabled weapons of mass destruction failed to materialise after the American-led invasion of 2003, Mr Bush switched instead to justifying the war as a fight for freedom and democracy. “The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies’ defeat,” he argued in his second inaugural address. This was more than mere opportunism: Mr Bush sincerely believed that the Middle East would remain a breeding ground for terrorism so long as it was dominated by dictators. But it did the democratic cause great harm. Left-wingers regarded it as proof that democracy was just a figleaf for American imperialism. Foreign-policy realists took Iraq’s growing chaos as proof that American-led promotion of democratisation
was a recipe for instability. And disillusioned neoconservatives such as Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, saw it as proof that democracy cannot put down roots in stony ground.

A third serious setback was Egypt. The collapse of Hosni Mubarak’s regime in 2011, amid giant protests, raised hopes that democracy would spread in the Middle East. But the euphoria soon turned to despair. Egypt’s ensuing elections were won not by liberal activists (who were hopelessly divided into a myriad of Pythonesque parties) but by Muhammad Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood. Mr Morsi treated democracy as a winner-takes-all system, packing the state with Brothers, granting himself almost unlimited powers and creating an upper house with a permanent Islamic majority. In July 2013 the army stepped in, arresting Egypt’s first democratically elected president, imprisoning leading members of the Brotherhood and killing hundreds of demonstrators. Along with war in Syria and anarchy in Libya, this has dashed the hope that the Arab spring would lead to a flowering of democracy across the Middle East.

Meanwhile some recent recruits to the democratic camp have lost their lustre. Since the introduction of democracy in 1994 South Africa has been ruled by the same party, the African National Congress, which has become progressively more self-serving. Turkey, which once seemed to combine moderate Islam with prosperity and democracy, is descending into corruption and autocracy. In Bangladesh, Thailand and Cambodia, opposition parties have boycotted recent elections or refused to accept their results.

All this has demonstrated that building the institutions needed to sustain democracy is very slow work indeed, and has dispelled the once-popular notion that democracy will blossom rapidly and spontaneously once the seed is planted. Although democracy may be a “universal aspiration”, as Mr Bush and Tony Blair insisted, it is a culturally rooted practice. Western countries almost all extended the right to vote long after the establishment of sophisticated political systems, with powerful civil services and entrenched constitutional rights, in societies that cherished the notions of individual rights and independent judiciaries.

Yet in recent years the very institutions that are meant to provide models for new democracies have come to seem outdated and dysfunctional in established ones. The United States has become a byword for gridlock, so obsessed with partisan point-scoring that it has come to the verge of defaulting on its debts twice in the past two years. Its democracy is

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High-water mark?

Global freedom scores, % of countries defined as:

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Sources: Freedom House; The Economist